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# WHAT TINA WANTS

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Moustafa Bayoumi

Tina works the register at the All-Night All-Right Supermarket on Devonshire, just off of Rte. 80, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, seven-to-eleven, and Saturdays, noon-to-nine. Sometimes, when Mrs. Gray is feeling religious, she works Sundays, eight-to-noon. She is five feet and one inch tall, five foot six in her boots, which her manager won't let her wear. Her hair is straight and almost tapping

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her shoulders but is shaved up the back of her neck and looks like bark. She keeps her hair the color of cooked carrots. She has a dot for a nose and a small mouth with big, puffy lips that she hides with as much dark colored lip liner as she can find. She is fifteen years old.

On Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and sometimes Sundays, she has that supermarket smell on her skin. If her mom doesn't pick her up in time, she has to outrun advances by dogs and old men. Both are attracted to the scent. The dogs give up sooner.

She's in tenth grade at Lincoln-Jefferson High School. Her best friends from school are, in order, Amanda, Georgina, and Cassidy, whose name is really Christina. She lives in the kind of town where all the girls have names that end in "a".

Tina is smoking cigarettes with them in a '94 Ford Taurus. It belongs to Amanda's brother, Albert, who moved to New York City three weeks ago for podiatry school. Their mother forced him to let Amanda "borrow" it until he comes back for Thanksgiving. Amanda is sixteen and just got her license. Albert printed out a list of seventeen biblical sounding rules and taped them to the visors. ("Number 12: Thou shalt not spray perfume on thyself when in the "T.") Amanda thinks Albert's got OCD. Rule number six is "Thou shalt not let anyone smoke in the "T.""

Amanda works with Tina at the All-Night All-Right. She's taller and fatter than Tina, and has lots of dark wavy hair cascading around her shoulders because she has a Greek grandmother on her mother's side. She shouldn't wear low-riding jeans, but she does. School bores her because she's good at it.

Georgina has naturally orange-peel hair and freckles all over her shoulders. She has green eyes without contacts but, because her eyelashes are so faint, her eyes disappear into her head without eyeliner, of which she

wears too much, giving her a racoonish look. She's Catholic and wears a white gold cross.

That leaves Cassidy. Cassidy is a natural blonde with blue eyes and a Marilyn Monroe mole (installed when she was eleven) under her left eye. No one believed she was a lesbian. She is the only one in the group to have had sex. And she said she really liked it. That was last January. She was running away from her looks.

Tina is a little intimidated by Cass. She finds her too worldly and is sometimes jealous of her. But Tina doesn't crave sophistication, like Georgina. What Tina wants is an escape from her friends' cynicism.

Today is the first day back at school. It's September 4, 2001.

Social studies, the last period in their day, was the one class the four of them shared. This was socially engineered so that they could all hang out afterwards, escaping the antiseptic, two-tone hallways of Lincoln-Jefferson for the Big Drip coffee shop at the Pan Am mall, where they'd all order iced white-chocolate mocha lattes topped with whipped cream and caramel. As they smoke cigarettes in the car on the way, Tina tells them about yesterday.

Yesterday was Labor Day. On Labor Day nobody was supposed to work, but the *All-Night All-Right* was paying time and a half, so Tina wanted to work. She signed on for the afternoon shift. It would be easy, because the charcoal, beer, and marinated steak (\$10.99/lb) crowd would've finished their shopping by morning. Frozen food bachelors and unisex vegetarians were the only customers she expected during her shift.

She had to punch in. The clock is beside the butchery, and to get there she has to walk through plastic sheeting that hangs like cow hide.

# PRAYER FOR THE LOST WATER BEES

Karen An-hwei Lee

The ocean is a crazed blue azalea.

Honeybees are intoxicated on blue —  
this is why they vanished.

No one knows where the water bees went  
in the heat, since bees are drawn to water.

Others say it is an omen. California will slide into the sea  
where it first belonged, a shelf underwater.

Angelenos call the phenomenon of swarming water bees  
*a congregation* as in a church — anointed fire.  
Water bees vanish.

Or say water bees never existed in the first place. This is why  
we do not know where they went. We never knew

their true names or their places of origin. We conjure bees  
drawing water in their bellies, glass bulbs of rain

flying over culverts and arroyos in search of hovels  
to call home. In the light of firehills,

the sun is not rising but setting — dunes illuminated  
by the light of invisible bees —

this is why they vanished.

The sheets are old and have faded to a dishwater brown. She feels like a car in a car wash whenever she walks through them, except she feels dirtier afterwards.

Yesterday, after punching in, she was pinning her name on her uniform and heading to the office to pick up her float and cashier's drawer when a customer stopped her and asked her a question.

"What?" she said.

She didn't understand him. He had an accent, black curly hair, and brown skin the color of paper bags. Was he Indian or Mexican?

"Could you tell me where I would find cumin?"

At first she thought he said "cute men" and considered telling him to get lost.

"What's cumin?" she asked. Her mother, Laura, cooked mostly spaghettis, roasts, and a pretty good meatloaf. Seafood Alfredo was Laura's dish-to-impress when company came over. The supermarket stocked a lot of things Tina had never heard of before. Arugula, choyote, and these strange white things in the meat section that looked like bones covered with fungus. She blamed Martha Stewart.

"Cumin's a seed. A spice."

"Spices are at the end of aisle eleven. Beside international foods," she said flatly.

"Thank you." He smiled at her, bowing his head just a little to the left.

She said *uh-huh* like an employee and walked off.

Fifteen minutes later, she spotted him in line for her register. There were other open registers with shorter lines, but he had chosen hers. Mrs. Aylmer, for example, always barrels through her line because she never looks up and never needs to call for a price check. She's also memorized all the produce codes. Tina still uses the laminated sheet and asks customers if the green bunch in the bag is dill or Italian parsley. She likes the brief reprieve a price check affords her.

As he approached, Tina got a better look at him under the unforgiving supermarket light that turns produce into intense greens and reds but makes people splotchy and transparent. He was older but too young to live alone. College-dorm age. His hair was cropped close with tiny curls escaping just above his ears. He had large, deep-set eyes that swallowed light and a nose that announced itself. His arms were hairy down to his fingers. He was wearing a white

T-shirt under a starchy green and white striped shirt, sleeves folded neatly like paper up to his elbows, with a brand of jeans Tina couldn't identify. The jeans had been ironed and creased. He looked crisp, like lettuce, and was honestly not bad looking. When he got close, he smiled directly at her. His teeth were large and very white, and he had an unself-conscious smile that was definitely foreign. She half-smiled back automatically.

As his groceries came down her belt, she started scanning them. Pint of whole milk (89 cents), quart of plain yogurt (\$2.89), two pounds of white rice (\$1.49), one spice bottle of cumin (\$3.49), cheap cuts of lamb (\$3.49/lb), six oranges (\$1.99), pita bread (\$1.19). Nothing large, nothing frozen. A solo cooker.

The computer beeped under her scans. All the computers were beeping and humming like an electronic herd of wild cats.

"What's this?" She held up a clear plastic bag, thin as skin, with a bunch of green leaves.

"Mint," he said.

Tina's finger, the nail chewed and painted an iron red, trailed down the laminated sheet.

"Pardon me," he said. "May I ask you a question?"

"Uh-huh," she said, not looking up.

"Do you attend the high school here?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

"Oh yeah?" She found mint. Ninety-nine cents.

"Well, I start tomorrow."

She looked up at him. "You're not from around here," she declared, as if reminding him.

"No," he said, smiling. "But tomorrow I'll be in the twelfth grade." He spoke more, as if her declaration were an invitation. "My first American school day. I passed the twelfth grade already, but I want to go to a good college, so I was advised to repeat it here and to study for the SAT exam. I plan to be a civil engineer."

He seemed excessively formal, like PBS.

But no one was behind him, and he was foreign and kind of cute. Tina could talk a little, if she wanted, as long as her manager didn't notice. She became curious.

"Where are you from?"

"Palestine," he said. He hadn't lived in the country long enough to hate the question. His chin lifted slightly with pride, and he smiled. Tina had never met anyone from there before and didn't know much about it. She looked at

him with a searching look, thinking of something to say.

"I lived in Kuwait, and Bahrain after that, and then in Egypt, too."

Finally, a place that meant something to her. "Wow," she said. "Have you seen the pyramids?"

"Of course! Bigger than you can imagine. They're amazing. My uncle, he lives in Cairo, he sent me to the American school there. And that is where I learned to speak English, a little anyway."

Tina began packing his groceries slowly.

"No, you speak really good," she said, impressed. He was from far away and was telling her about things she hadn't considered before. The least she could do would be to offer the prize of English-language confirmation. She wrapped the lamb in an extra plastic bag.

"But why are you here?" she asked, honestly confused. "There's nothing here. It's basically just a *Big Drip* and a *Borders*." She opened the mouth of another thin plastic bag on a wire. She lifted and placed the full bag into the

another monster bag of dog food. She already felt her shoulders pull.

"Oh, you have to work. Maybe I will see you tomorrow. My name is Karam," he said.

"Tina," she said.

"I know." He smiled again and pointed. She looked at her nameplate on her uniform.

"I'm very happy to meet you, Tina."

"Bye," she said.

"Armitage is such a bitch," Cass says. "She grabbed my smoke right out of my mouth today and told me I was going to get cancer. I wanted to lick her face and tell her I had a communicable disease. Bitch."

"Anyway," Tina says, "so I saw him again today, in front of Kappit's classroom. And he waved. I thought he was going to come over and say something to me again but then Armitage walked right up to him."

"So, do you like like him?" Amanda asks.

"I don't know. He seemed nice. He's *way* older. Like eighteen or something." Tina was

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PINT OF WHOLE MILK (89 CENTS), QUART OF PLAIN YOGURT (\$2.89),  
TWO POUNDS OF WHITE RICE (\$1.49), ONE SPICE BOTTLE OF CUMIN (\$3.49),  
CHEAP CUTS OF LAMB (\$3.49/LB), SIX ORANGES (\$1.99), PITA BREAD (\$1.19).  
NOTHING LARGE, NOTHING FROZEN. A SOLO COOKER.

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empty as if dropping a baby in a swing.

"I got a scholarship," he said, smiling. "From the International Association of Academic Exchange."

"Wow," she said.

"I wrote an essay, took a test, and here I am. They send international students around America. We met first in New York City last week. I love New York!" He beamed.

"Uh-huh," she said.

"Everyone I've met in this country is so nice."

"New York? It's dangerous there."

"No. We stayed in a hotel in Manhattan and saw a theater play. They gave us a tour of the U.N. And the director of our program, he noticed my shoes were old. He gave me some shoes, just like that. Brand new Nikes, just because the man, he saw my feet."

That's when she heard him say it. The mayonnaise on my feet. She was going to ask him about it but another man was now in line with a twenty-five pound bag of kitty litter and

finding the age gap, in fact all the gaps between them, deeply interesting and infinitely bridgeable.

"Maybe you should ask him out," Amanda suggests.

Georgina and Cass let out strikingly parallel sighs.

"If you ask him out, he'll like kidnap you and take you to his harem, and force you to belly dance for him." Cass says all of this with absolute seriousness. "And you don't have the hips for that." She flicks her ash out the car window like a movie star.

"Isn't Preeti Gopinath from Pakistan, too?" asks Georgina.

"I think she's from India." Amanda says.

Tina wishes she looked like Preeti Gopinath. As if it wasn't enough that she had that name (because she really was gorgeous), she also had the smallest wrists and ankles you ever saw, and she wasn't conceited. *And* Preeti was in the eleventh grade.

# LIME CEVICHE BEFORE THE RAPTURE

Karen An-hwei Lee

Fuchsia twilight of monoxide haze —  
Los Angeles on a lip of apocalypse  
this winter

while I huddle under a gas-lamp —  
sea-garden to tongue,  
radiccio with olive oil,  
ceviche of salmon, yellow-tail, and *abi*-tuna  
soaked in chili-lime juice,  
tenderhooks  
of bliss flayed  
without fin or bone.

The burning aerosol hour chides me  
for murmuring *fiscal cliff*                      *austerity* —  
or whether raw-fish sashimi is ceviche,  
Japanese or Peruvian  
at the rapture,  
whether we shall retain our names.

“You guys, I’m pretty sure he said *Palestine*.”  
“Whatever,” says Cass.

That night, Tina comes to work and finds Kevin, the manager, in a fury of paper and phone calls in his office, which hangs above the registers like a tree house. Kevin is a Lincoln-Jefferson graduate, thirty-years old and about forty pounds overweight. He shaves his head bald and is always reading the same book by Hermann Hesse (*Siddhartha*). He thinks Michael Moore is a near deity. With his tortoise-shell glasses, Kevin looks frighteningly like a cross between a man and a reptile.

He puts the phone down with a sigh. “Not until next Wednesday. I can’t believe it. Did you see it?”

“What?”

“You didn’t notice the lights? No, of course not. You’re only in the tenth grade.”

Kevin considers himself a man of the people but always condescends to Tina.

“The *lights*. Now the ‘H’ and the ‘K’ are out.”

Tina looks at him like he’s encased in a giant test tube.

“Don’t you get it? More than half the ‘ALL-NIGHT ALL-RIGHT’ signs burned out. Now it says ‘ALL- N-I-G...A... R.’ Get it?”

Tina says nothing.

“What if the African American community gets a hold of this? What if the Reverend Jesse Jackson shows up with a picket line? What if they think we did it on purpose?”

“Uh-huh,” says Tina. “That’d be pretty bad.” There are virtually no black people in her town. The only black people she knows are the Bancrofts, who moved here two years ago from Chicago. They run a mom-and-pop accounting practice in their home office. Jenah, their daughter, is in the eleventh grade.

“You bet it’s bad. Do you want people around the world thinking we hate black people?”

“No.”

“Damn right, I don’t.”

“Why don’t you just unscrew one of the other lights?”

“You can’t just *unscrew* those lights, Tina.” He looks at the snowstorm on his desk. “At least I don’t think you can. Actually, Tina, you know, maybe you can.” While considering Tina’s suggestion, he hands her her float and register drawer. “You’re on six tonight.”

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Tina sets herself up at her station and begins scanning groceries. She can find UPC codes involuntarily and can dispense change better than an ATM spits bills. Some days, she really enjoys her job because she can do it without thinking about anything at all. It clears her mind and pays for her clothes. Tonight, she has four hours of supermarket meditation ahead of her. She finds herself not infrequently thinking about the foreign boy. Only a few customers are shopping tonight. Nothing happens.

At twenty minutes to eleven, the light blacks out above Tina's register and she pulls her drawer and heads to the office. After cashing out (inexplicably 23¢ high), she heads through the butchery to change her clothes and punch out. At nine minutes after her shift is finished, Tina steps outside the supermarket and finds her mother's car purring.

"How'd it go, sweetheart?" Her mother always asks the same question.

"Fine," says Tina, looking straight ahead. When they pull away from the parking lot, she turns her head and looks over her seat-belted shoulder out of slim possibility. She sees only Kevin's football-shaped frame stuck high on a ladder resting on the store's sign. His arms are extended wide and his body is black against the glowing white of the letters. He looks like a large insect sucked into light.

"Hey Mr. Kareem," Cass sings out playfully.

"Hello." Karam shrinks back briefly out of surprise. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet, but I know you. I'm Tina's friend. She's over there."

Cass is standing just off the front lobby of the school and beside Karam. He has car keys in his hand. She points to a group of three girls sitting by their lockers a mere ten feet away. Two girls are looking at him with laughing eyes and open mouths that look like bubble-gum dispensers. The third, with orange-red hair, has her face turned sharply away.

"She wants to say 'hi.' Don't you want to say hi back?"

Cass looks directly at Karam as his face changes with understanding that this is a game he's being pulled into. He stands still for a moment and then turns to Cass with a smile. They walk over to the seated group.

"This is Amanda, ("Hi," she says), Georgina ("Hey"), and you know Tina (burning silence)."

"My name is Karam. Very nice to meet all of you." He bows his head slightly when he says this. His hand moves up a bit and then rests again by his side, as if he had thought about whether to shake their hands individually and then decided against it.

Tina turns her face slowly around and looks at him. She has a deep look of dread that she is attempting to disguise. She is failing. She hopes Karam can read the look as *please go away and forget this happened*. She tries to turn up the corners of her mouth into a smile. She feels like her arms are blushing. Her arms are blushing.

"Teen tells us you're an Egyptian." Cass says. "I've lived in Egypt, yes. I'm Palestinian."

"Don't they practice ritual sacrifice there?" Georgina says to no one in particular. Amanda sighs.

"Sacrifice? No, I don't think so," Karam says politely.

"No, I read about it. The pharaohs, right?"

"That was a long time ago." "Do you like Anne Rice?" Georgina asks quickly, caught in the rush of her own connecting ideas.

"Do I like rice?" "Do you like Anne Rice. You know. Do you read Anne Rice?"

"Do I read and rice?" A frown crinkles onto his brow. Karam looks confused, as if he's made a wrong turn in the dark and there are no lights or signs to orient him. Luckily, Cass is an oasis on the desert highway.

"How about coffee. You do drink coffee, don't you Mr. Kareem?" Cass has taken to calling him Mr. Kareem since she noticed, ten minutes ago, that he wears dress shirts and slacks to school.

"Yes, of course." "How about that. So does Tina! Why don't you take our Tina here for some good ol' American Joe."

Tina's head is powerfully stuck looking at the floor, but she slowly breaks the electromagnetic grip enough to raise her eyes just within Karam's view. *I'm dying here*. She hopes he can see that in her eyes.

Before another word is spoken, Cass adds, "Come on," and is pushing Karam toward Tina.

"Come on, Tina. Stand up," Cass says like a gym teacher. And the group is shepherded to the parking lot. Once they find Karam's car,

Cass pushes Tina in the passenger seat, and before Karam turns to ask if the others wish to come, Cass is on her heels and walking in the opposite direction, as if she has suddenly become bored with this diversion. Amanda and Georgina follow immediately, in a sudden movement, like channels changing. The three friends have disappeared quickly into the thick sweat of high school air. Tina is immobile in the car.

"Oh my God. I'm so embarrassed. I'm sooo sorry," Tina says, looking down.

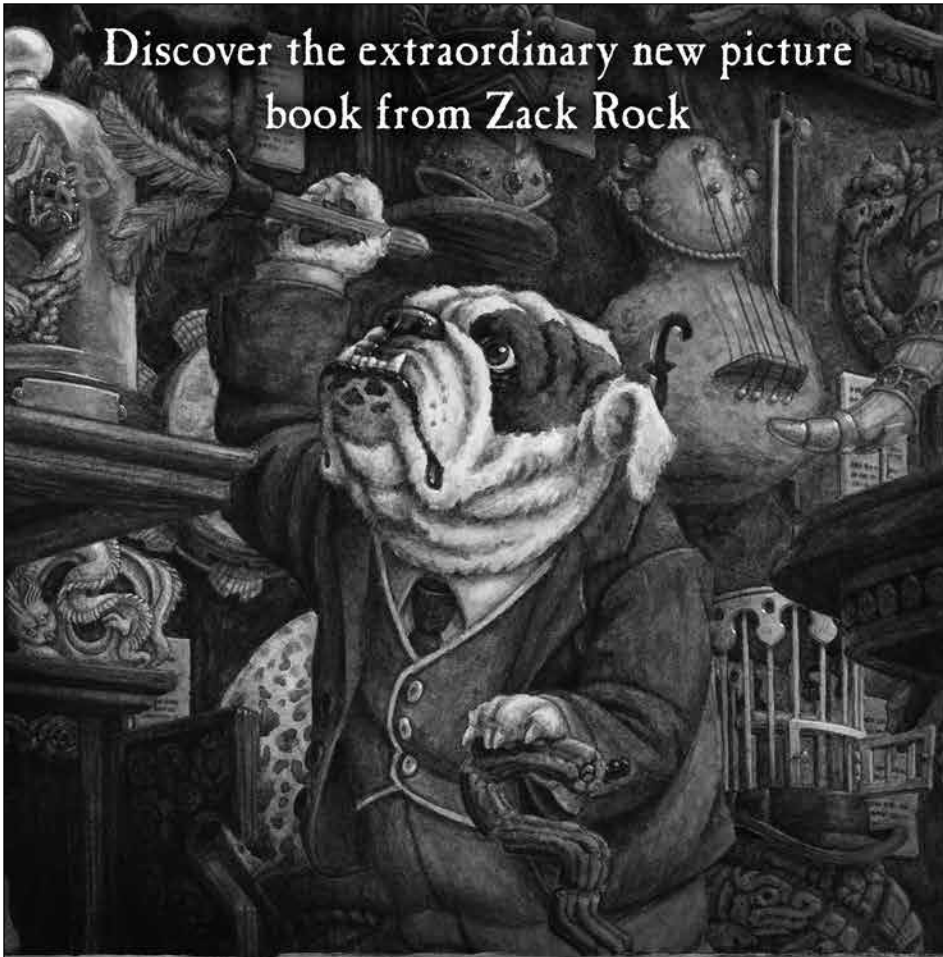
"A coffee. Why not. That would be nice." "God. I need new friends." Tina says.

At the Big Drip, Karam asks Tina for her order and requests a double espresso for himself. They sit at a small, round table that wobbles and has a dusting of raw sugar all over it. Tina excuses herself immediately to lipstick her lips. While staring at her face, she makes a mental list of things to talk about when and if she returns to the table. She decides she'll never remember her list and searches in her purse for pen and paper to write it down. She finds no pen, only an eyeliner pencil, and scratches out crayon topics on the back of old pay stub from the All-Night All-Right. She places the list on the top of her purse, takes a deep breath, and convinces herself that everything will be okay. She has forty-five minutes. Then she'll excuse herself, walk home, and call Amanda.

After two and a half hours, Tina has forgotten the anxiety that was fluttering in her stomach. Karam has told her stories about living in Egypt and Kuwait, about places with names like Bahrain and Qatar ("Why would anyone name their country that?" Cass would later say derisively.) He has family in Paris and Sao Paolo. His brother is studying for his O levels (whatever that is, but she nods) in a small town in England. He keeps drawing imaginary maps to these places in the sugar sand with his finger and then erasing them. She assumed his father and mother would be with him, but they are still 'back over there,' he says, without elaboration. He is alone here, living in an apartment. That in itself feels dangerous and illicit to Tina.

"Wow, you've really been all over," she tells him. "That's our tragedy, I guess," he says. "To know everywhere but home."

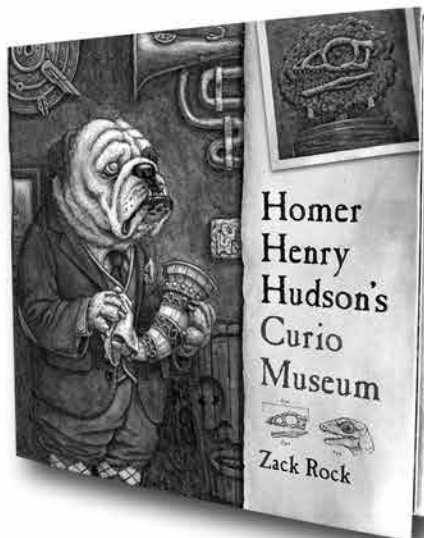
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CREATIVE  EDITIONS

He tells her instead how inspiring this little town is because it is so settled.

"It's been only a few days, but everyone has a role and a function. It all works so smoothly," he says. He would love to settle in a place like this, he tells her. She hears his stories and begins thinking for the first time that her tragedy is not settling in a place like this but in settling for it.

She hasn't had the need to check her list once for the entire conversation, and that alone makes her feel very adult. She tries to curb her excessive *Wows!*, thinking they probably sound very teenage to him, he who seems to speak slowly and almost always in full sentences. He stammers occasionally for words, and she feels generous and intelligent when she can fill in his sentences. She's proven something to herself with this conversation, that she doesn't have to be a girl anymore. It's now her choice. She knows how to be a woman, she thinks, and she can't wait to get on the phone and tell this to Amanda.

Eyes follow them out the coffee shop but she's too focused and he too new to notice them. He asks her if she lives far. No, she says. It's walkable. He offers to drive her home. She declines. She'd rather walk, which is the truth, because outside feels exactly right to her now. The air is warm and fresh and elastic. He tells her he insists on walking her home. He has heard how dangerous America can be. She laughs and says New York, maybe, but it's not dangerous here! But she happily agrees, and they walk the short distance behind the mall to her house on Haverford Lane.

At the foot of her driveway, she tells him she's home, and she realizes she wishes he would kiss her now. He tells her again how he is happy to have met someone like her and turns to walk back to his car in the mall's parking lot. She begins to walk up her oil-stained driveway when she turns and runs quickly back to him and, without thinking, jumps on her toes and kisses him. Before he can say a word, she has glided back over the driveway and around the house. She feels so proud to have kissed him. It makes her feel ready and brave and, in this interesting way, desirable.

For the next two days she dresses very carefully for school. No skirts because, caught in the wrong position, they may make her thighs look plump, like icing in a tube. No

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fancy blouses or cropped shirts. She'd look like she's trying too hard. It must be simple but nice. A careful deployment of jewelry. Hoop earrings. A light spritz of strawberry perfume as soon as she gets to school. Pants, but not jeans. She paints her nails white.

When she doesn't see him on Thursday, she kicks herself for not asking for a phone number. Did he have a cell phone? She can't remember. Her most vivid recollection is the smell that was left lightly on her when she ran back to the house. She'd smelled something similar before at *Soaps & Scents*. Sandalwood, she thinks, or was it Arabian Musk?

She wonders if she would have the courage to call had she had the foresight to get a phone number. Part of her believes she would, but in truth she knows she would not. His absence is making her doubt everything she felt that afternoon. Was it all just a stupid mistake? She didn't even wait long enough to see his reaction to her kiss. How could she be so brainless?

By Friday afternoon, she realizes that she likely won't see him for the rest of the week or over the weekend. It's not unusual that you don't see people, Amanda reassures her. It's a big school. The only high school in town. She'll see him again, just wait. Cass has moved on to calling him the Prince of Egypt. Georgina follows by shortening the name to Prince.

The weekend is long and terrible, dragging to forever because nothing ever happens. She hoped he would appear during her Saturday shift at the All-Night All-Right, but she had nine hours of families buying their week's worth of food, hundreds of dollars worth. She saw what felt like every item in the store roll down her belt in a never-ending train of food, but he was never the one handing her the credit card with airplane miles or the clipped coupon with the torn UPC code that she'd have to enter manually. In her mother's car on the way home that night, she realizes Kevin had blacked out the 'N' in the sign with what looked like paint or electrical tape. But you could still see the 'N'. Now it just looked weird.

On Monday, Amanda asks her to switch shifts with her because her father was forcing her to attend a medical school admission seminar at the local Hampshire Inn. Amanda wants to go anyway since there might be the opportunity to talk to boys in the faux-wood-veneer environment where everyone drinks coffee in

china cups. Tina agrees to Amanda's request without protest, her moods shifting between resigned, confused, and depressed. She would give Amanda almost anything now.

That night, the cashier-scan-zone has taken over her brain so that her arm feels more detached and mechanical than connected and alive when he suddenly appears in front of her station (number nine). He is smiling and grocery-less, an odd combination for the All-Night All-Right.

"I'm so glad you are here," he says, and she feels like forgiving him for things he did not do.

"Hi Karam," she says.

"I never found a way to contact you."

"Me neither."

"I don't have a telephone yet."

"Oh," she says.

She sees Mrs. Aylmer's head pop up slightly from her station, watching her. He is conspicuous without food, she tells him. He says he shopped yesterday, hoping to see her, and she flushes and feels a rush of energy. I have a break in ten minutes, she whispers. Meet me by the side, at the butchery door, she says. And he disappears.

She opens the door to the butchery, and he is standing there. One of the stray dogs prowls in the distance. A sudden cloud billows at the door because the butchery is kept cold and the air tonight is thick and hot. She takes a brick from the ground and keeps the door ajar with it while they sit on the steps.

"The butchers smoke out here," she says. She doesn't know if she needs to explain the brick, but she does anyway. "All butchers smoke. It's weird."

"Are they here?"

"Nah. They go home at five." The butchery is kept very clean, part of the butchers' pride.

They chat a little about school until he shifts slowly around, almost facing her, and asks her a question.

"Tina. Would you tell me. How old are you?"

"Sixteen," she says immediately. "How old are you?"

"I'm eighteen."

"That's cool. When's your birthday?"

"March 30<sup>th</sup>. And yours?"

She says nothing for a minute.

"Actually, can I tell you something?" she asks.

"Of course."

"Umm. Actually, I'm fifteen. I'll be sixteen in November."

She feels much better. He laughs. He tells her that he was so pleased to have someone to talk to the other night. She decides to admit she really enjoyed talking to him, too. He says he wonders if she would be willing to have coffee with him again, and she smiles and looks at him softly before turning her gaze away and saying sure. She tells him tentatively that her break is almost up, and he says, maybe Wednesday? And she says okay. He'll meet her in the lobby, like before, and as she stands up, he leans over, and she smells the Sandalwood again (*definitely* sandalwood), and he kisses her, lightly, on the lips. She feels herself turn red like a pepper. And he smiles shyly and walks off. She takes the brick out of the doorframe. Every inch of her body feels new.

On Wednesday September 12, 2001, Lincoln-Jefferson has an all-school assembly starting from second period. During first period, students were to gather in their homerooms for some directed conversation. The assembly would last three hours, and then students could stay and join in further, informal group discussions with a counselor, or they could go home early. In the afternoon, the gym would open to the community for blood donations. All regular classes were cancelled.

Shock and sadness have fallen over the school. It's Wednesday, but the hallways have a Saturday quiet about them. Many students have stayed home for the entire day. In homeroom, some students sob into Kleenexes while others ask why the news channels keep showing what they are showing. A lot of words are spoken to fill in gaps of silence, but nothing anyone says feels satisfying. Since the silence would be even more overwhelming, a low murmur in each classroom can be heard. Students learn quickly that Mr. Fenders, the geography teacher, had to step outside his classroom because his glasses fogged up and his voice cracked when the kids mentioned the fire fighters. His brother, he later tells them, died in a fire when Mr. Fenders was seventeen years old. Rumors begin swirling that Mrs. Cox, the Algebra teacher and the most hated and feared woman in the school, lost her sister, who lives in New York, and then at the door of the assembly, all the students march past her with unorchestrated sympathy and warmth in their eyes. She later takes the stage to allay people's fears. Her sister is fine, she

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says, and she looks strong and brave on stage. She thanks everyone for the kind thoughts, and asks them to “channel their energy to the families of the victims.” The students begin applauding spontaneously, the teachers—surprised—follow, and Mrs. Cox looks like an angel on stage.

Suddenly, Georgina pinches her arm and whispers. “Look!”

Armitage is back on stage with the microphone and begins speaking. Someone is behind her. “Okay Lincoln-Jefferson,” Armitage says. She always addresses the students as though they were the institution. “There is one thing

to speak his language until now, publicly, in front of all of Lincoln-Jefferson. A second spotlight appears and stays for a second on Armitage until it veers off and locates its target of Karam, too. He finishes speaking and no one moves. Armitage, now shrouded in near dark, sounds satisfied as she says “We are lucky to have you, Karam,” while he stands still, blinking into the lights. He is unable to move. Mr. Hopkins comes out on stage and holds Karam by his stiff arms and shuffles him off stage. No one claps.

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**“IF YOU ASK HIM OUT, HE’LL LIKE KIDNAP YOU AND TAKE YOU TO HIS HAREM, AND FORCE YOU TO BELLY DANCE FOR HIM.”**

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Tina and Georgina are in the same homeroom, and so they sit together at the assembly. They say nothing to each other while waiting for Armitage, the principal, to take the stage. Billy Taath is sitting beside their homeroom teacher, Mr. Leroy, and keeps asking him why. “Why, Mr. Leroy? What did we ever do?” Mr. Leroy just keeps repeating, “I don’t know, Billy.” And Billy’s refrain changes to a muttering bark of “we gotta bomb something, we gotta bomb something,” until Doris Ketchum, the loud smart girl, tells him to “just shut UP!” Mr. Leroy says nothing to either of them.

All the people in the auditorium stand when Armitage appears, and everyone sings the national anthem and “God Bless America.” For the first time Tina has ever encountered, the singing is emotional, and everybody is respectful. But Tina is crisscrossed in emotions. She feels sad and sorry and wounded and American, but at the same time, she also feels guilty because she is mostly thinking about her coffee date and wondering if Karam will show up. She wants to see him and maybe even hold him close. She doesn’t know what to think about anything now and really wants to hear his thoughts. He has seen so much more than she has, and he has that steady tone in his voice that she thinks will put her at ease and iron out the wrinkles of confusion she feels in her insides.

The next half hour is taken up with Mr. Hopkins, the English teacher, reading selections from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Grace Paley, and Ms. Granta, the bizarre art teacher with the spiky hair, follows with something or other about Buddhism that no one understands. The students start getting restless, and Tina hears mundane conversations begin to buzz around her. The sound is oddly soothing.

we must remember. And that is that whoever is responsible for this, we must not blame anyone but them. We still don’t know everything that happened, but what we do know is that Islam is not our enemy. The Arabs are not our enemy. And Lincoln-Jefferson is very lucky to be hosting a student this year who can tell us all about this, Karam Abbasi.”

Tina’s lungs lurch. *What is he doing on stage?* Armitage brings Karam forward, as he takes small, shuffling steps to stand beside her. Although he is about the same height as Armitage, he looks tiny on stage. His head is drooping and his hands fall directly to his sides. Armitage asks him to say a few words and holds the microphone in front of his face. The spotlight jerks around the stage until it narrows in on Karam. He squints into the light. The audience is absolutely still.

“I, I. I don’t know. It is a terrible crime. I am sorry.” His accent is so much thicker now that Tina can barely understand him. His voice quakes while his body remains absolutely still. Tina can’t watch him and stares at her lap, his nervousness enveloping her. She begins picking hard at her cuticles. She hears people around her begin whispering, “who the fuck is that?” and “what’s he saying?”

Armitage withdraws the microphone from his face and asks him if Islam supports terrorism.

“No, of course not!” he says thickly.

She says “that’s right,” as if he has passed an examination, and asks him to recite something from “the Koran, the Islamic Bible.”

Karam pauses, then opens his mouth and out pour sounds that Tina has never heard before. His stammering is gone and an alien language flows. Its sounds are different and strange, in part rhythmic and interesting, at other times like a radio being tuned. She hadn’t heard him

After the assembly, Tina is sitting in the hall with Amanda and Georgina. Cass didn’t come to school today. They had been speaking for a while about what they saw on television until no one wanted to talk about it any longer. Now they don’t mind sitting in silence. They don’t want to be alone.

Tina wants to talk to Karam about everything. She wants to tell him she was so nervous for him. She wants to hear his voice and praise him for enduring the world of Sally Armitage. She is sitting in the hall mostly to wait for him.

He doesn’t appear, and Tina knows it is understandable but misses him anyway.

The next day, she hopes again to find him, but Karam is nowhere to be seen. Tonight is a work night, and she believes in that feeling in her gut that he will just show up at her register again, with a smile and a word that will make time start again because it feels like time has stopped.

But at the *All-Night All-Right*, things are not quite normal. Kevin changed the music system so that now all it does is play instrumental versions of “God Bless America” and “Born in the USA.” Since Tuesday, customers have cleaned the store out of bottled water, batteries, toilet tissue, and potatoes. A couple of aisles are skeletal from the shopping spree. Tina keeps her eyes on those aisles because she can see more customers that way, but she doesn’t see Karam. She begins to worry again. Where is he? Did I do something wrong? Is he sick? Does he hate me? *Where is he?*

Her mother is late tonight. Tina sees a man sitting in his car in the parking lot while she waits outside for her mother. He opens his car door, crawls out and stands straight, looking at her. She stares back at him in the darkness, placing her keys between her fingers and mumbling for her mother to appear. And she



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does. Tina climbs quickly in her mother's car, and turns around to look at the man. She can't find him. He's disappeared, but she notices, for the first time that night, that the sign has been fixed. *All-Night All-Right Supermarket*.

For all of the next week, Tina scans the halls constantly for Karam, and having done it so often, it has almost become a reflex. On Friday morning, Mr. Leroy tells her and Georgina that they will have to stay for a short meeting after school.

"A meeting?" Georgina says.

"Yes," he says. "We've asked your parents there too. Ms. Armitage called them herself." His face breaks out into a smile. "Don't worry," he says. "No one's in any trouble. It's just a little meeting."

"There's nothing good about a meeting," says Cass, during lunch break. She wasn't asked to attend, but Amanda was. The girls spend the rest of the day in their classes wondering about what's going on. Tina eats only a bag of onion and garlic chips for lunch.

After school, the three girls walk together to Mr. Leroy's classroom. A well-dressed man and woman, people Tina has never seen before, are there, standing behind Armitage. Mrs. Granta is talking to Mr. Leroy and about six other students with their parents are present as well. The parents look uncomfortable and out of place sitting in the desks. Everyone is staring at everyone else blankly.

Tina spots her parents who wave at her to sit with them like she's blind and stupid. She wants to roll her eyes, but she keeps her face frozen.

"How was your day, sweetheart?" her father asks, too loudly, in front of everybody. His voice sounds false, in that obviously fatherly tone. She wishes she knew what was going on, but she wishes more that it would just end. She sits beside her mother, behind Georgina and her parents. Finally, Armitage speaks.

"This really won't take long. We've asked you all here just so we can ask a few simple questions. First, thank you very much for coming." Armitage is always more polite when adults are present.

"We just wanted to ask you, with your parents present, what you know about Karam Abbasi, our visiting student."

Tina looks up. *What are they asking about him for?*

"Do any of you know him?" Armitage asks.

No one says anything for a very long time.

"Tina. You know him, right?" Armitage says politely. Her voice is kind but it's also firm, like the bounce on a new mattress.

"Why?" she says.

"Do you know him, Tina?"

"Yeah," she says. She thinks her voice sounds small.

"And you, Georgina?"

Georgina nods.

"When did you first meet him?" The woman in the back is writing in a small notebook.

Tina and Georgina exchange glances. "I don't know," says Tina.

"Can you remember, Tina? Every bit of information helps."

"I don't know. Not long."

Armitage pauses. "Did he mention any friends or anyone to you, Tina?" She begins to hate the way she uses her name in every question she asks. Why is she only asking me? She thinks. Why is everybody here?

"No," she says quietly.

There is another gap before Armitage asks another question to everyone. "Is there anything about what he said to any of you that you may want to tell us?" Then she again turns to Tina. "Tina?" she says.

"No," Tina says immediately. Then she thinks. "Do you know where he is?"

Her question is ignored and some of the parents begin to ask questions back to Armitage. Tina doesn't hear what anyone else is saying anymore, as if water were stuck in her ears. The water has moved to her lungs. She feels like she's drowning. Suddenly, everyone stands up and the meeting has ended.

"If you think of anything, please just call me and let me know," Armitage says as everyone begins shuffling in the room. Armitage heads to the door of the classroom and shakes hands with the parents as they leave. Tina stands up to leave. She wants to go home and get in her bed and disappear.

As she reaches the door, Armitage asks her to stay for a moment, by herself. She says the last part looking at Tina's mother and father, who nod in unison, as if this had been planned, and suddenly the classroom is empty except for the two of them.

"Tina," says Armitage. "Come sit down. I want to ask you one more question." Tina

slowly sits across from her, avoiding her eyes. "How are you doing?" Armitage asks. Her voice drips sweetness. She's never heard Armitage sound like this.

"Fine."

"Now, you would want to help your country if you could, right Tina?" The way her name is constantly repeated reminds her why she can't trust adults. She nods slowly.

"So, can I ask you that question, Tina?"

She says nothing.

"Did Karam ever touch you, sweetie?"

"What?!"

"Did he touch you?"

"No," Tina hisses.

"You would tell me if he did, right darling?"

She stares down at Armitage's plain blue flats and nude pantyhose. She whispers roughly between her teeth, "He didn't touch me," and wishes she could add, "bitch." She feels sick. She wants to cry.

Armitage just looks at Tina for what seems like a very long time and then stands up and leans over her. "Okay, honey. You know, you can come and talk to me whenever you want, about anything." Tina stands to leave. Before she walks off, Armitage says to her, "You know Tina, has anyone told you that you are such a pretty girl? All the boys must fight over you." Tina thinks, *I hate this woman. Leave me alone.*

The next day, Tina's mother drops her off to begin her afternoon shift at the *All-Night All-Right*. She walks in to the supermarket and feels the shock of artificial air and supermarket smells. She goes to the meat department and walks through the plastic sheets to punch in. All the butchers are outside smoking. The brick is in the door. The air in the butchery feels colder than usual, and Tina feels the skin crinkle on her body. Two large cuts of beef are hanging from hooks and a third is on its side, stuck in the stationary meat saw. The cold temperature keeps the meat from bleeding, they once told her, and it's a lot easier to cut frozen. She finds her employee card in the vertical stack and pulls it out. She looks at the time clock, ticking regularly in front of her. She pushes the card in and feels the clock's insides grab, stamp, and release it. She feels something crack in her insides, and she starts to cry. This is when she realizes that she will never see Karam again, and that it has nothing to do with her. She wishes it did. ❧