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The Motions

“Baba, Baba tell me a story Baba!” she said to her father.

The six-year-old girl jumped up and down on the brown carpeted floor of the living room. Laying on the carpeted floor was a rug, light brown, with arabesque patterns. At the center of the rug sat a small, polished, brown wooden table. It was square with legs that curved towards the bottom, almost like a loop. Square paper napkins rested above it. The father sat on the floor, his back against the light brown couch.

The girl’s dark brown, neatly combed hair was muddled from jumping. Her pale feet turned pink. When her father didn’t respond, the girl stopped jumping. Panting, she studied him—caramel colored skin, bushy black mustache. His body hunched slightly. He was reading a book. His mouth whispered words. She moved a little closer to look at the book. The text was big, like in her green-level “hundred book challenge” books. It looked nothing like the black, bold, English lettering in her schoolbooks. It was squiggles and scribbles.

When her father turned the page, he turned it from left to right. When Ms. Annette read in class, she turned the pages from right to left. The girl had never seen Ms. Annette turn the pages that way. She thought that the next time she takes a book from the “hundred book challenge” bin in her classroom, she would begin at the end. Turning the pages from left to right.

The paper was neat and crisp. A light green paper. Green triangles with golden lines formed a border around the page. The pages in her schoolbooks were white and floppy. They were thick with few words and many pictures. No greens or golds. The book her father was reading only had squiggles and scribbles. No pictures, just the border.

After a moment, her father stopped whispering. He looked up at her with his gray-rimmed reading glasses. The girl giggled. His eyes looked unrealistically bigger. It reminded her of a cartoon. “Whatcha reading Baba?” the girl asked. He removed his glasses and placed his hand on the spine of the book. Pushing his fingers against each side of the book so that the pages could meet in the center again. He ran his hand along the cover, tracing the squiggles and scribbles with his fingers. The cover was like a leathery brown with swirls and stray lines in the center. There were more squiggles and scribbles. He smiled at his daughter. The girl thought this book was precious. She never saw one like it. All the books in her school felt rubbery. This book looked firm. She wished she knew what those

squiggles and scribbles meant. “You want a story?” her father asked. The girl smiled. Her father moved his crutches, leaning them against the white wall. She went to him, sat down and leaned her head against his side. He wrapped his arm around her. Her palms were sweaty and so she carefully wiped her palms on her flowery green pajama pants. He leaned to his side, kissed her hair and began, “Baba was really sick one time,” he coughed, then cleared his throat. The girl knew why her father coughed. He smoked cigarettes. Every time her father would open the living room window to smoke, she would be beside him. He was always careful not to get smoke near her. So, he would take note of which way the wind was blowing, to make sure the smoke would be carried away by it. The girl’s favorite part was when he finished the cigarette. The tips of his middle finger and thumb would touch. The cigarette was balanced on those two fingers. His index finger would position itself at the end of the cigarette. He flicked it from the window. It fell in an arc. Up, then down. The girl followed it with her eyes. As the cigarette fell, she tiptoed, leaning her head out the window. Clinging onto the windowsill. Her father put his hand on her back to keep her steady. It would always land in the middle of the gray concrete sidewalk below. The lit part met the concrete with a spark. It was like a failed firework.

Excerpt from “Do You Know Your Name is Donia?”

The clear blue water recedes, leaving behind seafoam and flat, soggy, gray sand.

The water returns, stretching a little further up to reach me.

It invites me to enter.

The Mediterranean greets me, “Ezayik.”

I smile.

“Hello. I missed you,” I whisper.

The wind blows through my hair and clothes.

It blocks all other noise—including the thoughts that weigh on my mind.

The Mediterranean doesn't care that I respond in English. It doesn't call me “American”. No matter which shore I stood on, no matter where my feet sunk into the hot sand; Ageeba, San Stifano, Azur, El Obayed, the shores' greetings came from the same loving body. Al Motawaset—the middle. The Mediterranean.

The summer I turned thirteen, we returned to Egypt, my parents' home. A place that was mine yet not mine. I could listen to my parents' stories. Stories of growing up around Greek villas in El Ibrahmiya with white and pink petals covering the ground. Stories of how far a name could travel, carrying the reputation of a man not to be messed with. I could keep the stories, but never had any that were solely mine.

I felt the burqa woman looking at me. She turned to my mother and asked why I was so silent. My mother's answer was indifferent.

“She doesn't know how to speak Arabic. She can understand you though,” she said.

I focused on a small olive colored pillow that slouched against one of the couches. There was a large button that sunk in the center of the pillow. It had green and gold fringes; some were tangled.

I wanted to sleep.

The burqa woman addressed me. I looked at her. Her skin was tanned and wrinkled around her eyes. The burqa piece covering her mouth moved slightly as she spoke.

“Do you know your name is Donia?” she asked.

I blinked. Her question felt like a bug that had flown too close to my eye. I thought I must have misheard her question and hoped that my mother would respond for me. I looked to my mother.

My mother looked at the burqa woman. I looked at the burqa woman again and nodded.

How can she ask such a stupid question? How would I not know what my name is? It's been with me my whole life, I thought.

My name in Arabic means “the world”. My name undergoes different permutations in America: Dona? Duh-ni-uh? Dough-nyuh? As if the question mark—the uncertainty—is part of my name. Americans don’t pronounce my name the Egyptian way. Ayoub, my last name, is the name of a messenger known for his infinite patience. I am the patient world.

My mother’s name means water; a dew drop. Her last name means, “one who is neat and does things with exactitude.” Her last name matches her personality.

It is important to know what our names mean in my culture. Names carry weight.

When the burqa woman discovered that I was born and raised in America, she assumed I didn’t know my name. She thought the world lost itself in America. In a country that did not have our version of respect.

The burqa woman didn’t know that in America, I was not considered American. I was an enslaved desert woman from the East; my family, terrorists who want to deprive citizens of their freedom. In Egypt, I was not considered Egyptian. I was an American girl showered with privilege and lacked culture. I was just another tourist interested in seeing the pyramids. Egypt was home to my parents more than it was home to me. The Mediterranean was my home—Al Motawaset. The middle of the world. The middle of me.

I’ve always wondered where my home would be.

In Egypt?

In the United States?

In America, I say I am Egyptian.

In Egypt, I am called American.

I am both and I am neither.