

## Smelling Guy

Fourteen billion years after the big bang there was a guy who always smelled the odors of Arabic food when he saw Arab people. This was on Earth. Why this happened nobody knows. When he looked at Eskimos he didn't smell whale blubber, or when he looked at Russians, he didn't smell Russian food—maybe because he didn't know what Russian food smelled like. It wasn't a big thing.

Until one day he started smelling Arabic food before he would see the Arab people, which wouldn't have been a big deal at a later date when people could travel faster than light and go backward and forward in time. But this was 21<sup>st</sup> century Earth in the place they called America and nobody knew how to do any of that advanced scientific stuff. As a matter of fact, some of the people running the place didn't even believe in science and were polluting the hell out of the planet just so they could have more things. It was kind of shortsighted, but that's the way it was.

When the people in power found out about the guy who could smell Arabic food before Arabs arrived, they got very excited because above all they were worried about getting surprised by Arabs. They hired the guy to go with them to political rallies and smell to see if Arabs were coming because they knew that no Arabs ever came to their political rallies and they thought that if one did come he might blow himself up in their face and splatter all over the place or maybe even hurt their bodyguards. It was an easy gig for the smelling guy, at least at first.

But after a while it got really boring because no Arab people ever came to the rallies and the guy really liked the smell of Arabic food. On his off days, he would try to get to Middle Eastern restaurants just to smell the aroma, and he got to be friends with the owner of a great mom and pop joint called The Daydreamer. The owner wrote beautiful poems about his hometown in Syria which he hadn't been back to in eight years. Then one day the smelling guy asked his friend

the Syrian poet if he wouldn't mind coming to one of his boss's political rallies just to see if his powers were working when there was only one Arab. That turned out to be a really bad idea.

The next week on Tuesday, which was a slow day at the Daydreamer, the owner went to a big rally that his smelling guy friend's boss was having about how he was going to make everybody there happy by promising to make other people who weren't there unhappy. This always worked. It was a big crowd and the owner of the Daydreamer had gone through the security check when the smelling guy started getting a strong odor of Arabic food, more precisely of "kishk," a Syrian soup he often had at the Daydreamer. He informed his boss's handlers, and they told the Boss not to go onstage. They made the smelling guy walk with them through the entire crowd until they could find the Arab in question.

People were nervous as the contingent of heavily armed security personnel pushed its way through the crowd, and the owner of the Daydreamer along with everyone else, started to wonder what was going on. As the security guys snaked through the crowd toward him, he realized that they might be coming for him, and he panicked. He tried to run toward the entrance where he'd just come in, but the crowd was tight. If people were looking at him questioningly before because of his dark complexion, now they were looking at him with downright hostility. He pushed through one tight knot and got into a lighter part of the crowd at the back and was able to break into a real sprint, trying like hell to get out of there before the goons could get ahold of him and do who knows what, when all of a sudden, "WHACK," the sound of the blackjack splitting his skull wide open was deafening, to those around him and even to the smelling guy and the security personnel pushing their way toward him. By the time they reached him, the owner of the Daydreamer was laid out on the floor, fading in and out of consciousness. When the smelling guy asked to see him, all he could say was, "Please help Fatima," and "Nice shoes," because the

smelling guy was wearing a brand new pair of penny loafers he'd bought at JC Penney's going out of business sale. Then he died. His name was Omar, by the way, Omar the poet.

Unsure of what had happened, but wanting to avoid a panic in the nervous crowd, the head of security communicated back to the Boss that they had thwarted a possible terrorist attack, whereupon the Boss came out on the stage to a huge round of applause and announced that a vile terrorist had been stopped in his tracks, there in the stadium, that day, and that once he'd gotten control of Congress and the Supreme Court, they were going to keep on doing that for Americans everywhere in this beautiful country of theirs. The crowd roared. Not having had time to call an ambulance, the security personnel borrowed one of the carts that was normally used to carry the injured football players off the field, loaded on the dead body of Omar the poet and paraded it down the track and out of the stadium to thunderous applause from the previously nervous, now pulsatingly excited crowd. That night it was all over the news, the Boss got a five point bump in his approval ratings, and he rewarded the smelling guy with a \$25,000 bonus.

Smelling Guy, whose name now deserves to be capitalized, felt really bad for Omar's wife and two little kids. Fatima's boy, Amin, was just 11 but already helped his father in the restaurant and Soleima was 5, just starting kindergarten. Smelling Guy was a bit afraid to go see Fatima, but he knew he had to, and once she'd yelled at him and called him every dirty name in Arabic about 69 times, she finally accepted his \$25,000 and his offer to do whatever he could to help them, which Fatima said was to come and work in the Daydreamer kitchen, washing the dishes, cleaning the pots and pans, mopping the floor, whatever was the dirtiest and lowliest job she could find in the restaurant. Faithful to her dead husband's wishes, Smelling Guy tirelessly slaved away in the Daydreamer from 6am to 11pm on his days off, as Fatima tried to save the only source of income she and her family had.

She put one of her dead husband's favorite sayings on the menu and in a plaque above the door, "*Come with a hungry stomach, a humble heart, and a human head, and you shall be anointed with hummus and the finest olive oil.*"

Smelling Guy thought maybe something had been lost in the translation, but all the Arabic customers seemed to appreciate the previous owner's words, and in a show of solidarity for the dead poet, they patronized the Daydreamer with their business.

On the days he was working in the restaurant, Smelling Guy's olfactory lobes were overwhelmed with the smell of Arabic food, what with the double whammy of all the Arab people there as well as the actual Arabic food that surrounded him in the kitchen. It's pretty hard to imagine how overpowering that would be. As a matter of fact, I can't really imagine it. But I respect Smelling Guy for hanging in there to try to make up for his mistake in inviting his friend to a political rally. It had not been a great place to invite an Arabic friend.

At work, Smelling Guy was treated as a valuable advisor to the Boss who would give him a big hug and smile whenever he saw him, but the reason for his presence at the rallies was kept confidential from everyone, including the Secret Service. The Boss saw him as a strategic advantage in his relentless PR campaign. Smelling Guy, on the other hand, was a bit concerned that his nose was becoming desensitized from all the time he was spending at the Daydreamer, but he didn't want to ask another Arabic friend to come to a rally to check out his Arab-sensing olfactory powers after what had happened to Omar the poet.

With the Boss embroiled in a battle with the courts about keeping Arabs out of America, his people had arranged for him to speak at a huge rally in Cincinnati. Smelling Guy was just off to the side of the stage, toward the front, kind of behind and beside the huge speakers that would beam the Boss's words to the thousands of cheering supporters that packed the stadium. His nose started twitching a bit, picking up the smell of baba ganoush, one of the most popular dishes at

The Daydreamer. There might be an Arab on his way. But Smelling Guy was unsure. He'd had so much baba ganoush in the previous weeks that it practically permeated his pores, and he was a bit hesitant to use his powers, even if they were working, after seeing what had happened to Omar. What if it was an Arab coming to the rally, Smelling Guy thought, would somebody kill him, too, and get away with it just like happened with Omar. So he said nothing, until...

“KERPLOWIE!” There was an explosion in the middle of the crowd, blood and body parts everywhere, even the Boss got a drop or two of blood on his face. There was pandemonium in the crowd with people careening away from the site of the explosion and trampling the weaker ones in their paths. Seven people were killed in the explosion itself, and countless more injured, but the real tragedy was of those who were trampled in the aftermath. Thirty-nine deaths and hundreds of injuries made it one of the worst terrorist attacks in America since the airplanes ran smack dab into their tallest buildings.

The Boss was real mad at Smelling Guy and fired him on the spot, but the attack turned out to be good news for him politically as it had been for the guy who was in charge when they ran the airplanes into the tall buildings. He got to do whatever he wanted. Congress pliantly passed the new and improved REAL PATRIOT Act, and his nominations to the Courts were confirmed without debate, often replacing the “terrorist-sympathizers” on the bench. That’s what he called anyone who opposed his agenda, and there were few voices courageous enough to stand up to him. Many judges resigned in fear as their homes were surrounded and sometimes attacked by enraged citizens acting with impunity. Arabs were banned from coming into America, unless they had a lot of money, but most of them didn’t want to come anyway. It was getting unpleasant.

Smelling Guy was without a job and felt really bad about what had happened. Until one day he saw a YouTube video that purported to say that the “terrorist” had been a plant from a Russian intelligence operation with ties to the Boss’s son. The video went viral and the Boss’s

opponents tried to initiate an investigation. The FBI's director wouldn't say anything about the attack other than it was being investigated.

Smelling Guy tried to do the only thing he could do, work seven days a week to help Omar the poet's widow at the Daydreamer. Fatima turned out to be a much better manager than her late husband. Omar's poem about people with human heads seemed to strike a note in the persecuted Arab-American community, and business at the restaurant was booming.

Smelling Guy started doing more and more in the kitchen and eventually became a pretty good cook of Arabic food. Fatima buried her resentment and began to respect the man who had invited her husband to his death. Although Fatima never revealed his identity to the members of the Arab community who had fond memories of her husband, Smelling Guy was worried that someone would find out.

But everybody on planet Earth was worried about something in those days, especially in America.