

*Habibi*

I was nineteen - finally - that summer, home from freshman year of college. I puffed on my cigarette in the back parking lot of the restaurant, taking time, examining messages on my cell phone. Mariah wanted to go to Boca Bar tonight but Becca was trying to get to some house party. As if we needed another stale Hills basement party. I applied some lipstick. It was my first, a Duane Reade purchase from weeks ago. Minutes passed, and the back door creaked open. A rush of light and Arab music and Sanz appeared, squat and heavy, apron greasy, heaving a garbage bag over his shoulder.

“We have more customer,” he said finally, wheezing.

“Coming.” I tossed the cigarette, went inside.

I didn’t mean to do it, but I gave the couple at table four the regular pita instead of the gluten-free bread they requested, and I knew the sweat that prickled across my forehead was not due to the East Coast humidity, or the seven o’clock rush that Friday night. At my station, avoiding them, I rearranged the plastic containers of pickles, submerged cucumbers floating in spicy brine, and let the murmur of middle-aged conversation and the clink of wine glasses lull me to a trance. Maybe I did spend too much time sitting in the sun that morning and my brain had turned to mush, like my mother warned me. Either way, it was a stupid mistake. I knew they were regulars.

They were clean looking people. She in pearls, he boat shoes. Unequivocally Watchung Hills. Pissed off, he lifted a circle of pita with the tips of his fingers, as one would lift a spider. “I would have been in bed for days if I’d eaten this.”

“I’m so sorry sir. It was a mistake.”

“I come here all the time, Farid knows what I eat. Are you new?”

“It’s my second week.”

“Oh, would you cut it out, Robert? Excuse him, he’s sensitive about his allergies.”

“It’s not an allergy. It’s a chronic immune condition.”

“I’m sorry. Let me know if there’s anything else I can get you.” Serving was a game I still enjoyed. Like acting. You made yourself an experience, a show.

I refilled their water glasses and quickly left their table.

“You sweat, yes? Busy night, busy night,” my boss Farid said through the narrow window that led to the kitchen. He slid a bowl of tabbouleh towards me and peered out at the front dining room. He observed the crowd and grinned.

“It is Friday night.”

“You need help. I call my son to come serve.”

I rolled my eyes as I walked away. Farid was too cheap to hire another waiter, which meant I was in charge of all twelve tables, five nights a week. *Now* he decides to bring in another pair of hands. I could leave tonight with a clean hundred if I worked alone.

His son arrived twenty minutes past seven. He worked as a personal trainer at the 24-hour gym in Peekesridge. We talked behind the pickle station. My eyes fell often to his biceps. He was olive skinned and muscular in his tight black t-shirt. Most boys at college were pale, the color of peanut butter sandwiches. He wore a silver chain around his neck. Entrancing. I wondered if he slept with it on, or put it on every morning.

“It’s an alright job, only the hours suck. But I get used to working at three a.m. and sleeping all day.”

“Where do you go out around here?” I was interested in wherever Watchung

Slope kids went to drink, get high, free themselves from whatever regularity was like for them.

He shrugged. “Different clubs and places.”

I nodded like this were very helpful. “My friends and I were at Pepito’s the other night.”

“You Hills girls love to party,” he grinned much the way his father had at the packed dining room. His chain glimmered in the low light. He tapped on his phone, then looked at me. “I go there sometimes with my boys, maybe we’ll see you there some time.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’m going to grab dinner for my dad. You want anything?” He typed the code for the register and pulled out two bills.

“No thanks.”

“Don’t tell him, I’m going to surprise him. I’ll replace it at the end of the night. Not that he’ll check.” He laughed.

I finished the last four tables on my own. I’d worked at Habibi, a tiny Lebanese restaurant in my hometown of Watchung Hills, for about six weeks now, and this was one of the busiest Friday nights we’d had all summer. Usually I was bored out of my mind, waiting for customers to wander down our side street and stumble inside. Most days I slept until noon and watched reality TV until it was time to go to work. The food was spicy and exotic, and Farid always gave me cash at the end of the night, even when we didn’t get a single customer. I didn’t know why he did this. He probably hoped a young white girl would bring in a few diners. I didn’t mind it too much. I was saving to

buy a car that summer. I wanted to drive cross-country. Maybe to California.

The next day, Saturday, was one of those days. It was hazy and hot. Around twelve-thirty, the overhead doorbell chimed and I looked up from my book. An attractive Middle Eastern couple stood surveying the emptiness of the restaurant, their arms weighed down with shopping bags. “Two for lunch?” I approached them with menus. I sat them by the window.

“Is your *fattoush* salad prepared in the traditional manner?” The man looked up at me, wanting answers. “With the *sumac* and the fresh mint?”

“Um, I’m not sure – would you like me to ask the owner?” They stared at me. I fetched Farid from the basement, where he was reading over papers from the bank. He looked strange to me in reading glasses. I stood, feeling useless at my station while Farid and the couple jabbered in fast Arabic. He walked back into the kitchen holding their menus.

“I take care of them. You read.” He smiled and patted me on the shoulder, began preparing them a basket of pita. Farid was always happy when he could talk to customers in his native tongue. I would be too. What was it like to always speak a strange language outside my home?

Farid disappeared to the kitchen to cook. He was a skinny man, balding, but I could never quite pin an age on him. I think it was because of all the juvenile television he watched. He was my boss – the owner, manager, chef and occasional busboy of Habibi – but while we languished around, waiting for customers in the afternoon, Farid kept an attentive eye on the large flat-screen he had installed against the left wall of the dining room. Farid loved *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. He laughed hysterically

when children flipped off trampolines and fell into the mud. He cracked up when dogs smashed their faces on transparent glass doors. We watched the Discovery Channel, action movies, and *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern*. I can never watch any of those without thinking of him now.

On one rainy Wednesday afternoon when the restaurant was particularly deserted, we watched Andrew Zimmern in Vietnam, where he sampled street food with members of a Korean rock group. Cameras followed him on a day trip to the outskirts of Hanoi, to an open air restaurant in a remote jungle village. Snappy editing and Zimmern's jolly bald head couldn't mask the bleakness of the impoverished town, the packed mud streets. Later, we watched as Andrew picked into monkey brains with chopsticks.

"He so stupid! How does he do this?" Farid stuck his tongue out of his mouth. "He comes here, then I make him good food. There is so much good food around the world, why does this man eat monkey brains?"

Farid's father, he told me several times, had run the largest restaurant in Tripoli until bankruptcy had forced him to shut down. They had served three hundred people each night. At Habibi it was just us, plus Sanz, an illegal Guatemalan who cooked and swept the floors during dinner shifts. I never spoke to Sanz much, mostly because his English wasn't very good. I couldn't think of much to say anyway. I wondered if they considered how bizarre it was, the three of us there, running this restaurant together like some kind of weird United Nations subcommittee.

When I wasn't at Habibi I was laying out by Mariah's pool with my friends. We saw each other so much that summer it started to feel like a project, something we had to see through to completion together. Not that we ever got sick of each other. There were

endless Cosmo's to flip through, infinite slivers of skin on tucked-away parts of our bodies that needed to be browned. When Mariah's mom was out, we smoked cigarettes while we dangled our feet in the hot tub. I wasn't sure that we all liked smoking.

Allison wasn't drinking that summer because of pre-season soccer training, so on the weekends she was our designated driver for our nights out to Pepito's. The club was downtown in Watchung Slope, known locally as the Slope, strictly forbidden by most conservative parents. The city had been a boisterous industrial zone in the twenties, but fell into decay after the Depression and remained Depressed while affluent suburbs like Watchung Hills blossomed around them. Now it was the best place in western Suffolk County to buy drugs and authentic Central American food. For college students home that summer, Pepito's, Boca Bar and Infinity Lounge were the only bars that didn't card us, and it was refreshing not to run into any of the polo-wearing kids who graduated with us.

We moved to the dance floor with our rum and Cokes, keeping to the tight circle we formed. We reveled in the Latin music, so different from the house music of our native frat parties. It swirled above us in gyrating rhythms. It spoke of romance and heat. We swayed and dipped our hips to the reggaeton beat. None of us could understand the lyrics. We giggled and smiled at the men who stared at us so openly from the bar. We were free at Pepito's like we had not been, somehow, our entire first year at college. I loved the place. Black, Persian, Dominican, old and young, moving together. It was America in a way that Watchung Hills never could be.

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We had a regular at Habibi. He came weeknights, always alone, always ordered a kebab with rice and Pepsi. He was in his forties, said he was a professor at a local community college. While Farid cooked, he tried to engage me in conversation. I was polite as I had to be, but I could feel his eyes on me while I folded napkins at the server's station. Several times I looked up and caught him watching.

"Quiet day, eh?" I nodded, refilled his soda. "Listen, would you like to be my friend? We can get coffee some time. Give me your phone number and I'll call you."

"Uh, I don't know. If that's a good idea..." I retreated to the kitchen and told Farid, who brought out the check while I stayed in the kitchen.

"You are alright?" Farid asked once he'd gone. "I tell him not to come back." I nodded. He patted me on the shoulder, then retreated to his basement office.

One hazy Sunday afternoon, we watched a movie on the flat screen about cartel violence and drug wars in L.A. "I don't understand these people. Stealing and shooting each other dead, why don't they go get an education? I come to this country to work hard, earn money for my family. Send my son to good university. These people, they waste away their good fortune. God has been good to us." He slammed his fist on the table. I jumped back. I sometimes thought Farid was crazy. The way he said *these people*. I'd heard the same tone in great-uncle Lou's *wops* and *hassids* at Easter dinner.

Farid wanted every opportunity for his children. But coming to America had drained his savings and left him in debt to family in Queens. He eventually found work and his own place in Oyster Bay, met Fatma and settled down in Watchung Slope with their young family. They worked and saved until he opened the restaurant in Watchung

Hills two years previously.

The purchase left their family stuck in the Slope. Farid's children attended local public schools, where the graduation rate was 70% and some spoke Spanish in class. Language barriers aside, street culture prevailed at WSHS. Farid's son fell in with a bad crowd, he told me. They shoplifted, vandalized cars in the school parking lot. He was turning it around now. He was getting his GED. But Farid's other children were struggling.

“How does a fourteen year old fail math? Tell me this, I cannot understand.”

“Maybe his school offers tutoring. You should call them and see.” I felt stupid offering parenting advice to my boss.

“I do this. He takes summer school. If his grade is again low, grounded for the year. No cell phone, no computer games. Too many distractions.”

Farid frequently had family members come in to help out around the restaurant. I met his wife when I arrived for my dinner shift late one night and found an elegant woman in a headscarf hovering over the grill. I couldn't understand how she skewered shish tawooks so expertly with those long, curved lacquered nails.

I had a lot of downtime at Habibi. We'd been open for two hours already that Saturday, and no one had come in after the Middle Eastern couple. I escaped the blasting air conditioning and took a seat at one of the small café tables outside. The plastic table cloth rattled in the light breeze, sticking uncomfortably to the damp of my legs. I didn't know why Farid let me wear whatever I wanted to work, besides the occasional comment that my skirt was too short. I drank iced tea from a straw and stared at the shoppers walking by. After a while, Farid came outside with a plate of baklava and a story to tell.

“In my village in Lebanon, the summers – sometimes they are twenty, they are thirty degrees hotter than this –” he gestured into the air, his fingers spread. “I, and the boys from the neighborhood, we bring wrenches and crowbars out to the old – how do you say – the fire hydrant in the corner of the city, sitting by the edge of the desert. We used to hammer away at the lining until the metal cap broke off and glorious cold water came spouting through pipe. We chased each other, threw globs of mud at the other boy’s leg and chest. Maybe an hour later – you know, the firemen, they are so slow in Lebanon – an hour later, the fire truck comes by to fix the mess and we boys run off. We never get caught.”

Farid smiled and stared vacantly into the memory. He often switched from past to present tense in his rough English.

He eventually retreated back into the restaurant. He returned with a standing chalkboard. Across it he’d scribbled *\$4.50 SANDWICH JUICE LUNCH SPECIAL*. I wondered sometimes if the restaurant would stay open past the summer. A swanky Turkish grill opened recently on Watchung Boulevard. They advertised belly dancers and hookah pipes for local suburban clientele on a wild night out. I stacked piles of pita bread, refilled the plastic containers of pickled cucumbers and radishes, and listened to the Lebanese music Farid played on repeat throughout the night. The twang of near Eastern guitars would stick to me like summer dust even after I went back to school in August. In my memories, they did not sound so sinister.

I thought about all the miles Farid and his wife had travelled to reach this suburban Mecca. When they arrived, they joined the queue of Wall Street brokers, lacrosse moms and malcontent teenagers circling each other in slow spirals. We had no

*Kaaba*, though – no holy monument commanding our worship, or demanding our spiritual cleanliness. We had lots of restaurants and banks and cupcake shops. And we were only sixteen stops on the railroad from Grand Central Station.

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I got off from work at 10:30 that Saturday night and walked over to Allison's house. The breeze that passed through Watchung Hills that afternoon was long dead. The thick heat of the air slowed my walk. Allison's street was dark. Silence lay over the brick and Colonial-style homes. Everyone inside must have been sleeping, watching Law & Order, or out partying.

Her parents were at their beach house in Montauk for the weekend, so we drank flutes of tequila while we dressed, danced, yelled, smoked cigarettes, piled into the car. That summer was like one of those old stop-motion movies. My sense of time was all jumbled up from drinking and smoking and sleeping ten hours a day. Waiting for customers outside Habibi...laying out by the pool while mosquitoes nipped at my ankles...I was suspended, like a hammock that swayed gently from one day to another. How important could any moment be, when it would be gone in seconds, on to the next?

Pepito's was the same as always. Gangs of women with long, crimped black hair and jeweled purses hovered around the front door, drinking out of paper bags. Music poured through the open windows. Cars drove by slowly, pausing to honk, and men leaned out the windows to holler at the women in Spanish, or English we couldn't understand. Men were everywhere. They laughed loudly at each other's jokes and slapped their faces with the brims of their Yankees caps.

My friend Jess wandered off soon to dance with a tall black man in a do-rag. I

danced with Mariah until my legs hurt. I broke off from my group, pulled a cigarette from my bag and sashayed my way to the back terrace. It was usually packed with clubbers coming up for air or looking for a private place to hook up, but I was the only one outside right then. The parking lot below was black and empty. I had just pulled out my lighter when I heard voices from below.

I looked down over the railing towards the back door to the club. A couple was arguing against the brick wall, close to the brimming dumpster, illuminated by the back lights. The girl – she looked young – had her back to the wall, and in the shadow I could see only her black hair. I recognized him. He was Farid's son.

“Baby, let's talk about this tomorrow, you know how you get upset when you drink,” she girl was saying. She slid her arms around his middle, pulling him close.

He pushed her away. “I asked you a question.”

She giggled. “I been out. What do you want me to say?”

“This isn't the first time you've made this excuse. I ain't a saint.”

“I don't have it. I'll have it Friday. Cut me some slack.”

Something I couldn't hear, and a thug. She groaned. With dread, I saw her head had hit the brick.

She shoved him, but he had her pinned against the wall, and he grabbed her hands easily.

“Don't tell me what to do, you stupid bitch!” He slapped her in the face. I could feel the air tighten from up on the terrace.

The girl screamed and slumped down to the ground.

“Aahh –” she threw her arms over her head and mumbled something I couldn't

hear. I saw Farid's son's leg swoop back and forward like a pendulum and land square in her stomach. The girl moaned. Her voice was muffled by her arm, thrown over her face to block out the world.

Farid's son shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and hovered there for a second. Then he stormed off, around the corner, and was gone.

I listened to the girl weeping down there, maybe for a minute. My cigarette had burnt up entirely into ash. I tossed it on the ground and opened the terrace door. Below, the girl must have thought someone was coming outside. She sat up, wobbly, keeping her back against the wall, and walked off.

My friends were where I left them. Jess had draped her guy's gigantic Nets jacket over her shoulders. Its sleeves were collecting dirt from the linoleum floor as she bent down low and he grinded against her back, his hands running down her waist, his fingers reaching into the back pockets of her jeans. "What's wrong with you, bitch?" She yelled over the music.

The next day, I stood at the pickle counter out front. They were separated into pickled radishes, spicy pickles, sour and olives. The pickles were constantly getting messed up. It was the most baffling thing about that summer, up until that day. I sifted through the radishes, pulling out salty kalamata orbs. Farid's wife must collect the leftover pickles from tables and throw them back into the containers indiscriminately. It was an awful mess that I felt was my responsibility, since I usually had nothing else to do.

In the kitchen, Farid was cooking. He spoke loudly over the steaming frying pan.

"I let Sanz go. He takes money from the register."

“What?”

“Money is missing. I do the accounts every night, there is no other explanation.”

“I don’t think it was him.” I hesitated. “Listen Farid, I was in the Slope last night. I saw your son.”

Farid smiled and shook his head. “You must be mistaken. He stay home last night, helps his brother with the algebra.”

“It was definitely -”

“No no. It could not be him.” Farid was still smiling. “It is so nice today. You go home. It is slow day, I take care of the customers.”

“But I just got here.”

“You want to work. That is good.” Smiling, “Fatma will cook. You enjoy this weather.” I could not explain about Sanz. Farid would not listen. He took forty dollars out of the register and placed it in my hand, like a father gives his son change for the ice cream truck. It felt like dirty money. What was I being paid for?

I spent the rest of the afternoons at Mariah’s, lying in the sun, trying to absorb it all. How did I get messed up in this, anyway? It was summer and everyone was a kid again.

I went back to work a few days later, Thursday. At my station I stared into the ornamental silver dishes that decorated the counter. I wished a genie would appear out of one and explain it all. Why people do what they do. I could not tell my parents. If they knew the restaurant had anything to do with drugs or theft they would make me quit immediately.

Around three, Farid brought out a step ladder. He hoisted it beside the door,

climbed up and removed the large glass *shisha* pipes that decorated the highest shelf.

“People have been asking for hookah. I will apply for the license today.”

“Good idea. That will bring in some customers.”

Farid sighed. “The wrong customers. Young ones, who want beer and olives and to smoke for three hours during dinner rush. But customers is customers.”

“Young people in this town need somewhere to go out. Some place safe.”

He nodded, not really listening to me. I pulled a chair from table seven over to the opposite corner, hoisted myself onto it, adjusted my dress and pulled glass pipes down from the shelves. I sprayed them down with disinfectant, wiped them dry. I looked into the emerald glass of one tall *shisha* pipe, finding my own distorted reflection. I understood then. There were some dark spots, some ugly places in life that were better left in the dust. Best to move on, work your days, take care of your family. Dream your little American dream.

When we were done, Farid turned on the television, huffing from exertion. Two British men raced go-carts around a track. Every time they slammed into one another, Farid laughed. I picked up my magazine, read, and waited for customers to arrive.

I didn't go back to Pepito's again, but I worked at Habibi for another month. It remained open for five more. When I drove by in my new car over Christmas break, hoping to pick up a falafel to go, I saw the FOR LEASE sign, the empty walls, stripped of the satin tapestries, the bells and elephants that spun at the door's opening in a brief wisp of summer breeze.