

PAYMAN JAHANBIN

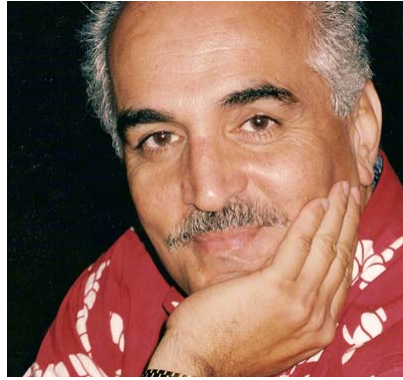
# CAMEL JOCKEY GO HOME

Second Edition, January 2010

[www.cameljockeygohome.com](http://www.cameljockeygohome.com)

# PAYMAN JAHANBIN

Recently banned in and from Iran for his latest play, *All Wounded*, Payman Jahanbin is a prolific, published and celebrated writer-poet in his native Persian. As the Author's first major work penned directly in English, *Camel Jockey Go Home* reveals a new, refreshingly readable writing style. Jahanbin's maturity as a practitioner of the classic, lyrical Persian style of story telling comes through from the first sentence.



From clowning in Amsterdam, Paris and London to translating Mormon scripture in Utah, overnight, the Author is conscripted to teach hundreds of newly arrived, rich, Iranian kids at the local public high school just as the 1979 Iranian Revolution begins to unfold. Payman tells his story as if watching a play co-starring school administrators and featuring his students, refugees from all over the world, as he teaches them to become their own storytellers.

## About the Author

While still in high school in Iran, Payman Jahanbin published several books of short stories, which preceded more plays, poems and short stories. In college, Mr. Jahanbin published a magazine called *From Poetry to Plays*. As a freelance journalist, he has published over 300 articles in *The Kayhan* of London, *The Ettela'at*, *Peygam-e Emruz*, *Ferdowsi* of Iran, and the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Jahanbin has a degree from Pahlavi University in Shiraz, Iran. He received his teaching certificate and theatre degree from Westminster College and a Masters of Arts and Humanity, Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Utah.

See more at [www.cameljockeygohome.com](http://www.cameljockeygohome.com)

Instead of teaching, I told stories.  
Anything to keep them quiet and in their seats.  
They thought I was teaching.  
I thought I was teaching.  
I was learning.  
And you called yourself a Teacher?

- Frank McCourt,  
*from Teacher Man*



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### **Acknowledgement**

Thank you Nerima Pasić for typing ten thousand pages of chicken scratch over the years.

I am especially grateful to my editor Mr. Cliff Lyon, who brought his grammar and language skills, humor and deep friendship to this story over many weekends of giggles and tears. May he forgive me for pushing this out too soon. There is after all, another Revolution happening now, in my Country.

Truly, the only rose without thorns is a good editor.

- Payman Jahanbin



In memory of George Brooks



# 1 THE COLORS OF MY LIFE

“Because I love colors.”

That was my answer to my furious father. ‘Why?’ he’d bellowed, seeing me with a painted face in a clown suit. He had told the whole world his son was studying law in a prominent London school.

“No, Dad, I hated law school. I enrolled in the College of Clowns. I’m swimming in an ocean of colors.” I raised my two silver eyebrows. Fat pink teardrops winked on my cheeks. “In law school it was all lifeless gray or dark brown, everywhere.”

My father looked at me in disgust and roared like an angry old lion. “Damn you! Damn your painted face!” He was on fire.

I was cool. “Dad, Marcel Marceau is going to teach my next-semester mime class!”

Dad’s face was red, the color of my nose.

“Who the hell is he? Who gives a shit about Marcel Marceau?”

He knew very well about the famous mime artist.

Perhaps because of my painted face, perhaps because of the bloody and unnecessary revolution in our country, I never saw my father again.

I will never forget my last look at his very red face.

\*\*\*

I have always loved colors. I pray that on the day I die, a rainbow will appear in the sky.

For me, the color of Christmas is not white. It's dark green. Summers are not warm, hot or burning. Summers are a jungle of my favorite colors: pale peach, baby yellow, brown mustard, dark ash-gray, yellow-gold, Kashmir pink and orchid purple.

I can still remember the color of my cradle: Pacific mist. The ceiling over my cradle was a light custard. The day I left my country, Iran, the sky was old gray. The autumn evening of my arrival in America, it was streaked with amber. That was thirty-five years ago.

\*\*\*

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the sky was deep blue and scattered with silver clouds. The sun spread its magnificent gold behind Utah's Mount Olympus. I'm neighbors with this majestic peak. I can almost touch its proud, rocky face. I went out to feed the birds

already gathering in the backyard for their nuts and seeds. I looked up and saw white powder on the mountain's crown, a dusting of snow to warn us of the winter ahead.

I left home especially early to teach the 8:30 English class at my school, Horizonte Instruction and Training Center. Mine was a special class for recent arrivals. In 2001 most were refugees from the troubled lands of Sudan, Somalia, Vietnam, Bosnia, Albania, Russia, Central America and my own country, Iran.

As I prepared to leave the house, I looked at the small television in the kitchen. A silver airplane hit one of the Twin Towers in New York City. A huge ball of orange fire appeared.

Another stupid Godzilla movie. Why did the monsters and beasts always attack Manhattan? I turned off the TV and closed the door behind me.

\*\*\*

There is a junior high school at the end of my street. It always brings joy to my heart to see the kids running along with their fat and funny backpacks, wearing red, yellow and blue hats, and you know their destination. They are going to school. What could be better than going to school?

As I waited in my car to make a right-hand turn, I noticed

teachers were running back and forth from the sidewalk to the door. They were hustling, pushing or carrying the small girls and boys, shouting and urging them to walk faster. That was unusual.

Were the students late for something? Were wild animals roaming the neighborhood? A lost bear had come into my backyard last year. Maybe there was a rabid dog on the loose.

A school bus arrived. The driver began turning the door handle to let the students out. He noticed things were unusual. He was still opening the front door when one of the teachers yelled at him, “Turn on the radio!”

I turned my own radio knob. A reporter was calmly and quietly speaking from the depths of hell.

This time the monsters and beasts really had done it. *No kidding*, I thought. *They are here.*

I stomped on the gas pedal. The freeway was almost empty. Some drivers were talking on cell phones, shaking their heads, and a few crazy ones were blowing their horns. I was a few blocks from Horizonte when I heard more. The first tower had collapsed. The skyscrapers were on fire, buildings exploding, a flood of people running in the flames and ashes. I had no idea where the reporter was standing, but he seemed to be able to

see everything. He was cool as a cucumber. I hated that son of a bitch. He might have been describing the Super Bowl or the bulls stampeding through Pamplona's alleyways.

I parked and ran into my school. The main lobby is on the bottom floor of a five-story atrium, with a solid glass wall facing east. The morning sun blasted through the window and glared off the waxed floor.

Some of my students were eating breakfast in the cafeteria. They seemed to have no idea about the violence that had just been unleashed on New York City. When they saw me, they stopped chewing their French toast and sipping from their small, pink cups of grapefruit. They began to follow me as I ran upstairs. My classroom was on the third floor. I knew the rest of my students would be waiting patiently and anxiously outside the locked room. They always were.

Some hung over the rail, watching people zigzag up the escalators and stairs that rose five stories through the atrium.

The routine began when I hit the second floor.

"Good morning, Teacher!" came a voice from the floor above.

"Hola!"

"Dobro!"

“Sabah al kheer!”

“Bonjour!”

“Bom Dia!”

“Dobro jutro!”

“Salaam!”

I was taking two steps at a time. I reached the classroom door. My hands were shaking. I dropped the key chain.

“Are you okay, Teacher?” Carlos asked from the back of the small crowd. Carlos was a young Mexican.

I usually greet each of my students before they enter the classroom, where they are my guests. But today, all I wanted was to reach the TV set and turn it on.

The clips were being replayed over and over: the carnage, the huge orange ball of fire tumbling out against a clear blue sky, followed by giant clouds of gray and white smoke.

We watched the towers fall again and again, and the stampeding people covered in dust and ashes. We saw men and women jump to their deaths, some holding hands. Ties, scarves and shoes were flying through the air. We followed each falling body with our eyes in our hearts, mouths open, unable to look away. We saw the whole city,

the whole world, coated with soot and ash, the colors of death.

Seventy-five-year-old Abdullah from Iraq began to pray in a loud and trembling voice.: “Ashhuddou la Alaha aelalah. [There is no god but Allah.]

Ashhudou ana Mohammad al Rasurolah. [There is no prophet but Mohammad.]”

Most of the students had no idea what was he chanting.

“Jesus Christ! Shut up, man!” Carlos yelled at him.

Behind me, watching the screen, my students were riveted to the floor. There was an impossible stillness in the room. We were speechless.

I asked everyone to sit down,. There was no way I could teach, and they were in no condition to learn.

It crossed my mind that I could tell them it was simply a bad movie. Maybe it was. I wanted it to be.

I became aware of someone murmuring in my ear. Then the voice shouted. “Turn the TV off. Please, turn the TV off!”

It was the assistant principal, Mr. Martinez. “This is an order from the District!”

Order from the District? Incredible! After twenty years, our

central office had something to say to me? And that was it? Turn off the TV? The mountain had given a birth to a pebble.

I seized my courage. “No!” No one was interested in learning English at that moment. We kept watching.

I liked Mr. Martinez. He was a very kind Mexican-American, a decent, committed professional just doing his job. He gracefully overlooked my rudeness, walked up to the TV set, turned it off and hurried off to the next classroom.

The TV screen was dark, but we kept looking at it. No one spoke. Everything was silent, even out in the hall. Mr. Martinez had succeeded in keeping order.

Nicholas, an elderly, distinguished-looking Russian, raised his hand. In the hundreds of times he had interrupted me, he had never bothered raising his hand.

“Yes, Doctor?” I said. He loved to be called “Doctor”.

“Teacher, this is worse than Leningrad, my hometown. You know, in World War Two?”

When did he learn the word ‘hometown’? I asked myself.

“Crazy pilots ... Locos ...” Lorenzo could not finish his sentence in English, perhaps not even in Spanish. In his mid forties

now, he had been a bank clerk in his native Mexico but here he drove a taxi.

Khadija, the much younger wife of Abdullah, was the first to begin crying. Abdullah elbowed her, but she could not stop.

“Let her cry, Abdullah,” I told him.

Narges, a middle-aged Pakistani woman stood up from her corner, secured her head scarf and went to sit between the couple. She put her arm around Khadija’s shoulder, squeezed, and handed her a white handkerchief. Melted by her tenderness, we began to breathe again.

“Teacher!” Elena from Brazil called out. “I have a sister in New York.”

Suddenly, we were physically connected to the burning hell in New York.

“Now, there is no need to be concerned. There are millions living in New York. Millions!”

Her blue eyes were wet and panicked.

“Why don’t you go and call her?”

She got up. “Yes, I want to.”

The ‘lost boys’ might have been the most frightened of us all.

These young ones had fled the killing fields of Sudan. They had escaped when their families were massacred and their villages burned to ashes. They had walked across deserts and jungles to safety in Kenya, before finally arriving here.

“Now, what is going to happen to us?” Sam asked.

I had always thought Sam was tougher than steel. The week before, he had told the whole class, “I am the luckiest — the only one in my group not eaten by crocodiles. We were running and hiding from the Muslim thugs who hunted us. They wanted to stop us so we couldn’t tell anyone what they had done, how they killed everyone — my parents, my brothers and sisters and my friends. They burned our churches and schools. We came to a muddy river where the crocodiles were waiting. I saw shoes floating in the river on bloody, amputated legs. I guess my legs were too skinny or they were not hungry anymore. I managed to get across.”

But now he was freaking out.

“You are okay, Sam. You will be okay.”

I’m not sure he believed me.

The classroom door opened. I thought it was Elena coming back, but in fact she didn’t return that day. It was the school principal, Mr. Anderson. He stood at the door, as usual. His fingers and his lips

moved as, like a shepherd, he counted his flock.

“... twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven. Not too bad.”

But Mr. Andersen was not smiling at us today. His sympathetic eyes took in the front row, where the Sudanese and Somali girls sat, their heads wrapped in fine silk scarves of the most vibrant oranges and yellows. The men were mostly unshaved, with bad haircuts.

“Make sure to walk around at lunchtime. It’s a crazy day,” he told me.

Mr. Andersen turned and looked at Khadija. She was head down and sobbing. The anxiety deepened on our principal’s face.

He reminded me of another compassionate man, my former principal, Dr Devreise: over twenty years earlier during the Iranian hostage drama. When the situation in our high school became too tense, he appointed me a body guard.

Oh God! I thought, not again! Please, not under the banner of Islam.

Mr. Andersen was ready to leave. “Don’t forget to walk around at lunchtime. We are going to be all right.”

His kindness and his calm, soothing voice were convincing

and very much needed. Even though he had so much on his mind, he looked over my students again, taking in each one.

Mr. Andersen had a policy that we read a page or two from a textbook before each class. “Read anything you want,” he always said.

And it proved a good idea. The students always got something out of it.

I pulled my tall stool to the center of the room, ready to open the book in my hand, the one I kept always on my desk. I am talking about *The Prophet*, by Khalil Gibran, a book that has become a big part of my life, that always takes me back to those green years when my father would sit by the pink rose bushes in the garden, drinking Russian vodka and reading from it, sometimes out loud. I have that very book, and have carried it with me everywhere. It still smells of my father’s hands after all these years and, amazingly, the scent of that vodka.

Then Almitra spoke, saying, “We would ask now of Death.”  
*And he said:*

*You would know the secret of death.*

*But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?*

*The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.*

*If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.*

*For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.*

*In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;*

*And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.*

*Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.*

*Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honour.*

*Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king?*

*Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?*

*For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?*

\*\*\*

I stopped reading. Khadija had finished crying, but her eyes were still wet. Abdullah's mouth was wide open, his missing teeth exposed. Nicholas had raised his head, pretending great interest. The air in the room was painted blue by my sad voice, and I wondered why, for the first time, the words brought such heaviness upon my soul.

I asked the class, "How did you like the poem?"

No one answered.

I said, "It's a beautiful book. I grew up with it. I'm a world traveler. I have this book with me all the time. Oh, and one other thing. I also take my old pillow with me. We never separate."

Again, no one said a word.

Who gives a damn about your lousy book and your stupid old pillow? Don't you remember just half an hour ago you witnessed hundreds of people burning in hell?

My students were motionless. Brought forth by this new horror, all their old sorrows were written in their faces. Suddenly they all looked much older, completely consumed and exhausted.

"Have a nice day," I told them. "Your next teacher is waiting for you."

Like young students, they scrambled to leave. No matter the age, students, even in graduate school, run to the door when the class is over.

The lost boys from Sudan, tall and elegant, always moved with grace and dignity, but not today. Perhaps everyone felt they were fleeing all over again, or they were running off to hear more about what was happening.

Only Abdullah sat on, stern and sullen, with Khadija. His mouth was shut, the upper lip covering his missing teeth.

"Is Khadija okay?"

I never presumed to ask Khadija herself. I must ask the

husband.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” He glanced at her.

“Do you have a question for me, Abdullah?”

He stared at me with blazing eyes.

Khadija rose and got ready to leave. Abdullah’s face was growing disfigured with rage. He began following Khadija, drawing himself up.

“Jews did it ... bastards ... filthy Jews!”

He did not look back. I wished he had seen my face before he walked away, frozen, as I tried to hold back the tears. My very old habit: crying — to hear such ignorance.



## 2 FROM THE PENTHOUSE DOWN TO THE DUNGEON

June 23, 1974

Dear Father Sir,

I have been in Washington D.C. since last week. I am working and my first summer job in America is a great and important opportunity for me to learn how American government functions.

Moose, my college roommate also works with me and his uncle Mr. Cooper helped us find our jobs. He works for The U.S. Federal Government. I am assigned to work in the office of His Excellency Claude Stout Brinegar. He is the Secretary of the Department of Transportation, a very distinguished member of President Richard Nixon's Cabinet. I have met some other members of the Cabinet too. It is not unusual for them to drop by unexpectedly. They are all very kind to me and I have great respect and admiration for all of them.

Our building, the Department of Transportation headquarters, is in the heart of Washington D. C. It is located very close to the White House. I have a very good view of the White House and the U.S. Capitol from my work place window.

My best wishes to the family. I miss you all very much.

Love,

Your Son, Payman

\*\*\*

In the letter to my father, I only spoke words of truth, without a single fabrication or exaggeration. I was indeed an employee in the office of His Excellency, Claude Stout Brinegar. I was hired as an ox, among other things, to pull a big, nasty carpet shampoo machine, assisting Mr. Cooper whom we called Uncle Cooper. You had to be a veteran to serve as Mr. Secretary's butler.

As I plowed, Uncle Cooper would walk behind me like an oxen driver with a big black hose in his hand instead of a whip. I hauled the machine where he told me to, straining and breathing hard, just like an ox. We let the foam run into the thick, dark-blue carpet, shampooed it, then sucked it back up, making sure not a drop of the filthy, gray water remained in that luxurious carpet. We plowed that carpet in the Blue Room almost every day.

The Blue Room was like a posh dining club, used for meals and meetings for the most distinguished guests of Mr. Secretary.

“Go right, boy.”

I was going.

“Go left, boy.”

I was there already.

“Stop coughing, boy.”

I wished I could. The harsh vapor burned my small chest badly.

“Go straight, boy.”

Much easier.

“Done. Good boy, good boy.”

“Yes, Master. Yes sir.”

Who was this boy? And how did he get here?

\*\*\*

Moose and I had been roommates in a small country college in the state of Vermont. He was from Washington, D.C. He called himself a “capital boy.” I had no idea what his real name was. He was a beautiful person. Lean and tall with big, brown eyes and long, black hair that waved over his powerful shoulders. He was not much darker than I, but he was black and he loved who he was.

When Moose invited me to go along with him to Washington, D.C., I happily agreed . It looked like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

to me.. We planned to stay and work in Washington for the summer break. Once in Washington, Moose's Uncle Cooper got him a parking attendant job in the D.O.T. parking garage. I was still looking for work.

One Sunday afternoon Moose took me to Uncle Cooper's house. It was in a busy shopping area on notorious 13th Street, close to the Capitol.

Uncle Cooper's kind face was light brown and his hair fully gray. He had a big round belly that shook when he chuckled.

We weeded his backyard. He invited us into his living room for a cold drink. He picked up his banjo and played a few songs but he suddenly stopped when Moose began singing. Moose was a terrible singer.

"Where you from?" Uncle Cooper asked me.

"Iran," I answered.

"That an Arabian land?"

"No sir. We are not Arabs. We are Persians, you know?"

"Hmmm. Okay."

I could read the confusion in his kind eyes.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Not in this town," I said.

“What do you do for fun?”

Moose jumped in. “He’s a clown, a mime. You should see him juggle.”

“Call Mama. Lord, an Arabian juggler!”

“No sir, from Iran, sir.” I was slightly irritated.

“Give it one time. What you got, boy?”

That was the first time someone had called me a boy. I didn’t like it.

I picked up a whisk, a spatula and a ladle from a wooden bowl on the kitchen counter and sent them into the air one after another, caught them, and sent them up again while I spun around, sat down, and stood back up. The utensils were all back in my two hands. Not one dropped. I bowed. Uncle Cooper clapped like a happy, naughty boy.

“Where did you learn that, boy?” Now he spoke more clearly.

“In Clown College,” I said.

“Are you a clown, boy?”

He didn’t wait for my answer. “Moose, I like this boy. I can use him in my kitchen.”

Moose looked at me. Uncle Cooper didn’t look like a slave master but he sure acted like one.

“What’s it pay?” Moose asked.

”Two dollars seventy-five per hour.”

No one asked for my opinion. I was sold.

However, Uncle Cooper stood up scratching his head as if he were not yet sure. He cleared his throat. “You look like a wild hippie. You need a haircut, boy!”

It was a hot afternoon. Uncle Cooper took me to a barbershop around the corner on 13th Street. He paid two dollars for my haircut and told the barber to shave off my broomy mustache for free. Before he dropped me at the bus stop, he opened his car trunk and handed me a short white tuxedo jacket. It was clean and pressed. The gold buttons sparkled in the sun.

“Wear it to work tomorrow. Make sure you’re clean. Take a shower in the morning and keep it clean, boy!”

Moose was sitting in the front seat, having a good laugh at my short hair while combing his fingers through his own locks.

I went home. I could not wait to see how the uniform fit me. It did not. It was baggy, but it made me look trustworthy, less Arabian, perhaps. White is cool. Being “Arabian” is not.

The mirror did not reflect the person who had left home that

morning. I looked smaller and younger, still with a brown face, but a white line above my lip showed where the moustache had been. The savage jungle lad had been reduced to harmless, little, clean-cut boy.

Next morning, I put on the white, spotless uniform and boarded a crowded bus. Not a good idea. I hung from the handle overhead, twisting and shuffling to avoid contact with people on the jammed and sticky bus.

“Please don’t touch me,” I was yelling, begging.

I found the Blue Room and then Uncle Cooper in the kitchen. He checked my fingernails. They passed. There were all kinds of good smells in the air. I helped him carry plates and utensils to set the breakfast table. There was enough food for the whole building: eggs, bacon, sausage, breads, hash browns and some kind of food I had never seen before.

Uncle Cooper said, “Mr. Secretary is German. He likes his Kraut food.”

I knew he was a German. He looked like the funny German commandant, Colonel Klink, in Hogan’s Heroes. He was tall, sturdy and bald. He wore thick, boring, black-framed eyeglasses. His forehead was shiny, very shiny.

Guests began to arrive in the dining room. Mr. Brinegar

escorted a small group of men: wealthy-looking civilians in dark gray and brown suits, and two deep-blue-uniformed admirals. They sat down together and covered their knees with the big, white napkins. We served them. They held their knives and forks delicately, putting only small portions of food in their mouths. They smiled as they ate, so smoothly and politely. After each bite of food or sip of drink, they carefully wiped their lips.

It was an amazing scene, so very civilized and peaceable. I stood in the corner by the kitchen, watching them. I was moved, inspired. My snooty grandmother would have had trouble finding something wrong with their manners. For me, it was a good review of how to hold my knife and fork American-style. Never put the knife in your mouth. Never use the fork to cut the butter. Do not chew like a dog eating from his bowl. It was a great reminder of bad habits I had picked up at college in Vermont.

Uncle Cooper walked around the large, square dining table taking drink orders, mostly for coffee or water. He came back to the kitchen, filled the coffee cups, put them on a silver tray and told me to pick up the tray and follow him. I was horrified. I felt the weight of the globe descend on my shoulders. Except for birds and dogs, I had never served food in my life, much less to a Cabinet member. I prayed I would not stumble or pass out.

I made it back to the kitchen, shaking, but without incident.

One of the guests stood up after wiping his lips, excused himself, and headed toward the lavatory. In a flash, Uncle Cooper grabbed a white towel from the shelf and handed it to me.

“Boy, take the towel to the gentleman.”

I followed him in and waited by the sink. He finished his business and washed his hands. I offered him the towel. He took it, dried his wet hands and returned the towel. Then, he pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his waistcoat and handed it to me.

“For you, boy.”

Twenty bucks! Twenty bucks! Twenty bucks! A voice was shouting in my head.

That was the first time I had heard this voice. It belonged to the greedy boy who snatched that twenty bucks.

Who was this “boy” they were calling me all the time? I was not a boy, and I did not like being called “boy”, but there was nothing I could do about that.

It seems I had sowed a little brown boy within myself, part of me and yet separate. Call me stupid, but I needed that little brown boy – and he needed me. I could endure the slurs, snubs and slaps. But the

little brown boy would not.

The little brown boy refused to grow up, bend, bow or shrink. I would be the one to take the shit for him, in silence. But he needed my protection. He had to survive. The little brown boy was rugged, born in America, raised on hot dogs and apple pie. He refused to cut his hair. He wore the same jeans and a dirty, green Adidas T-shirt every day. He was a natural-born American, and he was free.

\*\*\*

Mr. Brenigar's guests drank coffee and talked. They murmured, graciously and softly. I could hear the words of respect, politeness and civility.

After the guests left, Uncle Cooper let me have some of the leftovers for lunch. They were delicious, toothsome and so yummy!

All day, I washed, cleaned, vacuumed and plowed. Finally, the first day of my first job in America was over. I walked out onto the street and got on a bus. But this time, no one wanted to get close to me. My white uniform was soaked and tainted with smelly carpet foam and filthy water. I had grease and soap all over me. My wet pants drooped over my shoes.

That was some good chow, Payman. By the way, you look like shit, said the little brown boy.

When I arrived home I dropped my dirty clothes into the washing machine. I went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. There was some old food in there looking at me nervously.

The little brown boy spoke again, What the fuck, dude? Don't even think about feeding me that shit. Boy!

I went to bed. All night long, the little brown boy dreamt about His Excellency's leftovers.

\*\*\*

Being a part of His Excellency's team was a great joy. I worked from sunrise to sunset as a kitchen boy, an ox boy and a messenger boy, but always a boy. I regret that I never learned to cook those wonderful foods. Slaves do not cook. Do you have that expression?

It did not feel like I was working in an office. It was more like working in a social club. I met many notable and prominent people: cabinet members, senators and congressmen, power brokers, bankers and engineers. Uncle Cooper knew them all. His favorite was Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. He was the light and the life of the party. Very pleasant, very loud, and he always smelled splendid. Ted drank like a tipsy, chubby fish. He liked to start with two or three goblets of whisky, then have a glass of vodka. He finished with red wine. He always wrapped an arm around Uncle Cooper and thanked him.

Henry Kissinger was an infrequent visitor. He never smiled and his voice sounded like it was coming from a dark, cold basement. He wore his windshield glasses low on his pumpkin head. Do not ask me about his ladies. All knockouts! But I never liked him. He looked so suspicious. I am sure he was a spy for the Axis powers, considering the way he spoke in his thick German with Mr. Secretary. His mouth hardly moved. I never thought Mr. Secretary was a spy. The little brown boy agreed with me on that.

Uncle Cooper did not like Governor George Wallace of Alabama. Mr. Wallace was in a wheelchair for three years after the assassination attempt on him. Uncle Cooper called him white trash but still, I felt sorry for him each time they lifted the man out of his wheelchair to go to the men's room. I hated his southern accent, though. To my ear, it was worse than Kissinger's voice.

Uncle Cooper had nicknames for most of them. Vice President Agnew was Douche Bag. Tip O'Neil was Sack of Potatoes. He called His Excellency's secretary the daughter of Adolf Hitler.

I was very pleased to meet Vice President Gerald Ford. He never talked politics. He only talked about the roads and lines, ships, trains, planes and football. His voice was clear and strong. I never thought I could like a Republican, but I liked him. He talked about

college football and he came a few times to watch games on TV with His Excellency. I remember he was a University of Michigan fan.

I spent many days and many late nights with those mighty and powerful folks. I served them. I handed them white towels and black hats and dark umbrellas. I polished their brown shoes. I pushed their silver wheelchairs. I threw away their half-eaten food. I washed their dirty dishes. On hands and knees, I scrubbed their stains out of the blue carpet. But oddly, none of them saw me. I was Invisible Boy, a sub-microscopic human being. But in my crazy, crazy imagination, these guys were best friends with the little brown boy. I was doing the dirty job. I started thinking it was not so bad that they called me “boy.” A tip always followed “boy.” Maybe it was just a strange custom and I was misinterpreting. There were times when I doubted that I should hang on to the little brown boy. Sometimes he made me nervous. He rarely stopped talking, and he knew how to get his point across: You remind me of those sissy slave boys in *Gone With the Wind*. You little fairy ... BOY!

I knew from movies and magazines what kings and queens and royal families eat and drink. The ruling class in America does not sacrifice any luxury, in spite of their democracy.

The breakfast menu reminded me of the United Nations:

Austrian egg cake, French omelets, Irish soda bread, Portuguese sweet breads, Scottish skillet potatoes, Roman farina dumplings, Yugoslavian coffee cake. His Excellency indulged in my favorite, German knockwurst.

For lunch, we served veal, venison, pork, mutton, fowl, lamb and beef. No pork for Saudi princes. No tips, either, stingy assholes. The meats were fried, roasted, boiled, baked and broiled. The liquor bar and the beverage coolers were packed with Scotch whisky, Russian vodka, Spanish wine, German beer, and British gin. The smell of illegal Cuban cigars was always in the air.

Life was very good under the expensive crystal chandeliers in the blue dining room. I did my best to please everyone in that fancy, modern, slave plantation, always chanting, “Yes, Your Excellency!”

“Yes, master!”

“Yes, sir!”

I walked eyes down. I moved gingerly. I nodded, smiled and bent at the waist often. Each night, I rushed home, threw my uniform in the washing machine and headed out to find another party.

\*\*\*

Moose and I met each other on the Key Bridge in Georgetown

almost every night. The bridge was close to the nightlife on the Potomac River waterfront.

Moose had grown up in Georgetown. The hippies, the sidewalk hustlers, the restaurants and the bar owners, they all knew him, and he was a pain. Gentle and civilized during the day, as soon as we entered the waterfront he turned into an animal. The people called him a pissing-in-the-wind, porch-dog punk. I always walked a few steps behind him. I did not want to get punched or cuffed. But I was not so innocent myself. I did my share of stupid things. We stole roses from gardens. We never paid to see movies and we saw them all. Every night we drank within the sacred walls of Georgetown Cathedral.

One night, Moose took me to a bar. We walked in to see two bearded men kissing each other on the lips as yellow beer dripped down their chins. It was the first time in my life I had seen gay men together, an abrupt reminder that I was still a hick from a distant land stuck in the Dark Ages. I felt embarrassed. I felt instantly aged.

I ran out while Moose followed me, screeching and laughing, pleased with the outcome of his surprise. He loved to give me culture shocks. He sat down on the cobblestone street to finish his crazy laughter.

Another night we encountered a scene so debauched I have

never recovered. I felt my heart change colors, the last remnants of snowy mountain white tainted some ugly, rude color of pink. I walked out, crying like a baby scalded in hot water. I walked over the Key Bridge and kept walking. My apartment was in Arlington, Virginia. It took me a few hours but I walked all the way. By the time I reached home in the early morning, much had changed. I had lost whatever remained in me of innocence.

We never could afford anything in the fashionable quarter, but we went anyway and shopped the fancy boutiques as if we were serious buyers. We tried on every new arrival. This place was amazing: music, lights, girls and good, cheap beer.

It seems a tale of Gothic transformation to me today. Perhaps it was just a crazy life at a crazy time. There was a wild jungle out there, many, many, years ago, and I did my best to swing through it.

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“Uncle Cooper, how come His Excellency is not eating? I can’t eat all these leftovers. He didn’t even touch his knockwurst this morning.”

It took me four weeks to learn Mr. Brenigar’s name. “His Excellency” was easier.

“In fact, Uncle Cooper, you don’t look so happy yourself.”

As the day went on, he grew even more sorrowful. Finally, he broke his silence.

“Watergate, boy, Watergate!”

I was confused. “Is this water gate a bad illness?”

He smiled a dab. “No, silly boy, no. Watergate is a scandal, a disaster. If Tricky Dick goes, Mr. Secretary goes. When they go, we all go.”

“Who’s Tricky Dick, Uncle Cooper?”

“Oh, silly, silly boy, Tricky Dick is our president! I am talking about our president. I am talking about President Nixon. I’m so damn mad at him, bone-headed, shit-for-brains honky!”

I didn’t understand a word he said. Uncle Cooper was furious like a volcano.

“Wow, Uncle Cooper, I only got the shit part, but you look very mad. Are you speaking in English?”

Later, I asked Moose to teach me slang and profanities. I learned them all. The world of English opened up for me like a new dawn.

“So, Uncle Cooper, as far as I understand, President Nixon is in some kind of bottomless dung pit full of deep shit. What does this

have to do with me? I am only a dishwasher, an ox boy and a brown messenger boy.”

Uncle Cooper knew I was going to be crushed. I saw it in his eyes. His cheeks were burning and he was going to shatter me.

“Don’t you get it, boy? We’re all a part of the same team. A new president brings his own guests to the party. His own people, his own secretaries, drivers, cooks and dishwashers.”

I needed to interrupt him. “Don’t tell me he brings his own ox boy.”

“Yes, he does, boy. You and me is gonna be out on the streets any day.”

The long parties were about to end. The good tips, the leftovers, the spotless white uniforms, and the Blue Room, were already in the past.

“Don’t worry, boy. I’ll get you a job in the parking lot. You’ll work with Moose.”

I shall resign the Presidency, effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

This was the statement of resignation by President Nixon that signaled the change of scenery. New faces would replace the old. The

bright spot was that Mr. Ford would replace President Nixon. The new president was a friend of mine, too! But he didn't need me.

A few days later, I noticed some new faces going to the office. Soon the empty boxes arrived, and the packers and movers followed.

Uncle Cooper never cooked again. He took retirement. The daughter of Adolf Hitler cleaned out her desk and vanished. She left some pennies in the desk drawers. I took them all. I was just another casualty of the Watergate scandal. I felt a camaraderie with the other victims. Thank you, Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein. You made millions, and I lost my two-dollar-and-seventy-five-cents-an-hour job.

I was expired, put out like garbage.

I went home and for a while I stayed home. I did not go to see Moose on the Key Bridge. I did not wash my white uniform. I still have it. It hangs in my closet, with the shampoo and kitchen grease still on it.

\*\*\*

As promised, Uncle Cooper got me a job in the basement garage. It was one of the largest below-ground parking garages in the world, and it was open every hour of every day. My job was to check permits and shuttle cars around when they blocked other cars. The job was easy, but the place was a dungeon, damp and dark. It was cluttered with empty beer cans, broken bottles, used condoms, cigarette butts,

and lots of drug paraphernalia — burnt spoons and tin foil, needles everywhere.

The entire garage was stained with engine oil and greasy slick spots, thick with the smell of exhaust, burning oil and burning rubber. On the lowest level, there was a small door that opened to an old, crowded, underground shopping center. Its easy access to the parking garage had made my working place a heroin shooting gallery. There in the dark, hashish, heroin, and pot were sold around the clock. You could get stoned just walking about. The urine smell alone could make you dizzy. I had moved from the penthouse to a squalid dungeon. From the moon, I had dropped into a cesspool.

Thankfully, the little brown boy got me through the dark days by partying with Moose and me every night. I no longer had a uniform to wash each evening. I could head straight to Georgetown from work. Although I was Moose's faithful side-kick, I had my own style. After a week or two, Uncle Cooper let me grow my hair back. I bought a white canvas suit which I wore with black cowboy boots. I swaggered about the wildest parts of that city like a mini Omar Sharif.

The little brown boy learned a lot from Moose but also from our daytime companions: the junkies, hookers, pimps, gimps and Gilligans. We learned who was a whore and who was a floozy. Do you

know what poontang is?

Sound traveled strangely underground. We could hear hookers and johns bargaining about position, price and duration. Special discounts were given on Sunday mornings and Monday nights.

Thieves and robbers used the garage to divide their loot. Perverts came to masturbate. Panderers came to hustle. We saw classic pimp daddies and their special ladies. The experience was an education about culture and people. I preferred the Hollywood portrayal of these American characters. The real ones, sadly, were no different from the ones in my country. Not once did any of my old pals, the secretaries, the governors, and the admirals, stop by to say hi. They broke my heart. The little brown boy was distraught as well. I began to feel animosity toward Tricky Dick. His foolishness cost me my job in the penthouse. He'd let us all down, Mr. "I am not a crook".

\*\*\*

One Friday afternoon the parking manager handed me my last paycheck. It was time to go back to school.

I met Moose on the Key Bridge. He had a new project. He needed me to be watchdog while he urinated into a car's gas tank. The car belonged to a bouncer who gave Moose a hard time.

That was the last truly juvenile act of my youth. I realized we

were two morons making asses of ourselves every night. I had come for an educational adventure, and I had graduated, intact. I had glimpsed the path of vanity and uselessness. Now I needed light, kindness, civility, and change.

I had heard how beautiful is the autumn season in Vermont.

“Moose, we are going back to school!”

He was confused. “Who’s we?” he asked.

“Me and the little brown boy.”

He knew about my little brown boy. I think he had his own. As a black man in America, how could you not? He just looked at me, a long look.

“You go ahead. Warm up the room. I’ll be there in a week or two.”

He lifted me off the cobblestone and squeezed me tight.

“Let go, Moose. It’s embarrassing.”

He let me down and dropped his arms. I was free, standing there in front of him.

“Take it easy! They all know you’re not a fag. You’re famous around here. You’re a goddamn celebrity!” It was a good start for me in America, being a celebrity.

Moose never came back to school. I never saw him again. I have missed him all these years.

The next day I got to the Greyhound bus terminal early. I bought a ticket and waited for my bus. An elderly black woman sat next to me on the bench. She was reading *The Washington Post* newspaper. I peeked over her shoulder and caught some news. President Ford was having a meeting with his new cabinet members. Most of their faces were familiar, but I was very surprised to see His Excellency's picture among them. He was staying. The new president had not accepted his resignation. He looked well fed.

The woman asked me, "Where you headed, son?"

She had not called me boy.

"I am going back to school, ma'am."

"Great. What were you doing in D.C.? Did you like the city?"

She was motherly, very kind.

"Also part of my education ma'am. I love this city. It is the best school I have ever attended."

"Are you going to work for the government?"

I shook my head. "I've been getting my teaching certificate."

"How did it go?"

“Done. It’s in my briefcase. I’m ready to start teaching.”

“Good for you. You are so young, so successful. Your father should be very proud of you.”

“Yes, he is. Thank you, ma’am. Here is my bus.”

I stood up and said, “By the way, I am also a clown.”

She did not hear me over the noise of the bus engine.

The little brown boy got on the bus first. We were going to see the incredible autumn in Vermont.

### 3 MY CATHOLIC CONFESSION

I have often considered joining the Catholic Church, not for the rest of my life, just long enough to go and confess some of the great sins of my life. I am not religious, but I am not irreverent. I am not an atheist, a skeptic, a heretic or anything else. I suppose there is a God. But, if there is, it is not the one for whom the religious fanatics in my country claim to speak. Allah could not be evil. Men are evil. And men who do evil in the name of Allah are the most evil of all. I am talking about the ayatollahs in Iran.

You could call me Zoroastrian, if I could find my temple. My people went underground about 1400 years ago, when the Arab Muslim hordes savaged my old homeland, Persia.

I needed to go and see a priest to confess an old secret and perhaps my greatest sin — one I committed almost thirty years ago. Any priest would do.

“Yes, my son. The Lord be with you.”

He sounded like Father Mahoney. I was talking to a small, closed window in a dark box.

“Pardon me, Father. Are you Father Mahoney?”

I was not surprised when he said, “Yes.”

“Oh, dear Father, you know me. We are neighbors. If I confess to you, each time I see you in the store, in the church, or anywhere, I could be embarrassed because you’ll know everything about me. You would know my secret and my sin and my silly life stories. How do I know you won’t tell? After all, we are all human.”

He ignored my question.

“Tell me, my son, what is bothering you? Is your sin beyond the law?”

I felt like he was getting pissed off, wondering why I didn’t shut up and confess and get it over with.

“Aren’t you from the Middle East, the fellow from Iran? Are we talking about some kind of terrorist activities, son? I don’t know if I can handle this. I am obligated to report everything to the authorities. My son, since September eleven, even I have had to go and answer questions. Have you heard of Homeland Security?”

*Can it be possible? Is this still the same America in which I*

*have lived all these years?*

“No, no, Father. I am a teacher, not a terrorist. You know, I’d like to get this over with. Please, just let me talk now. I cannot wait any longer. It is about my job, my bread and butter.”

Father Mahoney started to speak.

I went on.

“My great sin occurred when they hired me as a schoolteacher. I was not qualified at all. I had only a few credits in education. I was just starting my master’s degree. The attendance book they gave me on the first day? I thought it was a kind of work log to record my classroom hours. I should not have accepted that job. There were people much more qualified to teach than I. What if someone more deserving, someone way ahead of me in line, what if they lost hope and surrendered their dignity and gave up their dream of teaching?”

“So there it is!” I said.

“I do not understand, my son. Are you telling me you hurt the people in line? And what line was this?” He sounded really agitated.

“No, no, Father, I just went to a grocery store to buy a bunch of red radishes and some green onions. It was Kim, my roommate’s, birthday. He wanted to decorate his not-so-good-looking dishes with

some colorful vegetables.”

You could hear the relief when he realized I was not a terrorist. Father Mahoney began to speak more kindly. “Keep going, my son.”

\*\*\*

I had walked to the local supermarket close by. It was a hazy, muggy autumn day, unpleasant for walking. In front of the supermarket I grabbed a shopping cart and went in. I turned right. And there in front of the produce section was Mr. George. I had met him before once or twice. He was the father of Dean, a classmate and my co-worker at the Mormon church in the translation department.

“Hello, Mr. George,” I said.

He didn’t recognize me, but hearing his own name made him curious.

“Don’t you remember me? Dean’s friend?”

His eyes smiled. “How are you? How is life going for you? Are you still translating the Mormon scriptures?”

This was the one thing everyone knew about me, and always the first question.

“Yes, sir, still doing it.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

My long silence was his answer. I enjoyed it as much as poking my eyes out with sticks — translating into Farsi pamphlets for new converts, the history of the Mormon church, and vocabulary notebooks for missionaries in Iran. I had quit three times and was fired at least a dozen, but they are very forgiving people, and besides, after a month or two of translation I bought myself a sports car.

“I am doing my master’s at the University of Utah, and I have taken a few hours in education.”

Suddenly he was paying more attention.

“That’s my goal. I want to teach. Perhaps when I go back home. There is no chance for me here.”

Mr. George repeated the word “teacher” a few times quietly and then he looked at me and said, “Of course you can teach here. We always need teachers like you. I can give you a teaching job.

“Do you want to start tomorrow?”

Who was this man? Was he a god, a president, a governor, an angel, CIA?

I began to inventory his shopping cart. You are what you eat. Maybe I could find some clues. A bag of potato chips and a big, fat, badly dented watermelon. No help.

“Sir, I am not certified. I haven’t finished the required credit hours. I am too young, too short, and I still wear a noose around my neck called a language barrier.”

But he was solemn and insistent.

“Do you own a school?” I asked.

He smiled again, very sweetly. “Yes and no. I am the Director of Human Resources for the Salt Lake City School District. I manage the teachers for four different high schools and many junior high and elementary schools.

“We recently received over one hundred Iranian students in two of our high schools. They are lost, confused and desperate for extra help. They have paid full tuition!

“I need your help. You’ll be their teacher, counselor and social worker. Not a day goes by that we don’t have some sort of episode with them. There have been problems with the other students and even with teachers.

“These kids are tough. We’ve had to call the police on occasion. I’m desperate. Please, just let me send you there.

“Help them. Calm them down. Teach them English and how things work in America. You’ve been in this country long enough to

know exactly what the heck is going on.

“Haven’t you?”

I could not believe what I was hearing. His face showed his exasperation and earnestness. He really needed me. For the first time, a feeling of self-importance was stealing over me. I kept looking at him. I checked his cart one more time. The watermelon remained silent.

“You can start tomorrow morning. Come by my office at eight. We’ll sign a contract. I’ll split you between the two schools. We’ll start you at Highland. They have the most Iranians.”

“Should I wear a tie?”

That was absolutely the most stupid question I could ask. But he took it as a yes. His face changed faster than a mime’s. Now he was overflowing with happiness.

“That helps, makes you look older,” he laughed. “Good luck. Do your homework.”

He handed me his business card. It was white and glittered with promise.

“Are you sure, sir?”

I glanced back at the watermelon suspiciously. Nothing. I looked back up, prepared to hear Mr. Jahanbin, you’re on Candid

Camera.

Mr. George looked straight into my eyes. “Positive.”

Suddenly, the watermelon looked glorious. For the first time, I noticed the beautiful, white, tiger claw stripes reaching up from the underside into green, winking smiles.

Mr. George stepped back, turned his shopping cart around and disappeared around the corner. For a moment, I was frozen. I looked the other way, expecting he would circle back around to tell me he was kidding. I could not move. I checked the ceiling to see if there were an angel trying to escape with a watermelon and a bag of potato chips. No sign.

I walked back to the front of the store and scanned it one more time, then left before he could catch me. I had forgotten why I was there and went out empty-handed. I wandered along in a daze.

I was only seven years old when I started carrying a portable blackboard around my neighborhood. Anything that moved, I wanted to teach it. Even as a child, teaching was my lure, my dream. Now the door to my candy store was thrown wide. Teaching in America? No money needed? The more I ate, the more they would pay, simple as that.

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I finally made it home, went inside and lay down on the sofa.

Kim was in the kitchen watching TV.

“Where are the damned vegetables?” he barked at me.

Then, “What’s your deal? Are you OK?”

It was hard for me to breath. I could feel my heart beating hard. Sweat had gathered on my forehead. “I didn’t get the radishes. I didn’t get the green onions. I got a teaching job.”

Kim was from Erie, Pennsylvania. I guess they give girls’ names to boys in Erie. He became more agitated. He was a nice kid, too nice to tell me I was full of it.

“A teaching job! Riiiiiiight.” Sarcasm.

He went back to watching the football game. His college team fumbled the ball. He cupped his hands over his mouth and screamed like a wounded wolf. Then he held his head in his hands. Another fumble. Kim was in agony. I was glad!

A slant of light poured into our basement room from a small window. Not enough light for a rainbow to celebrate the best moment of my life.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Now Kim was hitting our twenty-five dollar,

black-and-white TV. It had gone black, no sound.

It was dead, this time forever. It bit the dust, as you Americans say.

I had been especially close to the TV. That boob tube had been my best English teacher. I was screwed.

Kim fumed, growled, frowned and left the room.

To be alone was unmeasured happiness, in that calm, cool room. The streams of light poured fresh color on everything they touched. Thank you, God!

I had never spoken with God before, or been visited by an angel. Both happened on August 21, 1977.

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Father Mahoney was speaking again. “A happy ending, my son. You found your dream job. Mr. George got a young, energetic teacher, and so did the Iranian kids. By the grace of God, my son, it is His will.” Father Mahoney was yawning as he spoke.

But I was impatient to finish. “Father, that was not the end of my story. Please be patient with me. I need to tell you the rest.”

And yet, even I recognized that he had other sinners to hear, so I let him go and stood reluctantly to my feet.

\*\*\*

The first day of school as a teacher was a nightmare. In my country, we say, carefully translated, “I would have been better off staying home to stick needles in my ball sack.”

The day was a cruel combination of ridicule, confrontation and unpleasant surprises, followed by a bloodless revolution. How do you say it? A doozy.

It was still early when I arrived at Highland High School. I stood in the middle of the just-washed, shining, empty lobby. I heard someone breathing or grunting.

“Why are you here so early?”

A portly janitor appeared from a bathroom somewhere. The smell had followed him.

“Good morning. I’m new,” I said in a too-high voice, as I offered him my hand.

I realized at once, he was not going to shake my hand. A hug was definitely out of the question.

Before I could tell him my name, he interrupted me. Hearing my accent, he spoke especially loudly.

“EVERYBODY IS NEW HERE. THE SCHOOL IS NOT OPEN

YET, AMIGO!”

We’re not deaf, asshole! yelled the little brown boy.

I sucked it up. It’s good to warm up with small humiliations, low-impact aerobics. “Well, nice to meet you.”

That was the first lie of the first day of my teaching career. Thousands would follow.

The janitor jerked his thumb at the front doors and seconds later I was out there, waiting on the yellow, uncut lawn. So far, my red tie was not helping.

This was my first official encounter as a teacher. The nobility of the teaching profession that had inspired me throughout my studies was fast fading into fantasy.

Nevertheless, I would soon meet my first students and eventually replace my father’s image of me in a baggy clown suit and painted face —just not before being tossed out by this grunting, paunchy custodian.

I was still shaking with anger when the janitor walked out carrying a big bucket of filthy water in his fat, grubby hand. I turned away to avoid his hostile gaze. A strange noise made me spin around to see him flat on his back, legs kicking the air, his huge body soaked with

dirty water, the bucket overturned beside him. He struggled to get up.

I began laughing in my heart until I became concerned that he could hear me.

Revenge was mine. My face warmed.

The janitor heaved his soggy self off the ground, while brown water streamed down his shirt, off his pants and puddled on the ground. Now he was the fool. Less than an hour later I would pay a high price for this pleasure.

The school bus arrived. The kids poured as one body into the lobby. They reminded me of barn swallows, swarming through the sky over the Caspian Sea.

I followed the students inside.

What could be better than going to school?

The office was still closed. I waited a few nervous minutes before the secretary arrived. She was not happy to see a brown stranger waiting for her so early in the morning. She was as grumpy as the wet janitor and only a little less beefy. I followed her into the office.

“I am a new teacher.”

She took a deep breath. “Oh, yeah? Another one!”

When you learn English from the boob tube, sarcasm is the

first tone you pick up.

She sat down behind a desk loaded with piles of files and a big jar of candies.

“Give me your credentials.”

I had been warned as a child not to tell Americans, Give me. They don't appreciate it. You should say, May I please ...

I gave them to her. She looked at me suspiciously and mumbled something. Still moving her jaws, she walked out. I was left standing uncomfortably in the middle of the room. Were those low, mumbled sounds an invitation to follow her? I didn't move.

After a short time I heard her heavy footsteps stomping back.

“Mr. Linford is not here yet. Stick around.”

That was all? Just stick around?

I approached her desk to pick up my credentials and leave.

“Oh, no, you leave that here. Are you here to teach the Iranian kids?”

She pronounced it Eye-ray-knee-un.

The way she pronounced the name of my country, I would be scared of it, too.

“Their room is at the end of the hall by the men’s room.”

“Thank you. It was very nice to meet you, madam!” I said, even though she had not introduced herself yet.

Finally! I was off to teach.

I already hate this job, I thought to myself.

You can smell a high school restroom from miles away. Follow the stink.

I walked into the hall. Students were running, walking, banging their locker doors and noticing me. My red tie and shrunken jacket did not seem to impress them. The room I was looking for was not difficult to find. The door was wide open. The classroom was louder than the hall.

At first no one noticed my arrival. I knew I had found the right room when I saw the graffiti that filled the entire blackboard, and a few grinning Persian faces.

DOWN WITH THE KING!

DOWN WITH CARTER!

LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION!

*Christ!* Khomeini’s revolution had reached even this smelly room.



## 4 OUR TINY, LITTLE REVOLUTION

I looked for something to use to erase the blackboard so I could write my name for my new students. There was no eraser.

“Are you the new teacher?” someone asked in a kind voice, unprecedented for that morning. It was Shahin, at sixteen my youngest student.

“Yes, I am. How did you know?”

“The substitute told us.”

Immediately, the students became quiet and attentive.

I wondered if they also knew I was an uncertified teacher only six years older than Shahin, and that they were my first class ever.

A few minutes later I had a full class of Iranian students, mostly boys. The few girls sat together in the front.

The desks and chairs were plastic, dark gray and ugly. The faded brown walls were worn and badly scratched from chest level down. Tangles of spider web hung from each corner of the room.

There was a messy closet in the back of the room crammed full of buckets and mops, vacuums, brooms and toilet plungers. This was not a classroom. It was a storage room with a janitorial closet.

The first bell rang. I asked my students to stand one by one and introduce themselves to me. They knew each other very well already. Most of their names were those of the elite and ruling-class families. They were the Kennedys and Rockefellers of Iran.

Mehran stood up first. His father was a powerful Iranian senator.

“Nice to meet you, Mehran. Do you have a cowboy hat to match your fine boots?” I teased. We spoke in Persian

“Shit stompers,” he corrected me.

“Mehran, we do not say those words in school.”

“Mehran has decided to become a sheep farmer in this hell-hole.” A beautiful girl in the front row wore a look of disgust.

“And what is your name, my dear?” I asked.

“I am Shirin, the Sour One.” Shirin means sweet in Persian.

“And why is the sweet one sour today?” I asked.

Shirin could have been on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. The Iranian girls were the best dressed in the school,

and they wore the shortest shorts. These young people all stopped off in London or Paris to shop on their way to America. They were Khomeini's proof that the evil of the West was corrupting the Children of Islam.

“Why are we out here in the middle of nowhere? Why can't we go to school some place civilized, like L.A. or New York City? These Utah people look like sheep and goat herders who followed us here from the villages back home.”

“Now, now Shirin. Mr. Zehedi has recommended this city for its excellent schools.”

They were here because of Mr. Ardeshir Zahedi, the Iranian ambassador to the United States for most of the seventies. Mr. Zahedi had gone to college in Utah and had loved it. But he was best known to Americans, and all over the world, as Elizabeth Taylor's lover.

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I went to the board and pointed to the graffiti.

“Who wrote these words?”

Afshin raised his hand proudly. “I did. Carter is a bloodsucker. He's helping the Shah to massacre the people.”

I smiled and looked again for something to use to erase the

blackboard. I walked to the back of the room and looked in the closet. There was a dirty, crumpled, red rag lying on the shelf.

“What the hell are you doing in my closet?”

I jumped and turned, rag in hand, and found myself face to face with a solid wall of meat, blocking the doorway as if the supply closet were his private estate and my presence near it had polluted it and all its contents.

His breath had a bad tobacco odor. It was my janitor.

“Welcome to my classroom, sir. How may I help you?”

It was the most courage that I could throw at the meaty monster. He snatched the rag out of my hand and started walking out of the classroom. Then the graffiti caught his eye.

DOWN WITH THE KING!

DOWN WITH CARTER!

LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION!

“Did you write that?”

I ignored the question and his anger.

He whirled his barrel-chested body toward the door, steaming like a mad elephant gasping for air. His immensity could not handle such a quick motion. He stumbled over the doorstep. We all laughed.

He was out in the hall and the door banged shut behind him.

I knew he would be back with reinforcements.

“You are a troublemaker, you are!” Shahin said to Afshin, who was sitting next to him.

“Why not? It’s cool. There is a revolution at home. Don’t you know that?”

It was 1977 and things were heating up in Iran. Some of these kids were here for their own safety, because their parents were not supporting the revolution.

The classroom door suddenly blew open. The janitor rushed back into the room. A step behind him came a chunky, blond and green-eyed man with a short, square military haircut. He wore a dark green T-shirt and white shorts that tied at the waist under his protruding belly. A thick, red lanyard around his sturdy, corded neck suspended a black whistle just above his big gut.

He was a sports coach of some kind but he looked like a dog-catcher. Or a solid but mobile Mexican flag.

He looked at the blackboard and came toward me.

“Did you write that?” Foam was collecting around his mouth.

I did not answer him.

“Are you deaf and dumb, you damned Iranian?”

I hoped my students could not understand his words. I played to his image of me without showing disrespect in front of them.

“How may I help you, sir?”

He hissed like a snake. The only thing missing was the split, flittering tongue. He stepped up and tried to grab my skinny neck. Somehow I found the strength to push him back so there was a tiny gap between us. Seen up close, his flat, wide forehead was enormous, with enough room to land a small plane.

“How dare you! You barbarian shrimp!”

He was enraged. His voice shook the spider webs.

“Hi, mister,” Shahin jumped in. “Afshin has written those words. He is here. Sitting right here.”

Shahin had rescued me from a no-win situation and with perfect English.

Afshin stood up. He was fearless.

“Why did you write that?” The coach’s voice rose an octave.

“I don’t know. What does it mean?” Afshin said in his “stupid foreigner” voice.

Stupid foreigner is an act we all knew well. Pretending you

don't understand English. The dumber your opponent, the better it works.

The raging bull went right for Afshin, pulling his arm and yelling in his ear: "DO NOT EVER DO THAT AGAIN! Do you get it, punk?"

The janitor was not happy to see me off the hook so easily, and still alive. "Use this eraser. Take it!"

He pulled an eraser from his baggy pocket. The coach ripped it from his hand and held it up beside his head, glaring at me with icy eyes. Then he threw it at me.

I dodged it apologetically. In the same moment I ducked, I realized I should have let it hit me in the face to defuse the situation.

The eraser glanced off an empty chair, and disappeared behind a pile of junk.

I did not move. Afshin shrugged and sat down.

The coach barked at him again. "MOVE YOUR ASS, YOU LITTLE AHAB! ERASE THAT SHIT!"

"You little Ahab!" he repeated.

A middle-aged, silver-haired man appeared in the doorway, and surveyed the room for a few seconds while everyone stared back at

him. He walked into the middle of the classroom and planted his feet, standing like a rock that had sprung up on the flecked linoleum.

“What the hell is going on in here? What’s all this commotion about?”

The coach, still red in the face, pointed at the board. “I have asked this gentleman to tell me who wrote the profanity on the board!”

Suddenly I was a gentleman! It just made me angrier.

The silver-haired man pushed his round, black-framed glasses up on his nose with an index finger, then approached the board and looked up at the words. He read the lines twice and his jaw began to move. He looked around the room, gesturing with a tilt of his head for the coach and the janitor to leave.

Their sullen glares at me let me know we had unfinished business.

In a loud, deliberate voice our visitor said, “You know me well. My name is Mr. Linford. I am the vice principal of this damn school!

“Who wrote this?”

We all looked at Afshin. This time he did not move.

Mr. Linford began screaming. “I really don’t give a hoot about your goddamn revolution! We have seen many! You are here to study.

Keep your politics to yourself. You're a bunch of morons! You are the only troublemakers in this school. Just knock it off. That's it. No more. Do you get it, or don't you? Get this off the board." He stared at me with contempt in his eyes. "Try doing your job. Aren't you the new teacher?"

"Yes, I am. There is no eraser in this room."

"Well, go and get one, and if I see any more of this nonsense, I will call Immigration, and you'll be on the next boat to Pakistan!"

"I will pray for you every Sunday in church," I heard one of the boys whisper in Persian.

"I will pray for you every Sunday in church," said Mr. Linford.

He began coughing. His eyes were closed. He rushed to the water fountain across the hall, leaving the door open behind him. We all watched as he folded his large frame over the fountain until all we could see was his ample behind.

The boy was still laughing at his perfectly timed mimicry of the vice principal.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Jalal."

"A rich Jew," said someone else.

“A rich Jew, yes I am.”

“How did you know what Mr. Linford was going to say?” I asked.

Kamran, a red-haired, skinny boy sitting behind Jalal, took his yellow hat off and raised his hand. “He comes in here and says the same thing every day.”

Manijah spoke for the first time. Her liquid black eyes looked sad.

“Why do they treat us like this? I have seen him when he talks to the American students and it’s not like this.”

“Masoud stayed home. They beat him last week. He has a black eye. He was the only one suspended. Nobody else was.”

“The kids in gym spit on us.”

“I’m going to California. I do not want to die here!”

The second bell rang but nobody left. There was no end to their complaints.

“They steal our oil and our money and kill our people, and this is the way they talk to us?”

“I hate this school. That’s all.”

Another young Iranian walked in to join us, wearing

army-surplus camouflage pants and a khaki shirt. A thick, broomy black mustache covered his top lip.

After listening for a while, he spoke. “Teacher, what exactly happens in a revolution?”

“What is your name?” I asked him.

He stood up. “Arya. I am a senior.”

Arya’s father was a general in the Shah’s Imperial Army, in official photos the highly decorated soldier always saluting behind the Shah.

“Well, a revolution is when the people rise up against the government. We Persians probably invented it five thousand years ago, and we are still busy with the current one.

“Have you ever heard of Kaveh the Blacksmith?” I asked the students.

No one responded.

“He is a mythical Persian figure. Kaveh was the leader of an uprising against Zahhak, a sub-human, tyrannical, Arabian king.”

Some of their faces feigned recognition.

“When Kaveh raised his leather apron on a spear as a symbol of the resistance, the first flag in the world was born.”

“Where is the flag now?” Nima asked.

The class laughed. Nima was a small, chubby boy. It did not take long to realize he was the classroom clown.

“Who knows? The Arabs probably burned it the next time they invaded our country.”

“What do you think about this revolution we have now?” someone asked.

“It’s great. I cannot wait to see the king gone!” I said.

In retrospect, that was a regrettable answer. I confess, I was among the naïve who hoped the new Zahhak would prove to be a Kaveh and deliver real freedom to our country.

Nima stood up, flinging out his arms with a sugary smile.

“Have you ever seen a revolution?”

“No,” I chuckled. “But I have seen them in the movies. Doctor Zhivago was one of my favorite movies.”

“Who was Doctor Zhivago?” asked Nima.

“He lived during the Bolshevik Revolution, with our Russian neighbors,” I said.

“Is he still alive?” Arya asked.

“No, he died with a broken heart for Lara, his lover, and for his

country in the dark days after Stalin turned Russia into a big gulag.”

I couldn't stop telling the story. To me, revolutions were beautiful and romantic and always had happy endings. I was carried away. My head was talking, but in my heart something was smoldering. Something had to be done.

The humiliation of the morning had been too much, and it was only 9:30. Dr. Zhivago would not have stood for this. Neither would I.

The little brown boy was smiling. He whispered, Go, Daddy.

“Revolutions are great — a complete transformation of society, a big change,” I told my students.

Suddenly, I realized my clenched fist was in the air and every face in the room was fixed on me.

“Forget about the revolution back home,” I said. “Let's start one right here, right now.”

No one said a word. Arya kept chewing his moustache.

“Just get your stuff and follow me! We are going to pay a visit to the district office, right now!”

The students followed me out into the empty hall. We left the door wide open so passersby could read the graffiti on the board. My janitor had just finished wet-mopping the entire length of the dark hall

that led to a back door. He was coming toward us from the opposite direction. I looked right at him, stepped onto his wet floor and strode down the hall, splattering my footprints across his handiwork, and out into Sugar House Park. The students followed close behind, in a slipping, stumbling tangle. I'm told the janitor screamed profanities at us as we walked out. I never heard him.

We walked outside, skipping almost, and laughing as we began our march of fourteen blocks to the district office. It was an easy walk for an army of young, enthusiastic, brand-new revolutionaries born just that morning. I was under the spell of Doctor Zhivago, the yellow, smiling faces of sunflowers, sled ruts in the grimy snow, gun smoke in the air, blood on the road. We talked as we walked. I explained where we were going. I encouraged them to speak their minds when we got there.

“Tell them how you have been treated, and how it makes you feel,” I said.

As we walked, they told me again about the taunting and the spitballs. They complained about the shabby treatment, the janitorial closet for a room, and the terrible food.

“Perhaps you should not mention the food,” I suggested. “Don't they serve you the same food as the American students?”

“Yes, but it really sucks,” said Shirin.

Our noisy, forty-strong battalion attracted attention as we marched intently along the sidewalks. Several police cars appeared and began following us until the officers decided we were harmless and left.

We arrived at the district office, spreading out to march up the broad stairs to the main entrance. The boys took the stairs two and three at a time and opened the door for the rest of us as we reached the top.

Mr. George's office was on the right. I had been there only a few days earlier to sign my contract. Mr. George was standing in the middle of the room with a glass of water in his hand. When he saw us, a tremor on the water betrayed his surprise and anxiety. He put the glass on a desk and came over.

"Payman, how is your family?" — the first question he asked every time he saw me.

"They are fine. Thank you for asking, sir."

"What are you guys doing here? You should all be at school."

Arya was standing next to me. He stopped chewing his wet moustache and said, "No, mister, we will not go back to that burning hell!"

"Burning hell?" Mr. George asked. "What's wrong with your

school? Do they know you are here?”

Mr. George was understandably puzzled, but still kind and gentle. His secretary began taking notes, and Mr. George listened intently. The stories came out, including some new to my ears.

When everyone was finished, Mr. George said, “I will take care of this immediately. Thank you very much for coming here to tell me. Your parents pay full tuition for your education and you deserve a full education. I am truly sorry. Thank you again for coming in.”

We were all satisfied and hopeful. Mr. George first shook hands with each of the girls, then with the rest of us.

“How is the revolution going back home?” he asked me.

“First we need to finish this little one here,” I answered calmly.

When we left his office Mr. George was sipping his water and smiling. We were all smiling.

The next day, Mr. George came to Highland High. Each of our protagonists — the janitor, the coach and Mr. Linford — was severely reprimanded and issued a warning.

Mr. George came back the next day and the day after that. We were given the most beautiful private room in the school’s spacious library.

We never saw vacuum cleaners, dustpans or mop buckets again. I rarely saw my janitor, either, after that. We owned the library. A few weeks later, Mr. Linford had a heart attack and he also disappeared from the school.

Yes, our little revolution went very well. Better than expected. But the one back home turned out very badly. The king's boots had been replaced with ayatollah loafers and the crown with hundreds of gigantic black and white turbans. And we had no one to blame but ourselves.



## 5 SCATTERED IN THE WIND

Nima was a genuine buffoon, a joke machine, an eloquent lamponer. He owned my classroom and often raised his hand, not to answer a question, but to tell a joke.

“Pardon me. I have a joke!”

He never waited for my nod. I had given up months ago trying to make him tell his jokes in English.

He began in Persian: “An old mule was walking along the road. He saw a horrified burro galloping hard like a wild pony.

“What is the rush, my dear uncle? Slow down! Don’t hurt yourself.”

“The burro kept running, saying, ‘I am going to seek asylum in the United Kingdom!’

“United Kingdom? Stop! Are you crazy? They are not Muslim. They are dirty infidels.’

“The burro stopped abruptly, looked around, and lowered his

voice. ‘It is from Islamic Justice I am fleeing. Have you not heard the news?’

“The mule said, ‘I hear nothing anymore. The messenger birds may only speak Arabic these days. I don’t understand a word of Arabic.’

“The Burro shrieked, ‘Khomeini has decreed that all burros must have their balls counted. All burros must have exactly two balls, not one, always two, never three. You see? That is the reason I am running away.’

“The mule began laughing. ‘Well, you have no problem, then. Anyone can easily see, you do have exactly two testicles, my dear. Just bend your head around this way. Two balls ... see? One ... two ...’

“The burro sidled away. ‘Stop touching me. People are watching. They will think I am a homo.’

“‘So if you are not a homo, what’s the problem?’ asked the mule.

“‘Khomeini’s decree says first cut off one ball, then count them. So long, my darling. Pray for me. Adios! Adios!’”

When he had finished his story, Nima smiled from cheek to cheek, ear to ear.

“I have another one. May I?”

I was not happy. “No. You guys forget there are ladies here.”

Of course that was teacher’s bullshit. The girls always enjoyed his jokes and laughed longer than the boys.

“This one is not dirty ... only a little smelly.”

Nima began. “Khomeini dies. He has a reservation in Hell. The man at the front desk directs him to a bottomless shit-hole in the same building with Hitler and the Shah of Iran. The Shah is usually miserable. One day Hitler notices he is smiling and asks him, ‘Why are you smiling, Your Excellency? Since Khomeini moved in, you look much happier. I thought you despised this beastly man?’

“‘Yes, I do, Herr Fuhrer,’ said the Shah as he licked his bloody hands like lollipops. ‘My room has a good view. I have an electric fan and a black-and-white TV. Khomeini lives in the basement. He sleeps on the floor. I live above. My toilet drips on his head, day and night! I could not be more pleased.’”

The kids were turning in their seats, howling, smirking and beaming. I realized, for the first time, the revolution was a failure, a flop. It had been a mistake.

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Political humor reveals certain truths. In my country, we never

joke about respected figures like Cyrus the Great, King Darius or the prophet Zoroaster. When we realized how very terrible Khomeini had become, we stopped making jokes about the Shah. Khomeini made the Shah look like Mother Theresa. It is the same in America. I have heard numerous jests about George W. Bush, and I have made a few myself, but never do you hear jokes about President Roosevelt or Kennedy or even Jimmy Carter.

Khomeini began his purge on day one. He nationalized the banks and major industries and expropriated the wealth of leading business and industrial families. He purged not only former members of the Shah's regime, but also more liberal groups that had supported the Shah's ousting. The Iranian economy collapsed. Violent Islamic mobs took control. As the days passed, we began to realize that for some of us it would not be safe to go home.

Khomeini's revolution turned the clock back 1400 years, to the dawn of Islam. Instead of nursing along our young democracy, Khomeini was destroying any vestiges of freedom. Our century-old, modern, professional, judicial system was replaced with vahshieh sahraei, savage desert justice. Respected judges were replaced with psychopaths and child-molesters disguised as mullahs and ayatollahs. Public stonings replaced art festivals. Over 2500 years of Persian civilization, our glory and pride, was slipping away again.

Khomeini suspended all banking transactions for the Iranian students in the United States. He believed deeply that America was “the Great Satan” and that education would corrupt his children. Education, after all, is the greatest threat to tribal loyalty and religious fanaticism.

Towards the end of 1979, a month before the hostage crisis began, I arrived in Tehran for the first time since the revolution. The country was in bad shape. My young friends called it ‘the Spring of Freedom.’ I called it chaos. I spent two weeks in Tehran and went to London for a weekend, intending to return to Iran before coming back to the US. On the television in the London air terminal, I saw mobs attacking the American embassy in Tehran. I felt a day or two later for Washington and have never returned to my country.

The crisis was Khomeini’s method for establishing his rule — not the first time a dictator has created a monstrous enemy in order to rationalize his tyranny. America! What nation could be more suited to the role, with its weak incumbent government. Carter, epitomizing human rights, was hardly going to take vigorous reprisal. Khomeini used the crisis to force Iran’s ongoing civilian government to resign so he could commence his great purge.

Decades later billions of dollars of Iranian assets are still frozen in American banks, not to mention the human cost to the country in

destruction, death and suffering.

While the hostage crisis ran its course I was teaching more than a hundred Iranian kids at both East and Highland High Schools.

One day we were involved in a parking lot brawl with East High students. It was all over the news. Principal Dr. Devreise came to assure us that we would be protected. I was assigned a personal bodyguard, Mr. Archuletta, the district supervisor for minority students, smaller, more delicate version of me. We must have made quite an impression walking through the halls between classes, bodyguard trailing behind to ward off attack from the rear. Once a student shoved me from the front so hard I left the ground. Mr. Archuletta actually caught me, as much to his surprise as to mine.

I got off lightly. The body of an Iranian friend was found in his burning Mercedes — another victim of hatred. It was a grim time, being targeted at home in America, and worried day and night for my family in Iran.

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Concurrently, Khomeini needed youngsters for the killing fields in the war that was building against Saddam. More than a million people would die because of the animosity between these two evil men.

From the start of the eighties, one by one, without warning,

my students were plucked from my classroom, called home by their families. Uninhibited and unashamed, I cried many times. I couldn't hold back my tears on their departure days. I knew I would never see these young ones again. Most would end up on the war front. The faces of those children scattered to the wind are forever engraved in my memory.

Jalal, my little Jewish boy, would be one of those flower faces, fallen for no reason.

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June 6 1981 was a sad graduation day. It seemed more like a funeral mass to the few remaining Iranian students and me. Each time they called one of my missing students to the stage, it came like a kick in the stomach. When they called Arya's name, no one stood and walked across the stage. No one was there to cheer, to light up, and share his joy of achievement.

Arya's father had visited us at school only months earlier. He looked every inch the Imperial Army general and respected commander that he was — towering, distinguished and confident, with a great smile and sparkling white teeth. He had come to visit Mr. Linford, the assistant principal. In a short conversation beforehand, I whispered in his ear, "The man is a goon."

I regretted the comment immediately.

But the general smiled and said, “There is one in every crowd. Can I visit your classroom instead?”

“Of course, General,” I said, leading the way. “Do you want to hear about our little revolution?”

“Well, I certainly hope it is not as ridiculous as ours. I’m afraid the savage Arabs and Muslim fanatics are taking over. But still, His Excellency is beloved and powerful. The monarchy is the only way — the monarchy, my son!”

I had been politically active against the general’s “Excellency”. But this was the first time I had spoken to a general. It was a pleasure and, for Arya, a moment of pride when we entered the classroom together.

“Hello, my children,” the general said in Persian, although he spoke English fluently.

Someone asked if he was a new teacher.

“No, no, I am ...”

“Arya, why don’t you introduce your father?” I interrupted.

“He is my dad. The general!” There was no trace of shyness, only pride, in Arya’s voice.

“What is a general?” Nima piped up.

The general had the answer at the tip of his tongue. “You all believe in God, country and king. A general believes first in king, then country, and finally God. For us the king is the highest, the supreme leader.”

I wonder if he said the same thing to Sadegh Khalkhali, the lunatic Islamic judge who sent him a few months later to be slaughtered.

Arya’s father was among the first of the army generals convicted by the revolutionary tribunals. He was charged with “corruption on earth and fighting against the revolution, blocking the path of Allah”.

They took him to the rooftop of a mosque in downtown Tehran and shot him — the same roof on which they executed every member of the former regime that they could catch.

(This judge also ordered all the dogs in Tehran killed. Not even pets are safe from Islamic fundamentalists. We have a saying: “If God thinks Hell is not enough punishment for you, He will bring you back as a dog among the Muslims.”)

When Arya went back to Iran shortly afterwards, he found his home burned to the ground by Islamic thugs.

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rya!

His name echoed one more time across the auditorium.

No one moved in the thick silence. The announcer called the next name.

I wondered where Arya was now. I wondered if he'd seen the pictures of the dreadful bullet wounds across his father's temples, half his chin blown away and blood flowing from his smashed chest. The general was executed by firing squad, with machine guns. Months later, we learned that he himself had given his last order: the command to shoot. He had refused the blindfold.

I never heard from Arya again.

Jalal went home around the same time. His father was a diamond merchant with an office in Tel Aviv, Israel. This was enough to be convicted of in any Islamic court. Khomeini attack dogs went after the intelligentsia and the rich Iranians. Jews and Bah were among the first. Jalal father property was seized and he was arrested, accused of being an Israeli spy. His expensive diamonds were needed for the mullahs concubines.

My ample heartache was for Jalal. He was picked up by the Revolutionary Guard at the Tehran airport as he arrived from the US, drafted, trained and sent to the killing fields on the border between Iran and Iraq.

Manijeh came and found me that winter. She was a freshman at Westminster College. Manijeh liked Jalal and now she was grieving. She gave me the terrible news that he had been sent, along with thousands of children as young as nine years old, to the war front. Jalal had concealed his Jewish faith.

“He is a Jew in closet!” Manijeh said.

She showed me Jalal’s military photograph. A green bandanna was wrapped around his head with written on it Toward Jerusalem.

Jalal had a big smile on his face. Had he known the ironic slogan on his forehead would find its way back to us some day and expose his secret to us? A Jewish boy helping Khomeini’s Shiite army conquer his forefathers’ promised land?

“Jalal says they are giving a key to everyone to wear around their neck,” Manijeh went on. “It is supposed to be the key to Paradise and martyrdom. Gets you seventy-two virgins and all that crap. I will be madly jealous!”

I heard the awful news later. Jalal had been killed. He was

forced to clear a minefield by rolling over the ground in advance of the troops. They buried him in the martyrs' burial ground. Later, when they discovered Jalal was Jewish, they dug up his body and buried him away from the Muslim graves.

Did he get to Paradise? I don't know. The plastic key around his neck was made in China.

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In the summer of 1981 I received a telephone call from Mr. George.

"How's your family?"

"Thanks for asking, sir. They are fine."

"They are all gone!" said Mr. George.

"Who?" I asked.

"The Iranian kids," said Mr. George.

I knew that.

"We will keep you. We still need you. There are more refugees heading this way."

My heart was aching. I wished he would let me go.

"We are getting ready to host many Vietnamese children. Try

to learn some Vietnamese. In the mean time, your new assignment is in the mail.”

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Dear Payman,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been reassigned to Hillside Junior School for 7th and 8th grade English.

We wish you success in your new assignment.

Cordially,

B. George

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I was to teach English, but not as a second language. My new students would be English-speaking Americans!

It was my day. I was joining a super-exclusive club of the rarest teachers in the world. If any other members actually existed, I had not yet met them. Somewhere, there must be a brilliant Mexican teacher teaching French to Parisians or a Russian teaching Arabic in Baghdad. It was a mad, mad world.

I called my father. I had not been aware of his numerous difficulties under the new regime, but of course they were searching for him. His loyalty to the Shah was well known.

“Hello, sir, how are you?”

As usual he was gruff and irritable. “Are you calling me, Payman, to make sure hell is hot enough?”

I did not want to annoy him. “What’s going on with the revolution?”

“It is a calamity! Madness! Thousands have been killed, food is rationed, there is war, fanatical thugs are running the country, and I am very constipated. Everyone here is.” He laughed. Or maybe it was a short cough.

“Any good news?” I asked.

“Of course. Since the revolution I haven’t heard Madonna singing on the radio!”

That was the first time I’d heard him laugh since the revolution began.

“Dad, I have great news! I am going to keep my teaching job. I am going to teach English to American kids!”

“You’re what? How the hell do these people send a man to the moon when they are hiring Iranians to teach them their own language? What a shame. What a jangal you are living in.”

We said good night, and just as he was hanging up, I heard him

say, “Everyone knows the educational system in America sucks!”



## 6 PLEASE CALL ME CANADIAN

Mr. George was a Democrat and a Mormon, and only a Mormon Democrat could come up with such a bizarre plan. He was something, he really was. I'm sure that when he died years later as a missionary in Africa, he ended up in the Celestial Kingdom. How many Mormon Democrats can lay claim to that? In Utah, the Lord is hardcore, rock-solid Republican. Mr. George was sending an Iranian to teach the American kids their native language — only weeks after the terrorists had released the American hostages in Tehran. The hostage crisis was being relived in the media and was still headline news.

How inflammatory could this appointment be when the Parent Teacher Association (handpicked by the Hillside School administrators), had just pressured those administrators to reject several new minority (non-white) teachers?

It was a hot, late afternoon when I arrived at the district office to see Mr. George. The door to his spacious office was always wide open. He was in a meeting, but as soon as he saw me he stepped out of

his office.

“How is your family?” he asked.

The bloody revolution in my country had been in the news lately. It was getting bloodier.

“They are fine. Thanks for asking, sir.”

He smiled. He was at ease, calm. He was always cool. He carried a large yellow envelope.

“You have been assigned to teach English, speech and drama at Hillside Junior High School.”

The crusty administrators in his office were watching Mr. George and me impatiently. I knew the special attention I was receiving provoked their menacing looks. I felt like a germ under a microscope.

“Sir, am I qualified to teach English to American students?”

“Yes and no,” he interrupted. “Your main assignment has been outlined and explained. Please review the contents of this envelope carefully.”

In his kind face I saw for the first time a hint of mischief. He handed me the envelope, which I promptly dropped on the carpeted floor. I bent to pick up the envelope. It took only a moment. By the time I straightened up, he was gone. Evaporated. I looked into his

office. The crusties had vanished with him. This was his second magic disappearing act — the first being when he hired me in the grocery store.

I rushed away to the privacy of my home. The night before, I had watched a re-run of Mission Impossible. I decided I was on a mission. I had to get home to unseal the yellow envelope. Would it contain a cryptic message or would it outline my dangerous mission to go and teach American kids, or both? I was hungry for the truth. I hoped I could handle it!

I opened the envelope and found a dark gray audiotape amidst a pound of junk mail. I am addicted to junk mail, and this goldmine of valuable coupons only added to the mystery. I reviewed sheet after sheet. Was the junk mail for camouflage? Maybe not. There was a coupon for a free bag of Idaho potatoes at participating Ream's food stores. Was this a clue?

One coupon was for a three-dollar discount on an oil change in Provo. Another was for a slice of free anchovy pizza in Ogden. The dream of a glamorous mission was fading into banality.

After checking all the coupons' expiration dates very carefully, I placed the audiotape on my Craig 12 mini tape recorder. I reminded myself that the message itself could be coded. I pressed 'play'.

Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to infiltrate the school faculty at a small junior high school on Salt Lake City's east side. You will go undercover as a teacher.

The objective is to identify the bigots and foil their plot to purify the school.

You will transform yourself into a weapon of mass irritation. Repeat: a weapon of mass irritation. Do not confuse this with a weapon of mass destruction. In addition to teaching, you have been authorized to irritate, provoke, peeve, annoy and otherwise piss off bigots at will.

The voice sounded exactly like Mr. George's. It had the unmistakable tone of a Mormon Democrat. But why had he not told me all this himself? Should I have plotted the coupons on a map? And where had he gone with the office crusties?

As usual, this recording will decompose one minute after you have broken the seal.

The tape vaporized in a puff of smoke and ash, right before my eyes. The smoldering tape left a scar on the tape recorder.

Was I still dreaming?

I tossed and turned all night, thinking about the next day.

\*\*\*

The little brown boy woke up first. He was anxious to get on with it. With conflicted anticipation, we quickly hit the road, as he was fond of saying.

The drive took about half an hour. Once again, we arrived too early. I slowed down as I drove past to take a look. Hillside School was dreadfully old and sat on top of a dirty landfill. It resembled a military camp built by the Mormon pioneers more than a century ago.

Janitor at two o'clock! the little brown boy warned me.

A small, skinny janitor was sweeping the sidewalk. His broom handle exceeded his height. He looked like a midget but to me, since Highland High, any janitor had gigantic powers. My stomach tugged. I coasted past the school and began to canvass the surrounding streets.

The houses, surrounded by luxurious gardens, were not large. It was a humble neighborhood, but with so many different churches. I became concerned. There was a frenzied religious war in my weeping homeland. Back home we say, A black rope scares you if you have been bitten by a snake. I began to count the many houses of worship. I wondered if the wide variety of flavors spoke of religious tension here in Utah. There was not enough time to see them all — just enough to send chills down my spine.

The street started with Saint Ambrose Catholic Church, next door to an Latter Day Saints ward house. There was a First Congregational, a Redeemed Lutheran, a Zion Lutheran, a Christian Science, an Episcopal, a Church of Scientology, a Pentecostal, a Presbyterian and a Seventh Day Adventist church. There was a Korean Presbyterian church. How did the Lord wind up here from South Korea?

There were only a few thousand Bahá'ís in the entire world in those days. They suffered terribly under Khomeini's beastly regime in Iran. Here, even the Bahá'ís had a temple. All of these buildings sat within two blocks of the school, fanning out in every direction.

It was getting late. I had to return to school. The neighborhood was still very quiet. I saw cats looking out windows and dogs marking the tall trees and broken fences.

I parked and walked toward the building, a typical, outdated school. Before entering, I made sure the little brown boy was prepared for the new operation. He stared at me with his brown eyes.

Are you ready, boy? I asked him.

Who you callin' boy, BOY? Mister Mission Impossible, the little brown boy snickered sarcastically.

The principal's office was off the main lobby. I opened the door.

A tall, bushy man was talking on the phone with his large feet planted on the desk. Dressed in tennis shorts, he looked like a water boy for the football team. The sight of all that thick, black hair sprouting on pale legs brought bile to the back of my throat.

There was a big, framed poster of President Reagan above his desk. I never did meet 'the Gipper' in the Blue Room, but I had seen more than enough of his smirking face elsewhere. His movies were terrible.

On the opposite wall there was an old photo of baseball player Lou Gehrig with his famous saying: "I am the luckiest man on the face of the earth." I always thought that an odd comment from someone remembered as much for the disease that killed him as for his playing.

I stood in the doorway of the office, waiting for the principal to acknowledge me. His hairy hand held a green phone receiver to his ear as he pretended not to see us.

What, are we invisible or something? asked the little brown boy.

I ignored his question.

There were two sofas and a few upholstered chairs scattered around the spacious office. I sat down on a low coffee table just inside the door. It was a little after seven in the morning. The man was arguing with his wife about a second honeymoon. He rolled his eyes without

allowing them to rest on me. A cheap, gold picture frame on his desk held a photo of his wife. Next to that was a larger one that appeared to hold his entire family, all dressed identically, too many people to count without squinting. I looked around his office at some of the bizarre objects: a human skull, a stuffed white rabbit, the head of a glassy-eyed Bambi and a big, zigzag, spiral moose antler in the corner.

I am not fond of hunting or of cannibals, and I was already beginning to dislike this man. He still had not acknowledged me. Another long minute of silence passed while he listened to his wife on the other end of the phone.

“Good-bye, dear,” he finally said, and hung up.

“What can I do for you?” He looked at me with phony interest.

That was the first time I saw his face clearly. There was no warmth in it. I took a deep breath.

“I am your English teacher. What is it the things you want me to do?”

What is it the things? Your English SUCKS! the little brown boy screamed with delight.

Suddenly, I had the principal’s full attention. He dropped his hairy legs to the floor and walked past me into the hall.

“Kathleen!”

He called her name twice and returned to his desk, but not before the little brown boy got started. Yo, Kathleen! Hey, Pussy Cat! Fetch me and my friend here a couple of frosty ones while you’re at it! He was practicing a line we had heard the previous night on TV. I’m just not feelin’ the love, Payman.

I stayed on his coffee table, elbows on knees, trying not to grin. After all, I was on a mission to annoy him.

“We can’t just take as a teacher anyone who walks into this school. Ms. Kathleen must arrange an interview with you. Mr. George knows better. He should not have sent you here without our consent. Ms. Kathleen is my assistant.”

We were waiting for Ms. Kathleen.

The little brown boy was shaking his head. I don’t think he likes you, dude. Maybe you should get off his fuckin’ table.

The principal began tapping his red pencil on the desk. He kept looking at me.

A raspy, unfriendly voice came over my shoulder. “What can I do for you, mister?”

I had to twist right around to see her standing in the doorway.

Ms. Kathleen was a tall, skinny, silver-haired woman with vacant, colorless eyes and a rugged, puckered face.

“Check out the new English teacher George sent us.” The principal spoke as if I were an ape in a cage.

Ms. Kathleen scowled at me.

Bitch, said the little brown boy.

\*\*\*

In the United States of America, bullshitting is perfectly legal. The founding fathers decided that the right to bullshit should be protected by the Constitution. To keep the language pretty, they called it “freedom of speech”.

You may not excuse my rudeness, but this is one of the great lessons I learned as a member of His Excellency Claude Stout Brenigar’s team in Washington, D.C.

There I spent several months studying and listening to the elite and powerful practice the art of bullshit on each other. When I moved down to the subterranean parking job, I heard the same thing. I listened very carefully. It was the same bullshit downstairs as up, but with a different tone on a different subject. During my short career in His Excellency’s office, I had found a great role model to observe and

to mimic: Senator Kennedy. The man was a genius; an adorable, no-nonsense preacher. He could bullshit through his teeth, close the sale and leave happy people in his wake. And his tip was never small change.

\*\*\*

“Where’re you from?” Ms. Kathleen asked me in a sour voice. That was her first question.

The little brown boy covered his ears. I knew that was coming. Hang on tight. Here we go!

I paused for a second and looked straight into her narrowed eyes. “I am Canadian.”

Nice! the little brown boy shouted with delight.

This felt great. I was exploring new territory in the land of bullshit.

“Is that right?” Ms. Kathleen said.

I nodded. “Having a Canadian-Indian father has made me a little different. He converted to the Church when he was very young.”

The little brown boy caught on fast and began to mock her.

“Is that right?”

Ms. Kathleen and the little brown boy said it simultaneously.

In America, you don't have to answer that question. It actually means: I'll believe anything you say or I don't give a shit ... or both.

I was on a roll. "My mother is a Sikani Indian. They sent me here to attend Brigham Young University."

Is that right? The little brown boy was rolling on the floor, his peals of laughter rising to the ceiling and filling the room. Tears rolled down his cheeks and tickled his ears. His skinny hands clutched his belly as he kicked his feet in the air.

Me no chief. You no chief. Senator Kennedy be so proud of you! Now the little brown boy was hopping around doing an American Indian dance.

Of course it was all a lie, but I was not at fault if they believed me. I was only exercising my constitutional right, the right of free speech, the freedom to bullshit!

They bought it. I felt a cool breeze in the room. They seemed happy to sit there and listen to my absurd yet somehow believable tales. They did not ask about my teaching credentials, my lesson plans or, above all, my teaching philosophy.

No way would I tell them I was from Iran. The Iranian hostage crisis, barely ended, was like an infected wound, with a permanent, ugly scar forming over it. Thanks to the wicked Khomeini and his pack of

swine, good Iranians, at least in Utah, and probably across the United States, were considered criminals and religious fanatics. At this point, it was less embarrassing for an Iranian to discuss his venereal diseases than his doomed and disgraced country.

\*\*\*

It was love at first sight with my new class. I was blessed with the best students in the world. They were smart, focused and respectful. I never once had to discipline any of them. It was a miracle.

I consolidated my three subjects, English, speech and drama, into a single on-stage workshop. The school had a nice, rarely used auditorium. I started with mime and clown acts. We learned pantomime. We chose clown names for each other. Mine was Dooley.

I took everything from page to stage. We worked on the basics of acting, storytelling, the history of the theater, design, lighting and make-up.

The kids flourished and inspired me. I was proud of them, and most of the parents were supportive and grateful.

The school's librarian, Mrs. Magleby, was a gift from God. From her small library she provided books, scripts and copies. From her modest budget she purchased make-up kits. I'm sure that when she died a few years ago she went straight to the library in Paradise.

My teaching was going well, but my secret mission for Mr. George had not been abandoned. Only a few days after our first interview, Ms. Kathleen stopped me in the parking lot after school. She looked mighty exasperated and began to growl like a bear.

“You are an ah-ray-nee-uhn!”

“I’m a what?” I said.

“I just had a meeting with George.”

She meant Mr. George. He must have blown my cover.

“You’re a liar!” she screamed. “You are not Canadian, you’re an INCLUDEPICTURE “[I did not like her attitude, but the sentence sounded poetic. I imagined her breaking into a rap right there on the asphalt:](http://cache.lexico.com/g/d/dictionary_ah-ray-nee-uhn.”</a> •</p></div><div data-bbox=)

You’re no Canadian.

You’re a damned ah-ray-nee-uhn!

“Is that right?” I said, without betraying my distaste for this woman.

The little brown boy began chanting. Damn Iranian, damn Iranian, damn Iranian!

With my heaviest Middle Eastern accent, I hit her with

butchered English. “Me very so sorry. Is it my language barrier of misunderstand?”

Her face twisted and changed color. My mission was back on track.

“That’s my goddamned point. How can you teach English when you can’t even speak it?”

*Also rather rhythmic...* The little brown boy was at my shoulder.

“Thank you! Yes, I am study very hardly,” I said before I could stop myself.

The little brown boy was hopping up and down, squeezing his crotch. I’m gonna pee my pants if you don’t stop.

Ms. Kathleen spun around and stomped off.

Where is she going? asked the little brown boy. We were just starting to have fun!

When I got home I called Mr. George. He was chuckling as he picked up the receiver.

“How’s your family,” he asked, without letting me answer.

“You’re doing a good job, man! Doing an excellent job! You’re driving them crazy! Kathleen came to my office. I wish you could have seen her

face!”

The boss was happy. I asked for a raise.

“Teachers don’t get raises in the middle of a school year. Be patient,” he said.

\*\*\*

I was a black sheep among the other teachers, an outsider, a stage freak, a liberal vegetarian, a psycho, non-Christian and a radical leftist. We were doing scenes from playwrights like William Henley, Bertolt Brecht and Henrik Ibsen. We had done a scene from *Inherit The Wind*.

The principal reminded me I was to put on the school’s traditional Thanksgiving and Christmas shows. I had seen the boxes of costumes backstage. There was no way I was going to dress up white kids as Indians and pretend the rubber chickens were turkeys.

“Payman, are we all set for the Turkey Day show? You know, gobble-gobble?”

“I don’t eat turkey,” I said.

“That’s fine, Payman. I’m talking about the Thanksgiving show. We do it every year. You know, it’s a major American tradition. Have you ever heard of it?”

“Let me think.”

I paused to take measure of the cynicism creeping toward my mouth.

“No, sir, I do not believe I have seen this tradition,” I said, resisting the urge to ask him if genocide was also an American tradition.

“Well, let me tell you about it. It’s very simple,” said the principal.

“A long time ago, before we were even an official country, the Indians and the pilgrims came together to celebrate the harvest and thank God. You know, like a party. Do you understand party?”

“I think so sir, I have seen pictures,” I said.

“So now, every year we give thanks to God for his blessings and we celebrate our friendship with the Indians.” The principal continued, “It’s a paid holiday. Everybody stuffs a big turkey and cooks it. You can eat the stuffing, can’t you?”

Yeah, like the Indians got stuffed, I thought to myself. Instead I told him, “Yes, sir, I will try it.”

I meant the stuffing. He thought I meant the Thanksgiving show.

“Great. Good luck, then,” said the principal as he walked away.

By the time he realized there would be no show, it was too late. He didn’t say anything. Perhaps he decided it was too ironic, to demand that an Iranian produce a Thanksgiving show. It’s more likely he decided it was unpatriotic.

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The principal was more insistent about the Christmas show. The manger and props already took up most of the space backstage. They had an entire nativity scene.

“Did you know one of the Wise Men was Persian?” said the principal in a pitifully patronizing attempt to be nice to me.

My grandfather had also claimed — falsely — that we were descended from this Wise Man.

I shot back, “It would take ten years to walk from Persepolis to Bethlehem! The Persian Wise Man would have to have begun walking when Mary was an infant.”

I exaggerated, but he didn’t know any better. I was in a foul mood.

“And did you know that Jesus was darker than I am?”

It was a low blow, I admit, but the idea, the fact, and the

comment had been running around my head ever since I saw my first picture of Jesus Christ with flowing blond hair and Nordic blue eyes.

“I’ve been to Nazareth. A blond, blue-eyed baby would have raised some eyebrows, don’t you think? You have been there, haven’t you?”

“Antichrist!” he sputtered.

“Your Christmas show is tired and laughable,” I said.

I refused to do it. I was surprised he didn’t fire me on the spot.

\*\*\*

My first visit to the principal’s office was also my last. The entire year I was at that school, I was not invited, nor did I wish, to set foot in his office again. I should have scratched my initials in his coffee table: Payman was here September 2, 1981.

I also skipped all the faculty meetings. Nobody said a word. Once, I received a warning in my mailbox, which I ignored. The principal and Ms. Kathleen had convinced themselves that I couldn’t read anyway.

He was irritated. She was irritated. Mission accomplished!

I knew my days were numbered in that school. Hundreds of Southeast Asian students were coming to Salt Lake City and I would

soon be assigned to help them. Meanwhile, I was a proud black sheep, and did my best to be a good teacher. Despite the animosity that seemed to follow me from school to school, the students loved me, and I loved them back.

The students and I wanted to end the school year with a musical pantomime piece. I chose *All That Jazz* (Best Motion Picture, 1979), and in preparation we watched the final sequence .

As always, I had previewed this clip carefully, not so much to protect the kids as to avoid the wrath of the parents. The scene is stunning, a masterpiece, as popular today as it was then. The students were keen and went on to do a brilliant performance but, as it turned out, the dancers' full body suits were too much. I got the wrath.

\*\*\*

The last day of school was a wonderful and a sad day, and not easy to describe. There were many noble children at Hillside High, and a few rotten adults to make sure nobody had a good time. So sad.

As soon as I entered the school that day, Mrs. Magleby waved me into the library. I sensed that something was up. Without her usual smile, she went to her desk and returned with a rubber clown nose. I assumed one of my students had left it behind. I took the nose, thanked her, and turned to leave.

Coming toward me from two directions were the principal and a 300-pound man-truck I had never seen before. I was clearly their destination.

The little brown boy noticed first. Did you pick up your cyanide pill this morning?

I moved aside, pretending the man-truck wanted to pass me. Instead, he stopped. I found myself trapped between the principal and the man-truck.

The little brown boy began taunting me. Hit 'em, hit 'em! Hit them NOW!

“This is Mr. Story,” said the principal. “He’s the lawyer representing the parents of one of your students.”

In my country this kind of scene usually precedes a long prison term, if not a good public stoning. Freedom to Bullshit is not protected in my country. There, the man-truck could have taken me straight to prison by himself. He lacked only a black or white turban on his fat head.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Story.” I offered my hand.

Mr. Story pretended not to notice. The principal turned to Mrs. Magleby.

“Mrs. Magleby, can you check this movie ...” He paused, unable to remember the name of the movie.

The man-truck finished the principal’s sentence: “All that Jazz.”

I could smell Spanish omelet on his breath.

The principal repeated it, yelling. “All that Jazz! Is it an R-rated movie?”

Mrs. Magleby carried on shelving books. She was in a dour mood.

The two men slowly walked outside and stood in front of the library. One spoke quietly while the other nodded.

Mrs. Magleby whispered to me, “They just want to make sure you are gone from the school. That’s all. Playing their power games.”

I still had the red clown nose in my hand. I pressed it onto my nose. Mrs. Magleby laughed nervously. I walked out of the library.

As I passed by the principal and the huge lawyer, they stopped talking. Mr. Story looked as if he had gained weight since he left the library. The Spanish omelet was working.

I continued down the hall wearing the clown nose. They looked like frothing attack dogs straining at their leashes, begging to be released. I was running off like Bambi.. How they would have liked to

tear me to shreds.

\*\*\*

“Last day, folks. What should we do?” I asked my students.

“Nothing!” they replied.

“Make us an offer!” said someone.

“How about we write a screenplay?” I joked.

They knew I was kidding. I was not in the mood. I was still angry. It is easy to let sadness go, but anger has a harsh color that stains your heart, sometimes forever.

Nevertheless, I stuffed my anger down and basked in the sea of smiles.

“I need the last day off,” I told them.

“Can we leave then?”

“No,” I said, “there’s a lawyer in the office. He’ll bite your ankles and crush my fingers if he catches you leaving early. I want you to do the show for me, one more time.”

The students prepared the stage. I sat in the front row, and when they were in position, I announced, “It’s show time, folks!”

The soundtrack began:

*Bye bye love.*

*Bye bye happiness*

*Hello loneliness*

*I think I am gonna die.*

*Bye bye love*

*Bye bye sweet caress*

*Hello emptiness*

I feel like I could die.

\*\*\*

The kids did their best performance of the year. They were truly marvelous. Bob Fosse would have hired them for his next show. They washed away my anger and my sadness. When we turned off the stage lights afterwards, a part of my life went dark forever. I was not expecting that.

I never wanted to see that school again.

\*\*\*

It was a hot, dull, summer day. I was home watching my all-time favorite TV show, Hee Haw. The telephone rang. I heard the kind voice of Mr. George.

“How’s your family?” This time, he said it a little faster.

“They are fine. Thanks for asking, sir.”

“Are you busy?”

Mr. George wanted to see me. I was in his office in less than an hour. We did our routine again.

“How is your family?”

“They are fine. Thanks for asking, sir.”

“Good to see you. I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.” Nothing he said could be bad. There was still another month before school started. I was not worried at all. But somehow, the little brown boy was.

“You must be reprimanded for showing an R-rated movie in your workshop.”

Mr. George handed me a thin envelope.

“We have to put a copy of the reprimand in your personnel file. Don’t worry. It won’t change anything.”

I left his office distraught. The little brown boy mumbled something I could not understand.

\*\*\*

A couple of weeks later I went to the personnel office where employee records were kept in a small, vaulted room lined with shelves. District employees could go in and inspect their own files. I asked

Miss Fay, the secretary, if I could look at mine. She showed me the vault. I went inside. I found my folder easily, opened it and put it on the reading desk against the wall. My back was facing Miss Fay and the vault door was wide open. The reprimand letter was on top of my file. It looked mean, with its angry, red-ink letters screaming at me from the white paper. I read the words. I read them again, more slowly. Total bullshit. Protected, unfortunately, by law.

I employed my theatre training, coughing to cover the sound as I crumpled the letter into a rough ping-pong ball inside my fist. It only took a second. I had coughed much longer when I was an ox!

I checked my rear flank. All clear. Miss Fay was on the phone. Mr. George was not in his office. I looked around for a garbage can. There was none. I panicked. The little paper ball became a time bomb in my sweaty hand. I started shaking. I opened my fist and my mouth and shot the paper ball inside. It hit my front teeth and bounced to the floor. I scooped it up again and shoved it in my mouth, over my tongue. It got stuck in the neighborhood of my tonsils. I coughed harder, for real this time. The ball hit a bad wisdom tooth and shot a bolt of pain through my head.

Then I heard Mr. George talking in his office. He had just arrived. I started chomping. The wad of paper tasted sweet and dry and

impossible to swallow. Mr. George saw me. He stuck his head through the door.

“How is your family?”

I was suffocating and gasping for air. I could not answer.

“How is your family?”

Thank God, he repeated the question. It gave me enough time to send the semi-soggy wad down my throat, all the way down — almost.

“They are fine...”

That was all I could say. I kept coughing, and I needed water badly.

I put the file back and ran for the bathroom sink. I filled my palms with water and drank. The water was warm and thick. I looked in the mirror as I wiped my wet chin. My face had turned blue from the effort. My mouth and teeth were red with ink.

Mission accomplished.



## 7 UNDESIRABLES? I WAS THE ONE WHO KILLED JESUS

Spencer was one of the dancers in the final show at Hillside Junior High. He had been humiliated by his parents' complaint. He felt responsible. One particularly hot August night he called me.

"The lawyer guy told my dad you're going to be assigned to South High." The poor boy was tangled in the laughable litigation. His goodness was obvious, and I had been his favorite teacher.

My greatest concern since the library incident had been how to digest the paper paint ball I had swallowed at the district office. I was horrified to find myself peeing red, for days.

"Where is South High?" I asked Spencer. I had not yet ventured much beyond my East-side schools. I assumed "South" meant south of the city, more conservative, more religious.

"State Street, downtown, Payman," Spencer said.

Instant panic! Of course I knew the school. It was the eyesore

on the main drag on the south side of downtown Salt Lake City.

“It’s a dump. That’s where they put the undesirables,” Spencer told me.

I thought Hitler had lost the war. Khomeini was still in Iran. How could this be possible? “What is an undesirable?” I asked.

“I don’t know. That’s what the lawyer told my Dad. It usually means, like, unworthy of conversion, you know, like gays and lesbians, say.”

“Okay, I understand. But who are these undesirable teachers?” I had always assumed I was the only black sheep in the Salt Lake City School District.

“I don’t know. Just what I just told you, I guess.” said Spencer.

“Unworthy of conversion? What does that mean?” I asked.

“Nothing. You know. I don’t know. I guess it’s a church thing.”

I thought about it, and I realized all of my fellow teachers up to this point were either already Mormon or at least “worthy of conversion”.

I remembered an important and famous phrase from my Mormon scripture-translations days: They shall be a white and a delightsome people. Certainly for me, up until then, the faculty rooms

of my schools were a sea of white and delightful saints. Still, I refused to believe my light brown skin was the issue. It wasn't possible.

\*\*\*

The first obvious undesirable was the school location itself. Not one church for miles around. After my experience at Hillside, this was encouraging. The decision had been made to close South High on a date yet to be decided. All the while, the battle raged in the community to keep it open.

The building was an ugly, dark red-brick, hulk, with squares of dry and yellowing grass front and back, the rest pot-holed, crumbling asphalt parking lot, South High had been constructed during the Great Depression. It reminded me of the red brick garrisons between East and West Germany during the cold war, or an abandoned bomb shelter used for military exercises or sniper practice. The block was a kind of commercial death row, anchored on the south end by a battle-scarred McDonalds. On the north end was a low-slung cinderblock automobile parts store whose parking lot hosted a massive billboard that blotted out the view north from the front of the school. The school sat in its own deathbed.

State Street was the six-lane main drag in and out of town. The block across the street began with an Arbys, a porn shop called

Hard Core, a tattoo parlor, a bar, a job placement center, and several buildings no one ever entered from the front. An army of prostitutes paraded along the sidewalk in front of the school, where the grass and trees provided the best relief from the summer heat.

Each time one of the ladies stepped into a john's car, students standing within view would respond with polite applause and sometimes with celebratory whistling and pumping of fists. The hookers seemed to enjoy a special bond with the students, most of whom were from the neighborhood. I, too, felt a special connection. We were, after all, practitioners of the two oldest professions in the world. Unfortunately, neither profession held the respect and status of ancient times. We were both just bringing home the bacon, as Americans say.

There was not a hint of sarcasm in the students' cheering. The ladies would brace themselves, one hand on the car's dashboard, the other waving as the johns swung a quick U-turn and drove one block south, as always, to the Capitol Motel. Sometimes, when one of the ladies made it back especially quickly, she would flash her hard-earned money to get another round of applause. Sometimes, they just walked straight on to the McDonalds. This was the second time I had seen poor, hungry prostitutes. The first was in Bombay, so far away from Utah, but also not so far. It gave me the same sad feeling.

I remember being struck by how quickly the transactions were negotiated. In the underground garage in Washington, D.C., the bargaining was louder, animated and sometimes contentious. At South High, our schoolyard ladies conducted their business transactions more gracefully.

It was a remarkably discreet red-light district, though not so unusual for a major center of religious worship or one with a strict moral code. I suppose men are still just men, regardless of how they spend their Fridays, Saturdays or Sundays, according to their religious persuasion.

\*\*\*

A few days before school started, I attended the department faculty meeting. We were given our class schedules and the keys to our classrooms. I was delighted to see I'd been given a regular, five-hour routine of classroom teaching. My new classroom was an old science lab. I went there directly.

It was an especially large room. Its white walls were bathed in light from the big windows that faced east onto the rugged mountains that rise dramatically above the town nestling at their feet. The view of the majestic Wasatch Range was the most striking and inspiring a classroom could ask for.

I opened all the windows to let out the stale chemical air incarcerated all summer long. A layer of dust had settled across the room's surfaces. A faucet was dripping in the large, rusty, stained, iron sink at the end of a lab table. I managed to close it using an old towel to grip the handle. After two months, the persistent drip-drop-splash of hard water had formed thousands of sparkling eyes inside the rectangular sink.

I meticulously wiped the dust from each of the students' desks, the tables, every surface. I even scraped chewing gum from the backs of the laminated chairs where students had wedged their colorful wads along the U-shaped chrome spine. The gum was mostly pink or in shades of light green; not the boring gray gum of my childhood. These were early harbingers of the crazy, fluorescent colors of chewing gum and candy that decorate the lives of teachers today.

I replaced the burned and yellowed light bulbs with new ones obtained from a custodian whose room was not shared with a teacher. I emptied several garbage cans, still full from the last school day. I wrote my name on the blackboard.

Hello. My name is Mr. Payman. Welcome to my class.

I knew the other teachers would be doing the same. We were preparing our homes for another year of school. After I finished, I sat

quietly in the space, staring at my name.

What could be better than going to school?

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The next day, I went first to introduce myself to the principal, Dr. Smiley. He was the best smiler. Every day, Dr. Smiley came to school, it seemed, just to smile: a pure smile, a sweet smile, no smirks, no snickers, not even grins, but a full-on, complete, smile. He smiled all day long. He went home smiling. As far as I could tell, he had no other expression.

Then I went to meet the new assistant principal. I will call him Mr. Red.

In the Salt Lake City School District, if you can't hack it as a teacher, they promote you to administrator. I think the meanest administrators were sent to South High. I wonder if the meanest guards in the Nazi work camps were sent there because they were mean or because they were useless, or both.

I found Mr. Red alone in his red-carpeted office. Unlike Dr. Smiley's crowded office down the hall, Mr. Red's was empty. No other teachers were popping in to say good morning. When I entered, Mr. Red's squinty eyes glared at me. A bad feeling flashed in me, like finding myself in a dark alley at night far from home.

Mr. Red wore a red jacket and a red tie that clashed with his red-pink neck. I found out later, he drove a big red truck and lived on Redwood Road. There is only one way to deal with a Mr. Red.

I gave him my best, stock Omar Sharif Arabian accent. Moose called it the Persian Purr. It is confident, smooth and clear, with swooping tonality, the Hollywood-imagined song of the carpet sellers, camel callers and Arabian sheiks. It can be disarming for tough Utah boys, especially the ones who rarely hear foreign accents except on TV. I gathered as much humility as I could muster, took a deep breath, and did the routine.

“Hello, sir. I am most pleased to meet you.” I said it with the reverence accorded the king in the royal court of Cyrus the Great. “I am sorry I missed you yesterday. When I finished with my room, I came by to see you, but you were gone.”

It worked — for a second. Mr. Red almost made eye contact with me as he considered my greeting. Finally he replied, “I didn’t know I needed your permission to leave.”

Nice job, Omar! said the little brown boy. Tell Billy Bob to shove it where the sun don’t shine. I dare ya.

Simply being in my presence, Mr. Red began to burn. His face filled with anger, maybe even hatred. He opened his mouth unwillingly.

“When do you go back to your country?”

“Excuse me?” was all I could say.

Mr. Red slowly stood up and began looking at me in a way I had never experienced before. I was holding my schedule. He snatched it from my hand.

“Things have changed. You have a new schedule.”

There was not a shred of civility in his manner. I looked behind me, hoping for a witness.

Mr. Red started punching and pushing on a noisy electric typewriter while I stood there trying to guess what he was doing.

He’s typing your death warrant, ox boy, the little brown boy said ominously.

Mr. Red yanked a piece of pink paper out of the machine’s mouth. “Here you go.”

I caught the flying paper in the air.

He waited while I looked at it.

I was shocked. He was shocking! This was a kick in the teeth.

The little brown boy went berserk. Six subjects, six periods, six different classrooms in the six corners of the building! You must be freaking kidding me! This guy thinks he’s some kinda sheriff gonna run

yer ass out of town.

That was to be my new schedule. As Almighty God is my witness, I still have the original. It was a pathetic abuse of what little authority an assistant principal has — one of the very few things he could do to punish a teacher. It had the added feature of complete humiliation.

The red assistant principal had reduced me to gypsy teacher status, turning me into a portable teaching machine without a classroom, a teacher without a home.

I was utterly astonished. “Excuse me?” was all I could say.

When he first saw me, his face had gone from normal to pinkish. It had proceeded through crimson to ruby and now, finally, was flaming, livid red.

For a moment, I felt sure he would become embarrassed by his behavior. Whether she was dead or alive, this guy had to have a mother.

“Six plus six plus six plus six? It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” The cruelty in his voice proved him devoid of humanity.

But Mr. Red recomposed his face to look more serious. “I used to be a math teacher myself. Six, six, six is a very powerful number, plus, trust me, you’ll appreciate getting a little exercise between classes.”

Ha, ha, you're so fuckin' funny, I forgot to laugh, said the little brown boy. Maybe you really are the Antichrist, boy, he told me.

It is always hard to know what to do in such a situation.

I left Mr. Red's office. There was no sense in standing there talking to a cold, red stone. I considered my options. Having recently destroyed and digested my first formal reprimand, I rejected the idea of complaining. I didn't want to give anyone reason to go looking for the skeleton now missing from my personal file in the district office. I had been sentenced. He had my number, as it were.

My tedious adventure at South High had begun.

Accepting my fate, I walked back to my ex-room. But my anger was growing. I erased my name from the board and gathered my things to leave. On my way out the door, I childishly cranked the leaky faucet back on full blast and walked out, leaving the door open behind me. I hoped the whole building would be flooded. I thought about my old buddy, Moose. He could have helped me torch the damned place. That was a Friday.

Monday was the first day of classes.

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My new students at South High were a gift of goodness and

decency. I called them my big bunch of beautiful wildflowers. I wrote a thank you note to God only days after arriving in that condemned place. I knew God had nothing to do with the circumstances of my recent displacement, or the terms of my new punishment.

Wildflowers grow everywhere and by their nature bloom and die in the same spot. Only flowers caught in the throes of a violent storm are torn up, their petals scattered to the far winds. Mine were the scattered — from the war-torn lands of Southeast Asia. While for most of these children the flight to safety began in Vietnam, they were joined on their exodus by others from Laos and Cambodia. Between 1981 and 2000 the US would accept half a million Vietnamese political refugees and asylees.

Many began learning English while waiting in refugee camps. They had little difficulty with the language except in the enunciation of English sounds. The older the kids, the harder they found the new language. They were sad children, like birds in autumn, but at least now they were free and uncaged.

Their names in my ears were a beautiful song and each had a meaning. Huong — sweet smell. Tuyet — snow. Thu — autumn. Nguyet — moon beam. Hong — rose. Xuan — spring. And many kinds of Hoa — flowers. Only a poet would name her child Autumn

or Moonbeam. Those beautiful names were whispers of a rich and enduring culture.

The students were my daily nourishment, these admirable, lively, agreeable and eager children of light. The small newcomers were from war-ravaged homes. Some had traversed hundred of miles through infested jungles and dangerous terrain to escape horrors I couldn't imagine. Some of the little angels had faced brutal journeys: exhaustion and thirst in makeshift boats on the China Sea. Their stories of courage and perseverance taught, strengthened and inspired me. Their tales were among the world's most doleful.

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I have been a storyteller since childhood. It has served me well in many ways. I encouraged these students to do the same. I made them talk and tell. I begged them to re-open their hearts, to let the light in.

“Do not stop telling your story just because you are in a foreign land.”

Of course storytelling was a central part of their ancient cultures, as it was with mine.

In Iran, storytelling is an honorable profession. To entertain patrons, the tea shops (ghahveh-khaneh) hire professional storytellers (naghal). Soccer matches and revolutions are their only holidays.

My grandmother used to say, “To tell tales is to fan the heart.”

I told my students that the healing process cannot begin in silence. I told them over and over, “A well-told story gives both listener and teller permission to imagine a new life.”

The first one to stand and share her sorrowful story was a slim little black-eyed Cambodian girl. Her name was Sarith. She talked about losing her mother in a monsoon flood in their refugee camp. The burial had been postponed repeatedly due to adverse weather and too many other unburied corpses.

“I slept with my mother’s body in our bed for one week,” she said.

Bun spoke of hearing the explosion of his father’s skull in the furnace of the Khmer Rouge. “It was a big bang. My father had a big head.”

Theirs were blue, heavy-hearted stories, but they never cried. I was the only one crying.

Many of them left us after a few months. Utah was not the land of their dreams. They came with the broken remnants of their families to this temporary haven, but most couldn’t tolerate its severe, rocky mountain slopes, deserts and cold. Some had seen snow for the first time when they stepped off the plane. They all dreamed of moving to

California.

I will never forget Huy. Short and agile, he moved like a basketball player. He was a ball of fire. The kids called him Helicopter. Often, he came late to class. He would flick open the door and scoot noiselessly into his seat. He never gave me a chance to protest. He didn't like the name Helicopter. It reminded him of a tragic part of his young life. In the last minutes, as Saigon was handed to the Communists, Huy's father had fastened Huy to his back with rope, and run with him to a helicopter. As the mother plowed through the panicked and fleeing crowd Huy's little sister suffocated against her chest. The child's dead body was thrown out of the helicopter by the pilot, along with heavy baggage.

“My sister's name meant blue bird. I saw her fly for the last time.”

My little Huy was not a helicopter, but a poet.

Some of the students were working long hours, until well past midnight. Some had already built a new, small life here. They were collecting dry leaves for a new nest.

Jinji was a tiny student by day and a fast delivery boy at night. All he wanted was to buy the fastest car in America. He was happy making \$2.25 per hour.

“I make more than a doctor in my country!” he said. “I want to buy a car that will go 300 miles per hour!”

“Jinji, there is no car with such a speed to buy,” I said.

“This is America. They will make one for me!”

“That’s true, Jinji, everything is possible in America. Everything! Did you know I was an ox boy not so long ago?”

Jinji did not believe me. He had too much respect for me. I think he was from Cambodia. Wherever he was from, teachers were highly revered. In Iran, teachers are shama shoozan, burning the candles of their lives to light the way for their students, and students are hamshieh madioun, their indebted apprentices.

In the face of the perpetual insults, small-minded xenophobia and religious snobbery, Jinji and other students like him were reminders that the school district administrators, under the cover of the PTA, had lost their way and departed from their original mission. They could have learned from Jinji about respecting teachers.

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The school had a thousand empty classrooms and unending miles of dark, gloomy, cold halls served by only four small restrooms.

My first classroom was painted murky. The second was dingy.

Then I had to move to a pale, gray one. The fourth was grizzly brown and the fifth was painted leaden. I finished the day in a smoky charcoal room in the neighborhood of a smoking furnace.

Rush in, teach, hustle to the next class. All day ascending, descending, on the wing. It was hard to accept such petty treatment from such a petty-minded man. He was the cruel warden of a large, cold, mostly-empty school with endless hallways lined with empty cells. And I was its only prisoner.

Being enclosed by dead-colored walls all day gave me a very serious ailment. My doctor said it was color deficiency. There was no known pharmaceutical remedy for this malady yet, only homeopathic ones. I would go home and watch color TV at night, and walk about on the beautiful Persian rug that once adorned my grandmother's bedroom floor. On weekends I would paint the walls of my house golden-yellow, orange and violet. The red-faced assistant principal would not crush me. I bought a yellow car.

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From class to class, I carried a large box with my materials, homework, tests, and textbooks, past rows of empty classrooms, down the never-ending halls. I got to meet most of the teachers this way. I passed on messages and memos; announcements and secrets; paychecks

and apologies; gaudy, gay, party invitations and gossip. I came to know more about what went on in that school than the people with principal in their title.

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In the eighties, ninety percent of the teachers in the district were temple-worthy Latter Day Saints. The percentage was exactly the opposite at South High. The only active Mormons at South High were Dr. Smiley and Mr. Red. The few other Mormons at the school were teachers who, like us, had some sort of defect, which made even them somewhat undesirable. Perhaps they did not have a temple recommend or maybe they had been sent home during their compulsory missionary stint. Dr. Smiley and Mr. Red were both returned missionaries. They welcomed any opportunity to retell stories of their several years of spreading the gospel, each time with more self-reverence. It reminded me of a T-shirt I had seen that said The older I get, the better I was

Most of the faculty members in the district were Mormon and married.

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I was truly impressed by the size of their families. Many of my colleagues

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had four or five children by the age of thirty. I had seen reproduction on such a scale in poor Muslim neighborhoods in Iran. But in Iran, they were poor in spite of the family size. Here, they were poor because of family size. In both cases, large families are a sign of religious devotion and obedience.

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The few unmarried teachers were returned missionaries about to get married. Single men were especially suspect. My being brown-skinned with an accent suggested possibilities some of my colleagues were unable to resist. Some felt a personal, spiritual duty to exploit those possibilities. From their wildest imaginings, ideas were born that came to me in the form of rumors and gossip. Others felt a deep civic responsibility to facilitate formal discussions on the subject in the teachers' lounge: whatever would compel a perfectly healthy man to deny God's will well into his thirties?

The unuttered question was always, What's wrong with him? Insisting I was not gay sent their cloistered minds into even darker places.

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As for my "undesirable" colleagues, the other outcasts? Only

the best. They were more professional, devoted and hard-working than at my previous schools. There were also five school counselors: two slims, two plumps, one a lady gay. She was the best of all. They called themselves the zookeepers! At least half the faculty were “minorities”: black, Hispanic and American Indian. The other half, the Anglo-American half, were there because they were gay and refused to stay in the closet.

From the beginning, I was struck by the professionalism and work ethic of my new colleagues. They were not undesirable in the least, except for Mr. Lopez. You can find bad apples even in heaven’s gardens. Mr. Lopez was caught sneaking into the ladies’ restroom. I still liked him. He refused to use his freedom-of-bullshit rights. He just said, “I get a kick out of it.” He was fired before Christmas.

One day, Miss Jill stopped me in the stairwell.

“Don’t you have a classroom?”

“No, ma’am, I do not.”

“That’s my classroom over there. Why don’t you stop in next time you pass this way? Take a load off.”

Miss Jill was my first friend at that school. I stopped by her room one afternoon after class.

“How long have you been teaching here?” I asked.

“You mean, what’s my sentence?” she chuckled. It was not a giggle.

“Sentence?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Miss Jill. “You don’t just luck into the privilege of serving time here. You have to earn it. What did you do?”

“I’m not sure,” I said grinning. “It might have been the time I was born an Iranian.”

Then her lover walked in. All I saw were legs. I wiped the possibility of drool from my mouth.

“She’s mine,” Miss Jill whispered in my ear.

Miss Jill has turned out to be a lifelong friend.

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Miss Jacqueline also became a lifelong friend. She was a history teacher.

Her first question was, “How do like your new principal?”

“Dr. Smiley?” I replied sardonically.

Miss Jacqueline burst out laughing.

“Did you give him that name, Payman?”

“Well, have you ever seen Mr. Sunshine with any other expression?”

“He was in my dream last night,” I told Miss Jacqueline. “He was standing alone in his office. It was night. The school was empty and dark and he was smiling. His teeth cast beams of light into the hallway. It was a strange dream.”

“I know,” she said with understanding.

“Smiling is a deadly serious thing in this town.”

“Do you know why, Payman?” Miss Jacqueline took a long breath.

“Because they are thinking about their future in Paradise?” I asked, trying for the higher score on the sarcasm meter.

“Well, yes, actually,” said Miss Jacqueline. “Something like that.”

“I was kidding. Why do they smile so much?”

“According to local tribal wisdom, smiling is a reflection of your closeness to God and indicates confidence in your stake in the afterlife.”

“And all this time, I just thought those smilers were really happy,” I said.

I had no idea that traveling these dark halls would serve so

well, adding to my ongoing education and integration. Mr. Red's jihad against me yielded immeasurable gifts during my year-long sentence. My colleagues were not average teachers. They were great and kind people, earnest philosophers and ambitious students of life.

Still, I was sick and tired of the humiliation; I wanted a regular schedule and my own classroom. Among the qualifications for undesirability, my place of birth eclipsed all the others. Each night before I went to bed, I asked God to turn me into a gay man or a transvestite. I would happily become a lesbian if it would mean some respect and a decent classroom. I considered going to the mathematics man (six by six by six) with a new story:

I forgot to tell you, I am a Jew. One of my forefathers helped Moses chisel the Ten Commandments. I myself killed Jesus a few days ago. The police are looking for me. Now, may I please have a classroom ... or at least a more reasonable schedule, maybe one only as humiliating as those of the gays and lesbians? Or do you dislike the transvestites more? I could even live with their schedule.

But I knew there was no way the red stone would change his small mind.

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Some fought to keep the school open. They called the

superintendent Benito Mussolini. Dr. Bennet wanted to shut down South High, period.

They called the final day May 13, 1988 A Grand Celebration. Celebration? We cried buckets. We hugged each other a thousand times. Looters arrived from all around the city. Everything in the building — furniture, books, balls, televisions, telephones, and all the leftover junk — was sold for a dollar or two. The cold, empty school looked like a haunted house in a Nevada ghost town.

We were the last teachers in a 57-year-old school that was now dead. Before we left, the pompom girls began jumping and dancing. They sang the last song, like a death march.

Oh, South High

We'll stand behind you forever.

Oh, South High

To greater heights and fame.

Oh, the blue-and-white

Will ever wave on before us

While we proclaim your praises to all.

Rah! Rah! Rah!

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It was around 3 p.m. when the final curtain came down on South High School. After the school closed, Dr. Smiley faded away, still smiling. Mr. Red got a cushy job in the district working for Benito Mussolini, his reward for collaborating to close the school. Most of my South High wildflowers departed for California, perhaps a better place to grow up and bloom.

It was a sad summer. It is always sad when schools and ice-cream shops close their doors. For me, it would be another long, hot, dusty summer, waiting to find out where my next dumpster would be.



## 8 THE WORLD IS DEFINITELY NOT FLAT

I made a great discovery in the summer of 1988, when I found out the world is not flat! My path was leading me in a full circle.

I left Highland High in May of 1981, happy to be done with that sad place. I had moved around, rotated, circulated, and eleven years after I started, I was back at Highland High. Back to the same school and, strangely, the same janitorial closet.

The day before school opened, we had a faculty meeting. The teachers were mostly the same as when I left. All neat and groomed, trimmed, washed, aromatic, well-dressed teachers for rich students. The only undesirables were my tribe, those of us displaced from South High. The district had sent only a few of us to Highland. Most had been sent to run-down schools in poor neighborhoods. I was back on the East Bench, the city uplands, the top shelf. The name of the school said it all: Highland.

The school had changed principals several times during my absence. The new one was a loving and empathetic man, fatherly, mellow, merciful, smiley-like-he-meant-it, a young former priest named Father Ivan. He had become a pontiff at the age of seven! A Canadian, a green man. I had tried to be one once, but I got caught.

Father Ivan had an assistant principal, Mr. Gray. He was towering, hardy and starchy. He did not drink, never smoked, never laughed. Never, ever, zip, zilch. He reminded me of a Confederate general from the American Civil War. All he needed was a scraggly, old warhorse and a gray uniform. I didn't care for him. Gray is not my favorite color.

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Walking the long, wide, shiny halls of the school was a heart-breaking journey. Every corner, every wall, every room, and outside, the trees, the roses, bushes and the green grass, everything reminded me of my young Iranians, my smiling lost boys and the beautiful, black-haired angel girls.

I thought about Jalal, how he would sit every morning on the iron rail of the front stairs. It gave the best view as he watched for his buddies. Had he met the 72 virgin girls he was promised? Of course not. He was an innocent Jewish boy who got caught in Khomeini's plot

to send millions of his own people to slaughter. Khomeini had cheated him. All Jalal had gotten for his innocence was the plastic key around his skinny neck.

I could still hear Nima acting the clown in the cafeteria at lunchtime. He was a fast eater. He scoffed down his food in three minutes so his big mouth was free for twenty-seven, more time for his silly jokes and big laughs. I could see him sitting at the table, chattering like a choking piston.

“Knock. Knock.”

“Who is there?”

“Khomeini!”

“Khomeini who?”

“Khomeini, on time for dinner!”

Someone would say, “Who can afford to feed a horse?” And everyone around the table would bang their fists and shout in unison, “We will feed the horse! We will feed the horse!”

“Pardon me, he is not a horse, he’s a monkey.”

Nima would reply, “And who can afford to feed a monkey?”

“We will feed the monkey!”

My scarred heart pumped blood the blue of sorrow. I walked

about as if following behind a baby's casket. The first days of my second tour at Highland were full of thick and gloomy thoughts. It was hard to like that building.

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The district office had also transferred about fifty English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students from South High to Highland High. Their families could not afford to live in the area. The kids were bussed in. It was a bad idea bussing them miles away from their own neighborhood, only to cram them into a janitorial closet for the day, and then bus them back again. It was a politically convenient decision made without any consideration for the students.

Dr. Smiley and the other goofballs who agreed to close South High said that sending them to the more affluent schools would close the gap between the haves and the have-nots. I never, not once, witnessed an exchange between the ESL students and the American students, not one single sentence, not one word. The American kids paid no attention to my kids. Despite, or maybe because of, both groups being the same age, there was virtually no connection or dialogue between them.

I often wondered why American children would shun these kids. Could it be they were not at all interested in the world outside of

the United States? Did they regard the other students as some kind of extra footage, the kind that never made it to their nightly TV shows? Each of these freed birds was like a rare and beautiful book they could have thumbed through, read, and learned from. But the foreign students were invisible in that fancy, bustling school. Nobody saw them. They were evidence, unwelcome reminders, that all was not well in the world.

The only one visible was Jinji, the little Cambodian boy. He was one of the transferred students. In 75 days he had become more Americanized than an American World War II veteran. His English had improved noticeably. He had little difficulty with his pronunciation. When I saw him, I did not see him. I saw a round, big-eyed head poking out of a big Number 12 basketball jersey. You could not see his hands, chest, or legs, only his head above a giant jersey propelled by a pair of white sneakers. Twelve was John Stockton's number, the Utah Jazz star guard.

“Is that you, Jinji?”

He popped out his head like a spring lilac, like a short John Stockton bobble-head doll. His silky black hair covered his small forehead. He smiled sweetly.

“I am not Jinji. Call me John!”

“Good to see you, Jinji. Pardon me ... John.”

John, formerly Jinji of Cambodia, was a basketball junky. John Stockton was his hero. He talked Stockton, he dreamt Stockton. He ate and breathed Stockton. When Stockton broke his leg, Jinji went into a trance that lasted a week.

In winter, Jinji found a cousin in Los Angeles. His family moved to California. I was sorry to see Number 12 move away. He sent me a greeting card at Christmas. He included a color photo of himself and his new classmates. He had the same funny face, the same big smile and the same short legs. The only change was the color of his basketball jersey. It was no longer his beloved Jazz colors. It was shiny golden and purple, the Lakers’ team colors. He was no longer Number 12. He was Number 34. Jinji had sent Stockton into early retirement. His new idol was Magic Johnson. Jinji was fast becoming an American. Loyalty is hard to find.

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I went to inspect my old closet classroom. The room had a fresh paint job, a blend of brown and pink, the color of old stew. The blackboard was the same. The graffiti was long gone.

Down with the king.

Down with Carter.

Long live the Revolution!

What a sad story it was! The Shah had died. Carter had retired to Plains, Georgia. Iran was in deep shit. It was a new world and it did not seem that only eight years had passed; it felt more like eighty.

The brooms and old vacuums had been removed but the stubborn spider webs still hung on the ceiling. The moment I walked into the room, my eyes went to the spot where I'd stood that morning, the birthplace of our tiny little revolution. Oddly, being back in the same pharaoh's tomb made me feel like a sour loser, a double loser. I had lost two revolutions: the big, nasty one back home and the innocent, little one that had started in this very, clammy room.

I remembered what a glorious day it had been: my favorite lecture, my determined young comrades, the march. We had walked the long road in step with Dr. Zhivago. In my mind he had become more handsome, taller and stronger in over time. It was he who had carried the big red flag in front of us that day. Now my little heroes were all gone, the first ones scattered in the wind.

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I was gripped with a sense of gloom and dejection. To me, Highland High was more like a mourning house than a learning house, more like a snobby East Side shopping mall than a school. Some people

were friendly and gentle but not to me and my students. I tasted at Highland the same bitter treatment as before, but back then none of my students had slept in refugee shelters, they had not had to walk miles if they missed the yellow bus. And none of them drove old Pinto cars. My Iranian students had had their own private attorneys and accountants. Some had maids or housekeepers. They lived lavishly, happily. If money does not buy happiness, it surely seemed so for them.

The new refugees came mostly from countries ravaged in the wars of the eighties. Each had a unique story about a lost brother or a missing sister. I heard how they were forced to flee from Saigon, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Sudan, Somalia and other killing fields. The lucky ones came with a parent or a grandparent.

My small, windowless class got steadily more crowded. You could recognize the newcomers from miles away. They wore old and ill-fitting garments, no socks, torn and muddy shoes that were too large or too small. They had bad home haircuts, sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. The Africans were the most shy and confused. They were the ones who sat in a corner for hours, staring at the doors, windows and walls of the school. They were the only black students in Highland High. The Latinos cried and smiled more. The Afghan girls stayed away from boys, never spoke to boys. The Vietnamese did not get along with the Cambodians. They called each other communists.

In that small, windowless classroom, I had students from seventeen different countries. Every day they came and sat and watched me. They watched each other and they watched their sorrows fill that small, sad classroom until it wanted to burst like a water balloon. Once in a while we were happy. We laughed occasionally when someone lost a front tooth or a stomach growled. We giggled at little half-suppressed sneezes that betrayed our modesty. We celebrated when Father Ivan gave us some colored pencils. Small kids, small happinesses, small world.

I asked each of them to make a flag from their original country. Soon, there were seventeen small flags hanging above the board. The last one up was the Cuban flag, made by Jardi, already an old man of thirteen years. We had never had a Cuban before. The only Cuban I knew was Fidel Castro.

The day Jardi was to arrive, I waited anxiously for him. He had been adopted by a young LDS family, and we had already read his heart-breaking story in the newspapers. He had lost his entire family when they fled Cuba. He was one of the few survivors of an overcrowded, sunken boat. His little sister was eaten by sharks. He was very small and skinny. He coughed a lot. I wondered if the salty ocean water had hurt his tender throat. He never said a word. He never smiled. He was sickly and pale from the start, anemic looking. After a

few days, his skin turned the color of lime rind.

Jardi stopped coming to class. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The bad news spread through school like fire through a house of cards. Then it flew around the city. Tuberculosis in Highland High School! It became headline news in Utah. And the whole calamity had started in my small classroom. Was I responsible? Some thought so. Some blamed it on Father Ivan. I decided the real guilt lay with Fidel Castro. The disease was his gift to us. He was responsible in the way that Nixon was when I lost my job in Washington, D.C. Castro caused Jardi to flee. Castro killed Jardi's sister and parents. Castro made everyone sick in that crowded boat.

We were all tested for tuberculosis. Almost all of us, myself included, tested positive and faced nine months of medication and treatment. Nine months of waking up and pumping down a handful of harsh, colorful, bitter pills. Damn you, Fidel Castro! You shall live beneath Khomeini in hell!

The PTA parents were outraged.

“Who are these refugee kids? Are we spending our property taxes to run a refugee camp?”

The mantra began.

“Why did you close South High?”

“We told you so.”

They used blue ribbon tape to cordon off the area around our classroom. We watched ourselves on the local news every night for weeks.

We became targets. A positive TB test was a scarlet letter. We sympathized with the Jews forced to wear yellow stars — that made for a teachable moment. Everyone avoided us — everyone but Father Ivan. He became more loving and compassionate with my flock. He was an honorable and gracious man in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was not a politician. He was a man of God, and a good one.

As the story goes, Father Ivan finally said to Hell with this and returned to the pastoral life. If true, perhaps those were the harshest words that had ever come from his mouth.

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Not until the first day of the new school year did we learn that Mr. Red, my former South High tormenter, would be our new principal at Highland. Father Ivan’s replacement surprised no one, but to me it was horrific and debilitating. I became a true believer; the world is not flat.

Fuck that shit! said the little brown boy. We’re outta’ here. Quit now! Just walk out!

My nemesis had reappeared in my life to make me miserable again, to re-engage my ongoing persecution. But I was wiser now, battle-scarred. The American hostages were home and the teachers' union had my back.

Still, the idea of seeing Mr. Red every day was more nauseating than my TB pills. I went to Mr. Gray's office. He was as gray as ever. He kept looking at me the way a fish looks at you. He was enormous, a greasy white whale floating atop a small gray chair.

"Is it true Mr. Red got the job?" I asked him, knowing that Mr. Gray had expected to replace Father Ivan.

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"It's true."

I went to my classroom, packed up a few books and the little flags the kids had made. On my way out, I walked into the main office. I put my classroom key and attendance book on the secretary's counter.

"To Hell with all of you!"

It was rumored that I threw a textbook at Mr. Red. The truth is, I did. But it missed.

When I got home, I added the name of Fidel Castro to my evil-people list, for making Jardi sick and causing Father Ivan to leave.

Castro went in the same column as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Tricky Dick and Mr. Red.

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Everybody has an evil-people list, don't they? How else can you make sense of the world? The first person on my list is the teacher who flogged me upside down when I was six years old. I put my father on it temporarily for abandoning my mother after I was born.

Today, my list includes the world's dictators, the politicians, the pundits and the ayatollahs. Slobodan Milošević, Bashir of Sudan, Saddam of Iraq, Khomeini and Khamenei of Iran, the ruling Myanmar junta, and the midget generals in North Korea with their oversized-hats. These are only a few. And there are not only killers on my list. I include child-molesting Catholic priests and all the Fox News yo-yos; Murdoch himself, O'Reilly, Hannity, Glenn Beck and others. I find them guilty of cheerleading for Bush's war. George W. Bush holds a special distinction on my evil-people list. He killed more Iraqis than Khomeini and more Americans than bin Laden.

Whose is the latest name on my list? Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Holocaust denier, a veteran assassin still working hard on his evil legacy.

You must keep the list on paper. You should not keep it in your

head. I used to keep the list in my head — until it began to explode.

## 9 RATS WITH HATS

We are not deaf.

Why do so many Americans speak so loudly to anyone with an accent? Yelling does not magically translate your words into my language.

One more thing, if I may. Just because we don't speak your language as well as you do, that does not mean we are stupid. It is no secret among us foreigners that if we speak with an accent, in certain communities in this great land, some people automatically speak down to us. I realize it is done subconsciously, but for us, it can come over as insulting.

So, when someone relates to us as an equal, right from the get-go, it's pretty special. My new principal, Mr. Andersen, was one of those rare people. I'd almost given up on teaching in Utah. At the start of the 1991 academic year, I was planning to go back to school to finish my PhD, when I went for an interview at Horizonte School.

Mr. Andersen's office was tiny, half the size of his secretary's. Hemmed in by piles of files, books and papers, Mr. Andersen did not ask about my nationality, religion, or sexual preference. He caught me off-guard, speaking to me in normal conversational tones

“Tell me about your education, Payman.”

He's not serious, said the little brown boy.

I began to list colleges, starting after Clown School in London. He stopped me when I got to Westminster College and my education credentials in theatre.

“Wait! You have a degree from the Westminster Theater Program? You're kidding. So do I! You studied with Mr. Lees?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Mr. Lees was my favorite, a great man.”

The little brown boy became suspicious. Why is he being so nice to you? Doesn't he know that scum-sucking pig, Ali Khamenei, is your best friend?

We discussed theater, education, politics and religion. He told me about growing up in Korea. I told him about growing up in Iran.

Big mistake, buddy. The little brown boy was doubtful. I woulda gone with the Canadian rap.

Mr. Andersen asked me good questions about my teaching

methods and experience. He asked me how I could help him make the school better. He asked me how he could help me to be successful. He was gracious and thoughtful and he was interested in my answers.

The little brown boy was speechless. After fifteen years in the Salt Lake City school system, being Persian was no longer a liability but an asset. For the first time I was being respected as a teacher and as a person. It felt like I had come home. I would retire from this school.

Mr. Andersen guided me to a well-lit, spacious classroom, handed me a key, a roll book, wished me the best, and left. For the next fifteen years, unless he was recovering from one of his marathons, that man would return to my classroom several times each day to respectfully observe my teaching, my lesson plans, and my attitude. There was no chance I would be able to teach Sharia Law in this school!

Do you remember Dr. Smiley, the late South High School principal? In three years he never once stepped into my classroom. I could have been running a madrassa for the Taliban.

Horizonte attracted the best teachers. They accepted me, anyway. I learned from the others and we became friends. Teaching became an art for me, a form of personal expression.

Salt Lake City is a national refugee resettlement center and Utahns are famous for their hospitality. This valley has been a safe

haven for refugees since the Mormon pioneers arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. Immigrants and refugees arrived almost daily at the Horizonte School. It was an incredible opportunity and privilege to get to know and to educate them.

The first challenge was to teach the newcomers survival English. We taught them life skills. We tried to mediate the shock of transition to America. They learned how to use computers. There was a daycare center for infants up through pre-school. We were not only teachers; some of us became social workers, lawyers, accountants, wedding planners, funeral directors and healers. It was impossible not to.

My students at Horizonte were adults. I was in teaching heaven: they sat and listened, and were interested in so many things that lesson plans were hardly needed. I had a 75-year-old Russian Red Army general, an old Vietnamese air force pilot, one of Saddam Hussein's secret service agents, a Cuban buddy of Fidel Castro, the daughter of a Colombian drug lord... What an audience. No kidding, they were there to teach me.

A refugee is someone who cannot go home, someone who has been deposited in a strange land by circumstance or chance, rarely by choice. But each person's roots, thousands of miles away, remain forever

uncut. It was heart-breaking at times to witness the ocean of sorrow in which they swam, an ocean whose waves traveled from every corner of the Earth to lap our salty shores. Landing here, they were safe from their pursuers, and they were finally free. The long healing process began with learning to tell their life stories; stories that made time stand still.

The night before his scheduled execution, Arash was let out of Gohar-Dasht, a notorious Iranian prison,

He came to us on a rainy day, a wet, dead-man-walking. We encouraged him to talk.

“My family sold our home to bribe the warden. He opened the prison gate and told me, ‘Run! You have purchased only one ticket for your freedom!’”

“What did you do, Arash?”

“Simple. I ran. I ran at night and hid in safe houses during the day.”

“How did you get out of Iran?”

“A Kurdish guide led me through the Turkish mountains. I spent four years in Turkey waiting for political asylum until finally the

United Nations office helped me come here.”

“Why Salt Lake?” I asked.

“No choice. They didn’t give me one,” said Arash.

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The eight-year Iran-Iraq war was a cruel waste of time and lives.

The real reasons for most wars are unbelievably stupid. This one was no exception. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I will try to make it simple. The truth always is.

Once upon a time, two giant goons hated each other. Each was the tyrannical ruler of his kingdom: Ayatollah Khomeini, “The Pig-Swine,” in Iran, and Saddam Hussein, “The Swine-Pig,” in Iraq. They were neighbors.

If you confuse them, do not worry. They were the same species of dangerous animal. The only difference was in their tribes.

Shiite and Sunni are like similar flavors of the same religion, like the lemon and lime ice pops in the same box as grape, cherry and orange. Members of both tribes lived in both countries under the harsh rule of either The Pig-Swine or The Swine-Pig.

In 1980, Saddam invaded Iran. He believed the Sunnis of Iran,

his tribe, would appreciate his help in overthrowing Khomeini's Shiites, the other tribe. But the Iranian army repelled the Iraqis easily.

Khomeini was so pleased with himself, he decided to help the Shiites of Iraq, his tribe, overthrow their dictator, Saddam, and the other tribe. The plan seemed simple to Khomeini because the majority of the Iraqis are Shiites, his tribe.

Khomeini loved to give speeches in front of big crowds and for TV. Throughout the Middle East he preached about how he would unite the Shiites and the Sunnis for the first time in history, and together, they would march to Jerusalem, kill all the Jews and cast them into the Mediterranean Sea. Instead, for eight long years Muslims killed each other while their common enemy, Israel, sold weapons to both sides.

Khomeini pushed the war against Iraq with messianic conviction. He sent thousands of Iranian children and youth to certain death on the war front. Journalists used the term human waves. Waves fall and disintegrate, one after the other, on and on. My sweet little Jewish soldier Jalal was one of the first to die.

The American president of the time, Mr. Reagan, The Gipper, secretly sold weapons to Khomeini as ransom to gain the release of a few Americans who had been kidnapped by Khomeini's friends in

Beirut. Mr. Gipper had a very loyal lackey named Colonel Oliver North. They called him Ollie. He was a Washington ox boy like me. I call him Ollie Ox Boy.

So, Mr. Gipper took the money Khomeini paid for the weapons and told Ollie Ox Boy to use the money to pay his Nicaraguan friends to kill other Nicaraguans that Mr. Gipper did not like. Ollie was a good ox boy. But his uniform was military green. Mine was kitchen white. I think his had the same gold buttons.

On August 20, 1988, under tremendous pressure from the Iranian people and the world community, Khomeini finally accepted the U.N.-sponsored ceasefire. Khomeini called it drinking from the poisoned chalice of cease-fire. The war ended as it had begun, borders unchanged. The country was ruined and bankrupt. The Iranian people were so very angry, Khomeini feared rebellion. Only nine years had passed since the last revolution which was still fresh in everyone's mind.. Khomeini's solution was more murder and more public executions.

A week following the ceasefire, Ayatollah Khomeini issued his satanic decree:

It is naïve to show mercy to those who wage war on God. I hope that with your revolutionary rage and rancor toward the enemies

of Islam, you can satisfy the Almighty. (Letter ordering the execution of political prisoners in August 27, 1988)

He unleashed his army of jack-booted thugs and assassins to capture and execute his political opponents. Khomeini reached out to Allah for additional divine authority and guidance. Allah told Khomeini to kill still more people. Khomeini used Koranic scripture to inspire his henchmen:

Those who resist Allah and his messenger will be humbled to dust. The Koran 58–5. And: I will instill terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. The Koran 8–12.

Khomeini's jails were still full of former politicians and military officers of the Shah's regime — men who had been captured and imprisoned during the nine years since the revolution. They had to be killed to make room for the new purge. This time, in addition to whatever intellectuals, teachers and journalists remained in Iran, a new generation of freedom activists, young girls and boys, were rounded up and murdered by Khomeini's loyal fanatics. Years later we learn that an estimated 20,000 were executed in this purge. They were hanged from cranes, shot by firing squads or stoned to death. The dead were buried in unmarked, mass graves in Khavaran in south Tehran.

The BBC reported: Children as young as thirteen were hanged

from cranes, six at a time ... Because of the large numbers of necks to be broken, prisoners were loaded onto forklift trucks in groups of six and hanged from cranes in half-hourly intervals ... Every half hour from 7.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., thirty-three people were lifted on three forklift trucks to six cranes, each of which had five or six ropes ... The process went on and on without interruption. In two weeks, 8,000 people were hanged. Similar carnage took place across the country.

The world closed its eyes, once more, to one of the most hideous crimes in history.

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Arash had graduated from the University of Tehran. He was an intellectual and a member of the People's Mujahedin (Mujahedin-e Khalgh), the anti-Khomeini resistance movement. Most of the group had fled to France and Iraq in 1981, after successfully killing with several large bombs Khomeini's president, premier and seventy other high-ranking mullahs. But a few especially brave members remained in Iran, underground. Arash was one of them.

By the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Arash was running an underground publishing operation. One night, the Revolutionary Guard raided a secret meeting of the group. Arash spent two years in prison, wondering why, when they had executed all of his colleagues,

they kept him alive.

Arash's painful stories unfolded slowly over weeks and months.

"The prison guards raped the girls before they hanged them, to make sure they were not virgins."

"Please tell me you're kidding," I said.

Of course I knew he wasn't kidding. I still held to the false hope that I might wake up some morning to discover that the whole thing had been just a bad dream.

"That's horrific, Arash. And what's the reasoning this time, some kind of new fatwa the Pig-Swine pulled out of his ass?" I asked.

Khomeini always found some way to twist the Koran to justify his slaughter.

"Its even sicker, Payman."

Arash's pain was apparent behind his dark, black anger.

"Remember, virgins can't go to hell. They get an automatic ticket to Paradise, you know? Since Khomeini thought he was going to Paradise, he didn't want to be met by a bunch of angry women at the Gate. Someone should have told him he wouldn't be seeing Paradise, but would rot for all eternity in a dungeon in Hell beneath the Shah.

"Khomeini made me hate Islam."

While in prison, Arash disconnected from his religion. One day not long after his arrival, as class was ending, Arash pointed to the poster of Martin Luther King, Jr., that hung in my room.

“He was my teacher in prison. Morality and justice do not come from religion. They are born of men and persist in spite of religion. Religion rarely creates greatness. My religion has created only hell.”

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Talking with Arash always left me blue. Sometimes, even clear, sunny days seemed so gray. Each time we spoke about Iran, it was like mourning the death of a lover, over and over again. It makes me so angry to think about my people — crazy mad. Iranians are lovers, and lovers of life, educated, worldly, family-oriented, creative and generous. We say about our country, *Jenazah be roye dast*. ‘It’s like a dead body on your hands.’ What do you do with a dead body?

We spoke often about the revolution and the things that had happened since. Together, we tried to understand what had gone so wrong in our country. We always spoke Persian.

“I love my country,” Arash always said. “When the Shah left, I actually thought Khomeini would be our Martin Luther King, our Gandhi, a Nelson Mandela. What a fool I was.

“It was going so well. I was devastated when mullahs hijacked the revolution.”

We all were fooled, and devastated in turn. The ousting of the Shah had begun as a popular revolution comprising Iran’s most progressive leaders, intellectuals, teachers and students but with critical support from the Muslim clerics and community. Nobody likes a dictator. The revolution had strong support worldwide.

“But as soon as the Shah was gone, the Muslim gangs took over.

“We handed the power to a group of spiteful and vengeful thugs, a bunch of savage animals. Perhaps we deserved them. It is our fault. We invited them to come. We did it. We are a nation of idiots,” said Arash. “Payman, think about it. Who were the worst mass murderers in human history? Genghis Khan, Idi Amin, Hitler, Stalin, Harry Truman ...”

I cut him off, “Harry Truman, Arash?”

“Yeah, for Nagasaki if not Hiroshima. Please allow me to finish making my point,” Arash insisted. “Pol Pot , Mao Ze-Dong, Khomeini. Except for Khomeini, they all have one thing in common.”

Then Arash told me something I had never considered, “When they died, they took their legacy to Hell with them. Only Khomeini was succeeded by still greater evil. He was like the Dolly of mullah

monsters.”

“Dolly?”

“Yeah, you know the sheep they just cloned? Don’t you get it, Payman? All the other mass murderers were one-of-a-kind. Khomeini bred murderous mullahs like rats.

“Rats with hats,” Arash said as he wound an imaginary black turban above his head. “Look at Ali Khamenei. Just another fucking rat with a hat. He’d kill his own mother for a crumb of opium.”

Arash hated Ali Khamenei most of all among all the thugs in the Islamic regime. Khamenei had beat out all the other contenders to succeed Khomeini because he was the most ruthless candidate, and in spite of that fact that he was not officially qualified to channel the word of Allah. He wasn’t even an ayatollah, so he got creative. He pulled off a mini coup.

Khomeini’s son Ahmad was among his potential successors. One night Khamenei and Ahmad Khomeini were smoking opium together, as they often did. But that night, Ahmad died. It looked suspicious. Both were veteran opium addicts. Many Iranians believe Khamenei poisoned Ahmad.

Arash liked to tell a story about the egg party the evening of the day Khomeini died. “It was the happiest day in that prison. We

celebrated in silence. If smiling made a sound, it would have been deafening.”

The guards couldn't figure out why the prisoners ate all their eggs that night. They didn't know they'd been smuggled in, filled with vodka.

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One chilly autumn morning Arash ran into my classroom. His face was red and crazed. He was trying to catch his breath.

“He's sitting in the cafeteria eating eggs and hash-browns!”

Arash was speaking Persian, but in a low voice as if someone might hear him. He was hysterical.

“Who?” I was surprised to see him so distraught.

Remembering his manners, Arash paused. “Good morning.”

He let me return the greeting.

“The judge who sentenced me is in the cafeteria eating breakfast!” Arash said louder, but still trying to whisper. He put his hand on my shoulder and nudged me toward the classroom door.

“Please come with me. This is impossible!”

We walked fast. As we entered the cafeteria, Arash leaned close and gesturing with his eyes said softly, “He is sitting in the corner. That's

him!”

I looked at the middle-aged, bald, beefy man hunched over a pile of food and eating very quickly. He looked like a large troll, with his long, frizzled beard. His attention was locked on the loaded plate. We stood back, watching.

Arash said, “He is the judge who issued the death sentences to everyone in my prison. He is a killer. He must be arrested!”

The man stuffed a big portion into his frog mouth, wiped his greasy lips with the back of his hand and stood up. He carried the tray to the kitchen counter and turned to leave. Now I could see his face better. His eyes were watery gray with crusts in the corners.

On the center of his forehead was a bump that looked like dried peach skin — the dark stain of prostration. It’s a status symbol that comes from hitting your head repeatedly on the ground during prayer.

His brown, sullen face was the color of his poorly fitting jacket. Suddenly, he was looking at us with his eyes half closed. When he saw us, his lips trembled slightly. We both looked away.

“Are you sure?” I asked Arash.

I already knew the answer. The man looked like an Islamic

judge. They all look the same, very ugly. Anyway, Arash would never have invented such a scenario.

Arash was sweating. “Am I sure? How can I forget that pig face? You can see the evil. He was not just a judge; he was an evil interrogator, an animal. His name is Ishmael!”

We walked away slowly, then ran up the stairs to find Mr. Andersen. He was away at a meeting in the district office. I asked Arash to stick around and wait for Mr. Andersen. Meanwhile I rushed to see Mrs. Ford, the department chairperson. She was always pleasant and helpful. The door was open to her office where she was talking on the phone but looking straight at me. With a big smile, Mrs. Ford gestured for me to sit down. She looked at me the whole time. Then, she hung up, stood up and clapped her delicate hands.

“I have just received a call from the district office. Congratulations! You’ve won 1996 Teacher of the Year!”

I looked around to see who else she might be talking to.

“You must be joking!”

“No, seriously, Payman, you’ve been selected Teacher of The Year. Congratulations! It was unanimous.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Ford. That’s wonderful news.”

“But you don’t look very excited,” said Mrs. Ford.

“No, but I am! It’s just that, well, I need your help,” I continued. “One of our students claims there is a war criminal in the school. Is there a new student named Ishmael by chance?” Ishmael is an easy name for Americans to recognize because of the Bible or Moby Dick, the white whale story.

Mrs. Ford’s happy face closed up like an old rose petal. She sat down, grabbed the top folder from a small pile on her desk and opened it. She sighed with relief.

“He is an American citizen!”

“Are you kidding? American citizen?” I responded. “Arash says he is a killer, an Islamic judge. The judge who sentenced him to death.”

Mrs. Ford became impatient. “Payman, we are not The Hague. We are not judges. Look here. This is a copy of his passport.”

She held the paper up in front of her.

“We are only teachers. We teach them and send them home at night,” she said resolutely. “And congratulations again. We’ll throw a party to celebrate your award. You are the first from Horizonte to win.”

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Arash was coming toward me. He was still hysterical.

“Mr. Andersen is here!” he shouted.

I looked at him as he came closer. We stood face to face.

“He is an American citizen, Arash. I saw his passport. Are you sure he is the same judge?”

Arash grew more distraught. “Is he using his real name — Ishmael?” asked Arash.

“Yes, he is,” I answered.

“How did I know his goddamn name, then?”

How indeed? Arash was absolutely positive that the bald, beefy man was his former interrogator and judge.

“There is nothing we can do, Arash. He must have been cleared before his citizenship was granted. I saw a copy of his passport. He is an American citizen!”

Arash turned red and began to sweat again. He was going mad. He pleaded, “There must be something we can do! Call 911!”

“No. They’ll just laugh at you. Don’t call 911,” I told him.

But he was unable to accept the injustice. “I must. How do you say *jenayat kare jangi* in English?”

I told him. He pulled a pen out of his pocket, wrote *war criminal* on the palm of his hand and went to find a phone. I stood

exhausted. My head was a swirl of ocean waves washing up at the same point between my eyes but from different directions.

There are only a few ways to gain American citizenship and a passport that fast. In Utah, Senator Orrin Hatch was known as the go-to guy for visas. He probably saved some lives, but in the years that followed 9/11, Mr. Hatch would expend every ounce of political and emotional capital at his disposal to defend the war criminals of the W. Bush administration.

The other way to get American citizenship and a passport that fast is through the CIA. Obviously.

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The little brown boy had a lurid appreciation for such ambiguous situations.

Congratulations! Way to go, Daddy-o!

The little brown boy was happy and well. He was just the same. A naughty midget!

You don't need me anymore. You have come a long way from an ox boy to an award-winning teacher! Only in America!

Yes, dear. Only in America. I agreed with him.

Just enjoy it. Who gives a shit about the war criminals? The

world is full of them. Washington, D.C., is full of them. Ishmael is only a small, cold worm. He is nothing. The big rattlesnake is Khamenei, Supreme Pond Scum.

The little brown boy was absolutely right. He was always right.

But a little way off, I could hear Arash on the phone calling for help in his broken English.

“I need help! A war criminal! WAR CRIMINAL! Do you understand?”

It was sad. It was absurd. Such a crazy, crazy little world.



10 “I DID NOT HAVE SEXUAL  
RELATIONS WITH THAT WOMAN Ms.  
LEWINSKY.”

“Good morning, sunshine. How are you today?”

Every morning I stood outside my classroom at Horizonte and greeted each student. I invited them to come inside and share their stories.

I have heard so many sorrowful tales, I am sure the ocean’s water is made of tears.

I breathed their stories as their lives played out before me.

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Muharem was one of several thousand Muslim Bosnian refugees from the former Yugoslavia. In 1992 a civil war erupted between Serbian forces and non-Serb Muslims. It was one of many long-standing tribal feuds reinvigorated by the collapse of the Soviet

Union.

Through classic ethnic cleansing, the Serbs terrorized and massacred thousands up until 1996. Tens of thousands more were detained in concentration camps when the war ended. They were for the most part well educated but from all classes.

In his late forties, Muharem had come directly from a camp. He was skin and bones, a toothless, beaten skeleton who moved slowly and aimlessly. Until then, I had only seen such a face in old photos from the Nazi camps.

I had thought such places were a thing of the past. But the Dachaus, Belzecs, Sobibors and Auschwitzes of the world had closed down only to pop up elsewhere with different names. Now they were Celebic, Omarska, and many more.

Muharem had survived almost one year in Omarska, the camp dubbed the New Auschwitz. It was known as one of the most frightful and horrifying concentration camps in Serbia.

“Before that, I was only a mailman doing my job. They wanted me to tell them who had sent such-and-such damn letters to some doomed people they were after. How was I supposed to know? I delivered hundreds of letters a day, perhaps more!”

I read later about the Omarska concentration camp. One

survivor named Rozak wrote, “Thirst, hunger, gang rape, exhaustion, shattered skulls, sexual organs torn out, stomachs ripped open by the soldier assassins of Radovan Karadzic.”

The life-crushing tales of Bosnians were the most agonizing, but Muharem was not the only one wounded. We had far too many Muharems.

There was no need to ask Sakiba to tell you her story. She was still living it. She walked around the school asking anyone and everyone, “Have you seen my little Shiba?”

When bombs began to fall in Sakiba’s village, and fire raged, she grabbed her daughter Shiba and ran like everybody else. After some distance, she realized that the bundle she was clutching was only her daughter’s blanket and pillow. Little Shiba had slipped from her arms. She never found her baby.

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On April 26, 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded in northern Ukraine. The worst of the radioactive debris was collected inside what was left of the reactor, much of it shoveled in by ‘liquidators’. Dr. Alexander was one of them.

“I am a scientist. I was a university professor for twenty-two years. When the plant melted down I joined the liquidators. There were

mostly conscripted, but not me. I chose to go. I could not sit and watch thousands die, thousands and thousands of children.”

Dr. Alexander was a Russian Jew. He never told me if the motivation for his escape was religious persecution or his cancerous thyroid. He spoke French and German already. Learning English was a small challenge compared with trying to stay alive.

“It is very sad. We liquidators are dying faster than anybody else. So far, ten thousand. I will be joining them soon.”

He was kind, and generous with his time. I felt uncomfortable whenever he called me his teacher. I was not qualified for that. He was a scholar of Russian literature, a scientist and an historian.

I spoke to him of my hero. “Do you know the book Dr. Zhivago?”

My question surprised him. “Yes, of course. I have met the author, Boris Pasternak. I shook his hand.”

“Honestly? Can I touch your hand? Can I?”

He laughed. He grasped both my hands with his and smiled with his dry lips.

Dr. Alexander died a few months later in Salt Lake City. With his great humility and kindness, and his rich knowledge of life and of

Russian literature, he was my teacher.

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Dr. Iliya was a 76-year-old heart surgeon from Moscow. Every day he walked the three miles to and from school. He always dressed neatly, in a tie and jacket. He looked more like a family doctor than a specialist.

At the time Dr. Iliya and his family arrived, I had been experiencing an irregular heartbeat. My American doctors were puzzled and concerned. I had been through months of testing.

I had begun carrying a portable heart monitor when Dr. Iliya finally interceded. “You will kill yourself carrying this thing around, before it will save you.”

He made it known that he was unimpressed with the American medical system. “Let’s sell that silly box and buy some good vodka. Turn it off so you don’t waste the battery.”

Dr. Iliya came early the next morning to my classroom, carrying his old medical briefcase. He wanted to examine my heart. I submitted. I took off my shirt and lay down on the floor. He was confident and absolutely professional. With his bare hands, Iliya explored my chest area. He followed my arteries with his fingers. He moved slowly and deliberately. Finally, he pressed his ear tightly against

my chest and listened for what seemed like forever.

I was scared to death Mr. Andersen, the school principal, would walk into my classroom and find me half naked on the floor.

Dr. Iliya stood up, concluding without hesitation that my irregular heartbeat was due to a hormone deficiency. He wrote a message.

“Here, give this to your doctor, and good luck.”

My American doctor reluctantly requested a new blood test as per Dr. Iliya’s suggestion. When the test confirmed the diagnosis, my doctor was somewhat embarrassed.

Thank you, Dr. Iliya. You saved my life.

What could be better than going to school?

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“Eesa, you have an Arabic name. I know a few words in Arabic. Don’t you think your name might offend some Christians?”

“Yes, indeed, I am a Christian. I changed my name to Eesa Abdullahi only for not being chased by Muslims.”

Eesa Abdullahi translates to ‘the Jesus who serves and obeys Allah’.

“Did it help, Eesa?”

“Not really. Here I am.”

Eesa had lived on a big farm with palm trees and sunflower gardens, cooled by the tropical breeze from the Indian Ocean. He had eleven children, six sons and five daughters. He owned forty camels, seventy cows and 200 sheep. The civil war in Somalia forced him to leave behind his beautiful, seven-acre farm. He spoke often of his lost fields. But only once did he mention his six children who were slaughtered by the warlord’s men who took his farm.

For the Somalis, enormous families are the greatest of Allah’s gifts.

Polygamy is common and the women have no rights.

“Yahya, how could you do that, have three wives, leave two behind?”

“I had no choice,” Yahya said “I could get a visa for only one wife. I take the youngest. She will bring me more children.”

The Somalis were the most homesick. For native Arabic speakers, learning English was especially difficult. The writing is reversed and the letters are completely different. English and Arabic are from different language families. Their native language is Somali Arabic, a tribal dialect. There are also cultural barriers to learning. Somalis follow strict Islamic law: no pork, no alcohol, no gambling, no

music. Our European alphabet is, for many, the infidel's alphabet.

My Somali students were mostly shy and contemplative. You could see the exhaustion in their bodies and in their souls. This group was perhaps the most broken. Their pain helped us forget the pain of the Bosnian and Sudanese refugees.

In the exodus from Somalia they endured sand storms, hot deserts, wild African beasts, tribal wars and starvation. Most of the youngsters had grown up in refugee camps in Kenya.

In stark contrast to the horrors of their lives, the Somali women wear the most beautifully colored silk scarves and veils. It is a mystery to me how such amazing deep, rich colors can come from a country in such darkness for so long. Such happy colors hiding such sad faces.

But Eesa, the sunflower farmer, managed his pain with humor. And he used it to heal others.

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For the highest-level ESL students I taught a class called Current Events. It was extremely popular because it was my favorite and therefore the liveliest class I ever taught. It could have been called, World Leaders on Trial. The students were my United Nations Assembly.

The class was Mr. Andersen’s idea and, I believe, a special gift to me. I had free reign to talk about any issue in any context. In this district, that also meant permission to skate on very thin ice. I am forever grateful to Mr. Andersen for giving me such independence, at such risk, and the opportunity to take one of my passionate interests into my teaching.

When George W. Bush came along, my professional neutrality went out the window.

“Teacher? What does it mean, not entirely truthful?” Juan asked.

“Mentir. Imbroglia in Italian. In English: to lie, lying,” I said.

“Then why don’t they just say the word lying?”

“I don’t know, Juan, I think they are afraid to call the president a liar.”

“Why are they afraid? I thought you could diss the man without getting shot.”

Juan was one of a number of Mexicans here for credit toward a high school diploma. He spoke English as well as I did.

“Well, Juan, I think you are more likely to get shot if you call Dick Cheney a liar. If they call Bush a liar, they can lose their jobs. And

in Utah, so can you,” I reminded him.

I can promise you, graduates of that class are today well-informed, staunch, liberal, progressive, active, involved Democrats. At any other school in Utah, I would have been fired promptly and might very well have been the recipient of the first sanctioned stoning in this country since the Salem Witch Trials.

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Eesa was in the class that spanned the Clinton impeachment. As with the rest of the world, my students could not understand all the fuss over a little hanky-panky. The Somali women made good use of their colorful scarves to hide their chortles. They especially enjoyed the infamous stained dress affair. In perfect unison they would adjust their scarves to cover their mouths, like synchronized swimmers. It was a great, long, teachable moment.

One morning Eesa waited until all the students had taken their seats, then he stood up, walked around and stood behind my small podium. He leaned forward and wagged a curled forefinger at the class.

In his thick African Arabic accent, he said, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman Ms. Lewinsky.”

Beaming, he walked back to his seat as the class erupted in laughter.

It was hard not to laugh. Even the women in full black hijab lowered their heads to hide their snickering.



## 11 TELL HIM I AM NOT MUSLIM

Turn off the TV? You must be kidding.

By lunchtime, even Mr. Martinez was watching TV.

We watched the images of stumbling zombies, ghostlike faces white with dust and debris, powdered gray hair. It looked like a low-budget movie set with extras in bad make-up feigning horror as they ran by the camera.

But the co-stars of this horror film, W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, were not in this movie. They were hiding. Bush was in Air Force One flying in circles in the sky over Florida, while Osama bin Laden was relaxing with the sheep in the caves of Tora Bora.

We heard about the plane that crashed into the Pentagon and saw pictures of a smoldering round hole where the building had swallowed it. We learned of the fourth plane that crashed in an open field in Pennsylvania. Before that plane crashed, passengers calling on cell phones reported that they were being hijacked and that the

hijackers were Arabs. Passengers heard the hijackers yelling, ‘Allah akbar!’ (‘God is great!’) as they stabbed the pilots and flight attendants with box cutters. One passenger described them as looking Iranian. Of course they weren’t. Iranians do not shout Allah akbar except when cheering a soccer game or from the rooftops during the occasional revolution, to keep the dictator from getting any sleep.

We watched the stupefied people walking home, stumbling across the bridges from Manhattan. We saw police officers, reporters and firefighters, many of them crying.

Rudy Giuliani, the mayor of New York City, was having a bad hair day. He was everywhere, working hard to save his city. He held his megaphone with one hand, keeping the other free to wrestle the long strands of hair that lashed at his balding head in the wind. He earned the mark of a hero that day. He won Time magazine’s designation for Man of the Year and began running for president of the United States. For fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Giuliani will come tell you in person about his heroism.

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Obviously, it was an extraordinary day. All the teachers were asked to be visible and to keep people calm. Many students asked and were given permission to leave school.

We were concerned for the Muslim students — or, better said, any student who looked Middle Eastern, especially the ones who dressed in their native garb. We were worried about some of the unruly American students who occupied the school's fifth floor, the top floor.

In addition to refugees and other English language learners, Horizonte ran a full high school curriculum on the top floor of the building. It was called the High-Risk Program, and was for students who were unsuccessful at one of the other district schools. It was a non-traditional program designed to intercept kids who were falling through the cracks and dropping out. The fifth floor was the only floor off limits to the refugees. There had never been problems between the two sectors of the school. I'm not sure what those American kids knew or thought about the stories and the lives of the strange-looking people on the floors below.

For the American students on the fifth floor, Horizonte was the last chance. But for most of the refugees on the floors below, this was their first chance to get a formal education and to learn to navigate a new life.

The school had full-time police officer stationed in the lobby on the first floor. Officer Monsen was rotund, greasy and mean. He mostly sat alone in a small glass room next to the first-floor elevators,

apparently doing nothing. Only when Mr. Andersen was around or there was food to be had, would he come out of his small box, acting as if he were about to catch a thief. His hand was always at the ready, poised over his gun. Horizonte was Officer Monsen's OK Corral.

When he did do anything, he sleuthed around looking for smokers, mostly Bosnians. They were easy to catch because they were always there in the parking lot, smoking up large. The Bosnians refused to believe that smoking could be against the law in a free country. It is said that in Bosnia, when a baby cries, they give it a cigarette.

Officer Monson was a staunch Mormon. For him, smoking was an unforgivable weakness and a sin.

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One day I was teaching a lesson on the use of hyperbole in Republican rhetoric and right-wing media.

"Who do you hate the most out of a group of people like, say, Bush, Mussolini, Stalin, Khomeini and Hitler?" I asked my students.

I thought this class of mostly Bosnians would say Radovan Karadžić or Slobodan Milošević.

But Abdo yelled from the front row, "That fat asshole at the bottom of the stairs!"

“Who?”

Half the class repeated it together.

“The school police officer!”

Abdo pumped his fist in the air. He had been caught smoking many times.

A department-store-sized escalator rose up through the center of the school’s five-story atrium. From the escalator, you could see what was happening on several floors at a time.

We called this space the fish bowl. Hanging out in the halls of Horizonte meant hanging over the white pipe railings that ringed each floor, watching people coming and going, up and down. Or, you could hang out on the spacious, mid-floor landings of the wide stairs that zigzagged up through the atrium beside the escalator. Conversations could be both heard and held between floors.

By the afternoon, almost everyone was out in the halls, talking, crying, and arguing about who, what and why. I was on the down escalator.

“Fucking Muslims did it!”

“Goat fuckers!”

Goat fuckers? Some of the obscenities I heard wafting through

the fish bowl that day were new to me. In a sick way, they were funny. I looked down at the escalator's steps and imagined how a splattered egg thrown from the fifth floor might look as it oozed through the corduroy, chrome, and steel threads.

No actual person had yet been a target of these abusive words, thank God, but I couldn't help feeling that things were warming up to it, simmering.

The little brown boy began chanting, Mirror, mirror on the wall, who are the greatest assassins of them all?

"The hijackers?" I said.

No, moron. Muslims, said the little boy. And there is a big flock of sheep behind them dying to go to Paradise.

"But this is not all Muslims. These are fanatics," I said.

It's jihad, buddy, said the little brown boy. It's a good day to start a crusade.

"No, my son. We are more civilized than that."

The very next day, W. Bush gave a big speech.

"This crusade, this war on terrorism, is gonna take awhile. And the American people must be patient. I'm gonna be patient," said W. Bush.

The little brown boy reminded me of it for weeks.

I felt the same anger as anyone else toward those who had committed these horrific crimes. Yet some would hate me for those crimes. We of the Muslim world would all be targets of that anger. Thank God I am not a Muslim, I found myself saying in the years since 9/11. But still, I look like one. I planned to shave my moustache that night. If being Arabian was un-cool before, now it was toxic.

I could not bear to hear any more of this garbage. I needed some rest. I went back to my classroom and dropped into my chair. I rested my forehead on the cold, metal desk, eyes closed, hoping to discharge the static in my head. I wanted to go to sleep, sleep the day away, perhaps the rest of my life. I felt someone enter the room silently. I did not move.

“I did not have sexual relations with that woman Ms. Lewinsky.”

“Please, not today, Eesa. Can’t you see the whole world is in mourning?”

I looked up. Eesa was standing at the door. I had been barking at him, not talking. I felt worse when the color drained from his unusually light-skinned face. He plopped down on a chair, put his head down in silence.

“Have you eaten your lunch, Eesa?” I asked.

He lifted his head. I saw his puffy, red eyes, the tears dried on his black eyelashes.

“I can cry the rest of my life if you like. I have cried and cried since I left my farm until I come here. You want I cry more?”

I felt worse. “Have you eaten, Eesa?” I repeated.

“I’m not hungry,” was all he said.

I did not know how to comfort him.

The door opened wide. Arash walked in. This was Arash’s fifth year at Horizonte. He had become a fixture. Arash was smiling.

“Let the world see the real face of Islam!” He was speaking in Persian.

“That’s not Islam, Arash,” I said.

“And I’m Queen Elizabeth,” he quipped.

I turned my face to Eesa.

“He’s just upset.” I explained in English, referring to Arash.

Arash walked up to the board, wrote some numbers:

“20 x 72”

Then he calculated.

”20 x 72 = 1440”

“That’s one thousand, four hundred and forty virgins ready to be raped by these animals tonight. These guys must think Allah is a super pimp, only the hottest virgins!”

“Take it easy, Arash, you are frightening Eesa, and he has no idea what we are saying. Please erase those numbers.”

Arash was just warming up.

“Name me one decent, civilized Muslim country, city, town or village, and I will become a born-again Muslim!”

To be honest, I had to think about it.

“Cairo,” I said hesitantly.

Shit hole! blurted the little brown boy.

“Please,” Arash said. “The only thing swimming in the Nile is chunks of shit.”

“Baghdad,” I said.

Shit hole! said the little brown boy again.

“Baghdad? You must be kidding. When’s the last time you were in Baghdad?” said Arash.

The little boy added, Hey! Didn’t they give away an all-

expenses-paid luxury honeymoon in Baghdad on The Price is Right?

“Riyadh.”

Shit hole! said the little brown boy.

“Sure. A gorgeous tropical Mediterranean city where they cut off your hand for stealing a loaf of bread and stone you to death for kissing your goat,” said Arash.

“Tehran,” I said.

“Yeah, until Khomeini took a big giant dump on it.”

Eesa stood up, came over and whispered in my ear. “Please tell this man I am not a Muslim. I am a Christian. Good-bye, Teacher,” and he left, shaking his head.

It struck me that as a Christian, Eesa had lost a lifelong struggle to assimilate in a Muslim country. Now the paradigm was reversed.

Arash continued ranting.

I wished I were bold enough to ask him to leave. I was thinking about it, but my savior saved me one more time. Mr. Andersen escorted an Iraqi family into my classroom.

“I have a new family for you. They need some help.”

Mr. Andersen always thought I spoke Arabic fluently. I never corrected him. I’m not sure why. He always brought to me all the Arab

students in the school, to speak to them, help them and guide them.

Mr. Andersen was patting the head of a little boy hiding bashfully behind his father.

I could have told him, “Mr. Andersen, sir? It’s about time I must tell you, I know Arabic as well as a Jamaican knows Eskimo. Over the more than 1,400 years of Muslim invasion and occupation, the Persian language has prevailed. The black turbans who run Iran today are still trying to force us to learn Arabic. For me to learn Arabic would be an affront to a very old Persian tradition.

“I learned a few Arabic words and phrases when I was a little boy back home. My shrewd grandfather would use me as a piggy bank to carry his money from Tehran to Baghdad to buy his used cars. He would stuff thousands of dollars in bundles into a diaper fashioned from a scarf and then dress me in a long flowing Arab gown and headdress. I looked like a miniature Yasser Arafat. It was pure child exploitation! But the hidden money was safe. Nobody robbed children in those good old days. I considered running with the money a few times, but there is nowhere to hide in the desert.

“My grandfather would always say, ‘Arabs are good to their goats and their cars.’ We never bought any used goats, but we did buy several used Mercedes.”

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They have been waiting for a long time.” Mr. Andersen was speaking hurriedly. I knew his house was on fire. “Tell them I am sorry. I’m sure they know it is a crazy day.” He waved and left us to it.

The Iraqi family spoke no English. The mother said only, “Thank you, thank you,” repeatedly. The father was tall, with a pale, confused face. I’ll never forget the soulful hunger, and yet the emptiness, with which his eyes searched the room. What was he looking for? He was a very quiet man. He had a short beard dyed red with henna, and the rest of his jaw was clean-shaven. A small turban of black silk was wrapped around his head.

I loved the woman’s costume. It was sky blue with peach around the collar. The kids were gorgeous. The boy, wearing a green shirt, had big smiling eyes that shone with innocence and the girl’s dark hair was lovingly combed and braided.

“As-Sal mu Alaykum, Peace be with you,” I said, expending nearly half of my inventory of Arabic words and phrases. It is never pretty when Persians speak Arabic.

They only smiled. Their faces held something unknown. Perhaps the mother was afraid of tomorrow. The pain of anxiety was in her eyes. I had no idea how to say “Are you hungry?” well enough to

allow anyone else to hear.

I pointed to my mouth and stomach. The boy laughed. The little black-eyed girl smiled. I stood up and I walked to the door. The kids walked side-by-side ahead of us, holding hands.

Arash was still standing by my desk. For the first time since I'd known him, he was silent. As much as I hated his loose mouth, I must confess, I appreciated his fearless irreverence and his visceral truths. I lacked his courage. He stayed in the classroom when we left.

The third-floor hall was the most crowded. We had more classrooms on that floor. It was not easy to get through the people standing around. The mother had the hardest time, carrying a bulging bag in her hand. We walked toward the escalators in the center of the atrium. As we came within view of the upper floors, we began to hear indecipherable shouts from above. They appeared to be aimed at us. I looked around. There were no other candidates.

A sharp, fearful silence pierced the already tense afternoon. But as the yelling resumed, it became clear that we were the targets.

The shouts were gaining force: cruel and merciless taunts poured down through the atrium from faceless voices above.

We all looked up. We saw half a dozen American high school boys and girls looking down at the Iraqi family and me. Most were

dressed in the morbid colors of an angry generation. I saw purple hair and nose rings. Heavy chains dragged on a skinny neck. A bad mullet haircut sat like a stub atop a trench coat. A Big Gulp threatened to rain warm soda on our heads. Slowly the words became clear.

“Towel heads!”

“Terrorists!”

“You suck! Arabs!”

“Sand niggers!”

The onslaught of obscenities thickened. The father looked clearly concerned. He grabbed his children by the arms and pulled them closer. The little girl began to cry. Drops of poorly aimed soda splashed around us. The little boy twisted from his father’s grip and leaped down the escalator. His escape frightened his sister even further.

The taunting turned into a stuttering, out-of-sync chorus:

“Camel jockey, go home!”

“Camel jockey, go home!”

“Camel jockey, go home!”

We started down the escalator as jeers rained on us. The little boy was already on the second floor, looking up at us with panicked eyes. I looked up again. I felt slightly more secure now. There was a

greater distance between us and our antagonists. But they didn't stop yelling. More joined in. Some began clapping, then more, and soon the chanting gained coherence until they shouted in unison:

“CAMEL JOCKEY, GO HOME!”

“CAMEL JOCKEY, GO HOME!”

We reached the bottom floor and I hurried to open the lunchroom door. The father pushed the children inside. He did not speak a word.

The mother turned around and glanced quickly at the bullies. She did not understand what they were yelling at her. She gave them her smile and said, “Thank you.”

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That should have been the end. How could I go on tolerating the shame, the misunderstanding and ignorance that repeatedly stretched belief in the goodness of humanity? I had worked all my life, since coming to this ugly, beautiful country, to be tolerant, caring, to stand up and believe in the value of my work. I might have said, looking at this quiet, traumatized family who needed to know that they had made it to a kind of haven or promised land, enough is enough.

The fallen towers in New York underscored the impossibility of

my self-imposed task.

But I'm a clown, a fool. I can't help who I am.

We sat and ate together, the camel jockey who can't even speak Arabic, and his new Iraqi friends, and I remembered that I am a shama soozan. My life is a candle, a single, insignificant flame, and I have no choice but to let it burn, right down to the base.

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The little brown boy is rolling on the ground at my feet. I poke him with my toe, to try and get him to stand up straight and show some respect for once, but he just rolls away, shrieking with laughter. You want a rainbow with that, Payman?

## The End



