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**The Saving Grace of a Favorite Cousin**

*Published in Beyond Memory: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Nonfiction. Edited by Kaldas and Mattawa.*

2020  
4 May 2018

My most favorite of favorite cousins—  
sending love as I write—

I can't believe Jameelah did that. It seems so intentional and clearly thought out . . . and I always think of her as so sweet. You did express your belief that there were other personality traits lurking beneath the surface. She had access to dozens of things and yet she deliberately chose to shred that sweet little hummingbird's nest Duncan gave you on your six-month anniversary! So sweet of him. So nasty of her. Ouch ouch ouch. Of course you were upset. Did she seem to grasp what you were saying when you threatened to take her back from whence she came? And what was Oscar Wilde doing when all this was happening? Looking wide-eyed and somewhat alarmed, I suppose. You do have your hands full with them.

Speaking of him, I couldn't sleep two nights ago, and got myself on YouTube, looking for a suitable old movie to put myself to sleep with. *The Trial of Oscar Wilde* popped into my head, for some unknown reason. So I watched the first hour and fifteen minutes. It's amazing what can happen when your adored cousin has done a standup comedy schtick on that terrible line about street Arabs. "What did you expect? Did you think I was some kind of common street Arab to be bought with cheap trinkets and an occasional supper in some Soho restaurant?" (youtube.com, *The Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 21:18). It didn't bother me at all! I laughed hysterically, remembering you standing on the wobbly chair in your kitchen, copying the line in your terrible British accent, and then giving your best

Jack Shaheen *Reel Bad Arabs* explanation. (Bless him; what a gift for our community.) This is the way to deal with racist stereotypes!

Seriously, though, I hope that Jameelah's momentary lapse of good judgement isn't going to stop you from moving ahead with the Bast tattoo. I so love the idea of two queer Arabs cousins with Bast tattoos, visually stating our commitment to carrying on the fine upstanding Arab tradition of cat worship. I think the left shoulder is a perfect spot. It won't hurt as much as the back of the neck.

First the irritating story of the week, so I can get it out of the way. You know how relieved I am not to be at the same school as you-know-who. Relief isn't quite the right word—not strong enough. No more painful encounters in the hall, no more marching into those monthly meetings like a soldier going off to battle—from which he knows he might not return. Well, this week, she ended up at my school, for some meeting with some set of unfortunates. And of course I had to run into her, on the fifth floor of Social Science. I lied through my teeth, responding with the same “Yes, it's good to see you too.” Should I have been honest? Are social pleasantries a tradition worth holding onto? Are they the glue that holds our barely civil society somewhat together?? You tell me, you've got a better handle on those things. As she and the unfortunate colleague who was accompanying her made off down the hall, I distinctly heard her say: “Oh yes, that's Women's Studies! A white man teaching!”

This has gone on for years. And yes, I corrected her, sometimes in the group setting, sometimes one-on-one. Do you know how I fought to stay calm during these encounters? And of course I had to speak calmly and respectfully—no more righteous anger from the Arabs or queers or women in these enlightened times. Ha ha. Yes, of course you remember. You've heard about all 437 of them! And right now you're wondering if I managed to hold on to my sense of self through this latest attack on my racial identity. No I did not. I came home with that shrinking feeling, like our dear Lily in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. My version would be *The Incredible Shrinking Arab Canadian Transgender Man*, and of course I wouldn't be as funny as she is. Not that there's much to laugh at, as far as I can tell. It's my perennial struggle, here in Calgary. In a city with all these Arabs, all of us ostensibly falling into the category of visible minority. But when you're light-skinned, and the name is Joe and not Mohammed, and the accent is absent because English is your first language, good luck. The system grinds on diligently and efficiently, in a no-nonsense manner.

Racism has a million ways of creating hyper-visibility and invisibility on the same day, at the same time, with the same people.

Remember the gray Formica table, the chairs we squirmed into with our short legs, two chubby Lebanese kids with mouths watering? Gram maneuvering the wooden paddle to take the Syrian bread out of the oven. Working to avert another scar on her forearm that sometimes came from touching the hot wire rack. How on earth did she come to think rubbing butter is the way you take care of a burn? Don't we have better folk medicine traditions? Must have been something else we lost on the way over.

For you Syrian bread at the top of the list, for me grape leaves. We both pretend-smoked them, then got into the serious business of fingering them with utmost tangible pleasure, playing with the bits that fell out onto the plate, letting the lemon taste melt. BTW, have you noticed how many non-Arabs think there's too much lemon in our dishes?! Ha—how is that possible? The look of utmost satisfaction and just-rightness that lit up Aunt Rose's face as she sucked the juice of a half-lemon, then immediately picked up the second and finished the job. It took me a while to work up to it but I can do it now. There might be a bit of puckering but it's minimal.

No concern then about Racial Identity—capital R, capital I. None. Just two earnest children responding appropriately when a loving grandmother filled up our plates. In that tiny bungalow with two tiny bedrooms, Gram and Aunt Rose each with their single bed. The striking cleanliness of the house, the simplicity, the few possessions. Same as all of ours, basically. How small everything was, how little we had. Navigating the vagaries of working-class existence in southern Ontario within the global capitalist system, circa 1960s. How many people alive today use a word like vagary? I wish we hadn't lost so many words. I wish our language wasn't weakening. Please—don't let me start in about my students' writing skills. Or lack thereof.

I know what you did the minute you picked up this letter from the mailbox. Got yourself inside, prepared the tea, and lit up. Sprawled out on the couch with this letter. At least we're doing our best to keep that particular Arab tradition alive. We haven't gone over to the other side—with organic wine or beer from a local micro-brewery. Cannabis it is, and while Trudeau and his team have dropped the ball on way too many important promises, at least we're moving toward legalization of our favorite herb! We have to figure out a way to get ourselves together

to celebrate, on the day it's finally legal. Why are you on the other end of the country? Why are you on the East Coast? I know, I know. The real question is how did I end up in Calgary? Exactly. It's a question I ask myself on a regular basis. Where was I—oh, racial identity. Who cares about it, who thinks about it, when you've got enough people around who see you? Even one. If you and I lived in the same city, and regularly hung out and ate and smoked and drank tea with great abandon, I would not feel this way. Invisible, that is. I would not feel that I had to prove anything. I would feel part of something, and it would be a physical thing, an embodied thing, that was just there, that I didn't have to talk about or name or explain or create a fucking theory about. Now I sound like some kind of biological determinist (is there such a word?) but you know what I mean—and you know I know it's not biological. But there's something embodied about it because I've felt it, when I've had it. And it hasn't been an intellectual thing. They're simple elemental activities that the body responds to. And when they're gone the external world's approval takes on such meaning. I wouldn't care about you-know-who if I was coming home to you and we could laugh about it and make fun of white people and remind each other that dear old Marilyn Frye did us a favor when she came up with the birdcage metaphor. Here in Calgary circa 2018 there are too many wires for me to fly around. There's the white world and its desire, maybe even its need, to know who's who as soon as they look at us. If it's not visible, it's not real. If your racial identity is not visible, it's not real. And of course then we've got the wires that come from our own community, from inside as it were.

I did take your advice. I showed up at a workshop planned by three local groups, where we learned about media representation of Arabs from an earnest—and yes, dark-skinned—thirty-year-old who no one had a problem identifying, and a white man with the same research topic. Which is great. What white person would have taken that on twenty years ago?! Guess what happened? From out in the hallway I saw the usual greetings amongst the folks who know each other, the simplicity and straightforwardness of the Arab-to-Arab greeting. With me, it was the highly excited, overly polite, and far too enthusiastic welcome of the Arab greeting a white person who has done them the great honor of coming to their event. I sank into a depression, which got worse when I saw the Styrofoam plates they were serving snacks on. Styrofoam! Yes, the stuff that takes half a million years to break down, the cocktail of toxins that should have been outlawed decades ago. Somehow these insults to

the earth hit me harder than they used to, as climate chaos becomes more real with each passing day. Did you see the flooding in New Brunswick? Could just one weather reporter include just one sentence at the end their report on the latest flooding/hurricane/tornado/earthquake: "This appears to be part of the pattern of the intensification of extreme weather events that climate scientists have been warning about for thirty years." But who's counting? And I know, I know. You're right. It's time for me to light up. Consider it done. And thank Allah and the Creator and the Great Spirit and the Buddha for medical cannabis, that's all I can say.

Did you know E. M. Forster dedicated his book *Maurice* "to a happier year"? I like it—think I'll adopt it for my new slogan. Just tell me there is a happier year coming. Invisibility is a hard thing to reckon with, especially when you're doing your best to be visible. Can racial identity be taken away, can it be lost? Does it mean I'm letting others define me? Who has the power here? I don't know, I sure don't feel like I have it. Is one steady local connection with someone who knows who you are enough to sustain identity?

Whose perceptions about race matter? Who gets to decide who's who? Think about the range of understanding of racial identity within our own community. I've lived in places where I was part of the community—it was a group that understood our skin tones vary, our name patterns vary, and yet that didn't make anyone less than. It meant we operated from an inclusive definition of racial identity, an inclusive definition with the understanding that there is a diverse spectrum of Arabs.

So it happened again today. I was walking home, along 26th Ave., and a car drove by with a Manitoba license plate. You know what happened . . . that tiny bit of unusual green coloring on the plate that happens to be the exact same unusual green paint that Aunt C had in her kitchen, on the south wall. I know we have the same reactions when we see the license plate. Our three-hundred odd connections that no one else in the world shares. That green color, Gram's kitchen, the Capitol yellow-and-orange 45 label for the Beatles *P.S. I Love You*, the thick lilac bush in Uncle M's backyard we smoked our joints under. Don't ever ever ever go away. I've lost every other family member. You have to stay. Make that HAVE TO STAY.

I'm really OK with you still having the same positive thrill when you see the green; I want you to have that. I want you to have a positive connection with her. Even though mine's gone. When I see the license plate I have this dismally flat smack to my heart. She really has rejected

me, and that relationship is gone. Even after everything that has happened in this family of ours—things that go beyond even the typical Arab fucked-up family dynamics—I can barely grasp this loss. There were three people I thought would stick with me through this life. Three. Out of that massive extended family. Whatever it was—a hundred of us? At least. Down to three. Aunt C, sibling, cousin. Three that I seriously believed, utterly knew, was so reassured by, the presence of the three of you and the earnest belief the three of you would stay. And in 2018, you're the only one still standing.

News flash: I confess, I do like to believe that I don't fall prey to the same mistakes other people make. Laugh as hard as you want. You know this about me. Fine. Laugh away. Lots of people are rejected by family members when they transition. These family members may have stood by them during things like same-sex relationships, disclosures about family violence. Like, for example, Aunt C. She stuck with me through thick and thin. I knew on an abstract level that none of that guaranteed support through a gender transition. I thought I knew it on a deeper level. But I didn't. I'm still in shock that she dumped me. And there's no doubt anymore, ten years into her rejection; now I understand that's connected to being on such shaky ground, racially speaking. Part of this gradual withering away of my racial identity is a direct result of that loss. Sitting in that gray kitchen with the unusual green paint on the south wall affirmed me in ways that go beyond speech.

And not to worry. I have totally let go of what happened last year when you were visiting Aunt C, and could not ignore the large elephant in the room, that is, me. You weren't doing that typical dysfunctional Arab family dynamic thing where people talk about other people without consent and cross all kinds of boundaries. Which is not your style—thank the Creator! The moment was there, you had to say something. Only to have her shut it down. "I have nothing to say about HER," she said icily and emphatically. The same tones she used during our last phone call.

Enough of that. How is the novel coming? We need the great Canadian love story between an Arab man and an Indigenous man. And you're the one to write it . . . . . the two of you were so adorable together. Arguing over the merits of bannock versus Syrian bread. Why on earth did he decide grad school in New York was his heart's calling? And who says long-distance relationships can't work? Bad decision, Duncan, that's all I can say. I know, I know, it's all water under the bridge and you're happy he's doing environmental law for his people up north and you

haven't thought about him *in that way* for years. (Liar.) That's alright, I find myself in the same position. It's the age thing. Who thought we'd end up here, single and not a prospect in sight. Even after suffering through the indignities of online dating. At least you have it somewhat easier as a gay man. Try being a trans man looking for a relationship with a woman. Good fucking luck, is all I can say.

Special request, special request. Please call at least once this coming week and fill up my voice mail with your best imitation of your mother's voice when you came out to her. The way you nail that note of shrillness coupled with fear when she said *There are no gay Lebanese!* I need a good laugh. Or two. Or three. How many gay men's coming out stories have to do with an extraordinary effort not to laugh at their dense parents swearing up and down that people like us only exist in other racial communities? Honestly. Not to mention that family members who could have been named at that moment . . . I mean, thinking about Cousin Johnny. Straight? I don't think so. . . . And we could name a few others here.

I do feel better, after writing this monologue or epistle or long-winded letter to you. I assume we are the only two queer Arab cousins in existence who write long letters to each other—in handwriting—with purple fountain pens. No texting for us!

Sending love, and more love, habibi. Pet Jameelah and Oscar for me, and give them catnip. Tell Jameelah you forgive her for destroying the hummingbird nest. I myself will wait for the special Halifax organic catnip that you are packing for Bronwyn.

Your most favorite of favorite cousins of all time, and of all lifetimes (if you were to believe in reincarnation which I know you do not, although I myself remain on the fence, given the fact that the Buddhists have an awful lot of things figured out correctly), I remain,

Joe