

Leftovers

Once the breakfast plates were cleared the next morning, Mark and Sam packed up their car to head home. Juliette and Tareq stood on the front porch while Emily walked with Mark and Sam, her arm linked with that of her sister-in-law. They were laughing, but neither Juliette nor Tareq could hear why.

“You have wonderful children,” Tareq said.

“Yes, I do.”

Mark opened the car door as far as it could go and leaned over the top. “Sorry I forgot the coat,” he called to Tareq.

“I’ll take him shopping,” Juliette replied.

Mark dropped himself into the driver’s seat, closed the car door with a slam, and they drove off. Sam waved from the passenger’s seat and blew a kiss at Juliette, and then, Tareq thought, maybe at him as well.

Emily trudged back up the drive and landed loudly on the front steps. “Boots, Tareq,” she pointed at his feet. “You’re going to need boots. And gloves for those beautiful hands of yours. Not a hard labor guy, are you?” Emily giggled.

“Emily!” Juliette nearly scolded her. She knew that Emily was just teasing, but she didn’t know how Tareq would interpret Emily’s sense of humor. Emily looked at her mother in a way that said *you know I’m right*.

“You do have beautiful hands, Tareq,” Emily reiterated as she went inside the house. “Mom’ll get you some gloves, though. No worries.”

Emily was like no daughter Tareq had ever known. The way she spoke to her mother, and to him, alternately alarmed him and charmed him. She had a freedom with herself and with her mother that was foreign to him, but that also made him feel comfortable. *What you see is what you get*, an American had once said to him. Now that he knew Emily, he had a better sense of what the phrase meant.

At lunch that day, Tareq learned what Americans really meant when they said *leftovers*. He knew it was physically impossible, but it seemed that there was more food on offer on Saturday than there had been the day before. And there was more freedom in how to consume it. On Friday, different foods had been placed next to

each other on the plate, each occupying its own sanctioned territory. Only the gravy spilled from one region to the next.

But on Saturday, the foods mingled. Emily piled mashed potatoes on top of the turkey and poured gravy on top of that. She microwaved the mix, and then added a layer of cranberry sauce above it all. Juliette mashed regular potatoes with the sweet potatoes and laced that with spinach. She skipped the turkey entirely and ate the cranberry sauce on its own. Tareq, however, prepared a traditional plate, each item neatly in place. He did not know the flavors well enough yet to blend them.

“You look sleepy, Tareq,” Emily said from across the dining room table. “Jet lag, huh?”

“Yes.”

“You can take a nap,” she suggested. “Mom and I will clean up. And then after dinner tonight, we’ll watch *It’s a Wonderful Life*.” She looked over at her mother to confirm this was acceptable. This was a tradition, and it occurred to Emily too late that maybe it was a tradition her mother would not want to repeat that year.

“Sure, honey. That’ll be fine,” Juliette reassured her. “Do you know that movie?” she asked Tareq. Tareq shook his head. “Then you *should* take a nap! It’s a classic. You’ll want to be awake for it.”

Tareq complied and headed upstairs, and Juliette and Emily got to work in the kitchen.

“I like him, Mom,” Emily said over Juliette’s shoulder as she carried plates from the table to the sink. “He seems really nice.”

“He is nice, Emily. Pass me the lid to that container, would you?” Emily knew that was the end of the topic for now. “I haven’t even asked you,” Juliette continued. “How is everything at work?”

Things were good, Emily told her mother. At last she was moving up from the proverbial mailroom position and getting involved in projects that interested her. She was working hard, but she still had energy at the end of the day for her own writing. She was making friends. It was a soft-landing after a long search for meaningful employment.

“I’m glad, honey. It’s important to do what you love.”

Tareq was fast asleep when he heard his name. “Tareq!” Emily called up the staircase. “Almost time for dinner. Then the movie!”

Tareq pulled himself slowly upright and sat on the edge of the bed. He looked at the room’s closed door, studying the facets in the old-fashioned glass doorknob. He turned his head to the window; through the sheer curtains drawn across the window, he could see the outlines of the taller trees outside. Another layer of

curtains, pulled back at each side, were tucked behind decorative hardware that to Tareq resembled doorknobs attached to the wall.

He rotated his head around. Behind him was a closet; the space between the bed and the closet was barely big enough to open the closet door. In the corner was a small table and a lamp. He had yet to turn on the lamp, but he remembered putting his passport into the drawer in the table.

“Tareq!” Emily called to him again. This time he could hear her coming up the stairs.

“I am awake,” he called back as he closed the bedroom door behind him. Emily now stood at the top of the stairs and waved to him as he walked down the hall. “Dinner’s ready,” she said. “And won’t your feet get cold?” she pointed at his stocking feet.

“I do not wear shoes inside a house,” he replied.

They ate leftovers again for dinner, but they were different leftovers. “We made soup while you were sleeping,” Juliette greeted him as he walked into the kitchen. “Tradition.” She ladled some turkey soup into a bowl and explained that they’d skip the other leftovers for now.

“You have to pace yourself with Thanksgiving,” Emily warned him, “otherwise it’s just too much.” She paused a moment and then added, “Unless it’s chocolate cake.”

After dinner, Emily made popcorn, grabbed glasses and a few bottles of sparkling water, and set up the movie in the basement. Tareq followed Juliette down the staircase, his hands on the railings on either side. When they reached the basement, he awaited seating instructions. Emily read his body language before Juliette did. “I’ll sit on the floor,” she suggested. “You two take the sofa.”

Tareq and Juliette did as instructed, but sat more formally than Emily thought necessary. Emily sat as far away from them as she could without it seeming like she was avoiding them. Juliette read her daughter’s actions quickly. She thought back to when the kids were in high school and heading out on first dates. Was this how Mark and Emily had felt when they brought someone home for the first time? Probably.

Over the course of the movie, Juliette and Tareq relaxed into each other on the sofa, but a public display of affection did not suit either of them. Even with his nap, Tareq struggled to stay awake; Juliette nudged him occasionally, but eventually gave up. When the movie ended, she woke him up as the credits rolled. They said good night to Emily and went upstairs together.

They now had the second floor of the house to themselves, and they lingered outside her bedroom door. “I liked that movie,” he said, “at least what I saw of it.” He laughed. “Much better than *Romeo and Juliette*.”

“A much happier ending,” she concurred.

“Juliette,” he said, pushing her hair back from her face, but still standing at a distance Juliette thought was more than just polite. He wanted to tell her he’d see the whole movie next year. He wanted to tell her how happy and relieved he felt that none of his fears about how her children would react to him had materialized. But he could hear Rana remind him of all the rules he was breaking. He could hear Mark telling him to get away from his wife. They were both telling him he had no right. *But I do have a right*, Tareq retorted in his head, *to the movie, to Juliette, and to a wonderful life*. “Juliette,” he tried to continue, but the words gave way beneath his feet.

“What is it Tareq?” Juliette asked, eyeing his face closely but finding few clues. She waited for him to speak, but Tareq only inhaled and then let out a long, slow breath.

“Mom!” Emily called from the basement as Tareq was trying to compose his reply to Juliette’s question. Emily’s voice did not sound alarmed, but it did command attention.

“This is what it means to have children,” Juliette said to Tareq lightheartedly, tugging at his collar. “Always an interruption.” Juliette walked the few steps to the top of the staircase and shouted down to Emily. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“There’s something wrong with the sink,” Emily yelled back.

“I will look at it,” Tareq told Juliette.

“Coming,” Juliette called back to Emily. “Maybe Tareq can fix it.”

On Sunday, Juliette, Tareq and Emily ate breakfast together, all three at the kitchen table. Emily wanted another cup of Tareq’s coffee and asked him to show her how he made it. He took her through the process, quizzing her along the way. His fingers engaged each step with nimble animation.

“What instrument do you play?” Emily asked Tareq.

“Instrument?” Juliette asked, overhearing their conversation.

“Piano,” Tareq replied.

“You never mentioned the piano,” Juliette interrupted with surprise. “Mark never mentioned your playing the piano.”

“There was generally not a piano where Mark and I were.” Tareq noted the fact plainly.

“We can find you one here pretty easily,” Juliette offered.

“That is not necessary,” he replied. “I have not played in many years.”

“Well, it still shows in how you make coffee,” Emily observed. “People who play an instrument often use all their fingers to perform tasks, not just their index fingers, and they coordinate their hands together.”

“Where do you learn this stuff?” Juliette asked her daughter in amazement. Tareq was wondering the same thing.

“I keep my eyes and ears open, Mother Dear,” was all she said. “Eyes and ears open.” She took her cup of coffee from Tareq and leaned back against the counter. “This is the best, Tareq,” she nodded approvingly. “You can stay.”

“Thank you, Emily,” he replied, both for her compliment and her imprimatur.

Juliette glanced at the clock. “Oh! Em! We need to go now if you’re going to make the train.”

“I’m finishing this coffee, Mom,” she was clear, “train or no train.”

“Enjoy your coffee. It may be weeks before I have the privilege to make you another cup,” Tareq told her. “I will bring your bags to the car.”

“I guess chivalry’s not dead, huh? At least not around here.” Emily held the cup close to her nose to enjoy the aroma. “Thanks, Tareq!” She was genuine in her gratitude. It was only a backpack and a computer bag, but his sincerity could move mountains.

The steam from the piping hot coffee rose before Emily’s face, and Juliette knew that Emily would never finish it in time. She scrounged in a cupboard and produced a plastic cup with a beat up lid. “Here,” she turned to Emily, “put what’s left into this.”

“He’s not going to like that,” Emily warned drolly. Emily hadn’t spent much time with Tareq, but she was pretty certain that he wouldn’t approve of his coffee being consumed from a plastic container.

“Probably not,” Juliette agreed impishly, “but you know, desperate times, desperate measures.” Juliette’s expression feigned helplessness as she held the mug steady for Emily as she poured the coffee from the ceramic mug.

“Ready?” Tareq called from the porch. “The bags are in the car.”

Juliette and Emily could feel the cold air from the open front door all the way into the kitchen and hurried to the foyer. Tareq stood on the front porch and watched them from outside. “What is that?” he asked Emily as she shifted the travel mug from one hand to the other as she put on her coat.

“Told you he wouldn’t like this,” she joked to her mother.

“It’s a travel mug,” Juliette replied archly, knowing full well that Tareq knew what a travel mug was. “If she misses this train, the next one isn’t for hours.”

“Ah,” he replied, equally archly. A hint of his sense of humor rippled on his forehead.

Once in the car, Juliette sped to the station, and they dropped Emily at the train hastily. Emily hugged Juliette through the car window. “Keep him in the guest room if you want, Mom, but I like him.” Juliette shook her head at Emily, but she was glad to know that Emily approved.

Emily checked the trunk for her bags, but then saw Tareq ahead of her, walking toward the station with the bags in hand. “Tareq!” she called.

Tareq turned to face her. “Come, Emily. Quickly!” He walked backwards as she ran toward him, trying to keep the travel mug as level as possible. When she reached him, he handed her the bags as though passing off a baton in a relay race.

“You’re the best, Tareq. Really. I mean it.” She winked at him and was off.

Tareq waited until the train had left and he was sure Emily would not reappear. He walked back to the car at a more leisurely pace and found Juliette parked in one of the station’s handful of spaces. “She made it,” Juliette informed him. “I just got her text.”

“Where to?” he asked, buckling his seat belt. He started to lean over to kiss her, but then thought of Mark sitting in the same seat, leaning over to Juliette in the same way.

“Gloves,” she replied. “If I don’t find you some gloves, I’ll hear about it.” He held up his hands before his face. Emily’s right, Juliette thought, his hands were beautiful. Juliette matched her palms to his and folded her fingers through his. “And I have a few errands to run.”

They drove to the nearest city, about 20 miles away, and entered the largest parking lot Tareq had ever seen. Juliette offered to drop him at an entrance to the mall so he wouldn’t have to walk far without a coat, but he opted to stay with her. They found a spot near enough that Juliette hoped he wouldn’t get too cold, and they made a dash for the multi-acre structure.

The size of the complex was impressive, but it was the sound of the shopping mall that struck Tareq first: an intriguing combination of chatter, padded footsteps, and music, all punctuated by the occasional cry of a baby or the shriek of a child. The decorations in the mall impressed him further. Visitors to Egypt might find the pyramids exotic, but in Tareq’s opinion, the American shopping mall in the holiday season trumped the pyramids on that score. He did not find the mall beautiful, but the decorations were eye-popping, and the animatronic Santas, reindeer, and elves made his jaw drop. Fake snowflakes hung from the ceiling; Tareq wondered how these compared to the real ones he hoped to see before he returned to Cairo. The scent of the mall was beyond his description. He stopped and sniffed. “Caramel popcorn,” Juliette explained.

He followed Juliette blindly, keeping his hand to her back for his own well-being as much as hers. He was expert in assessing buildings and knew it would take a small army to secure this location. But nothing in his training, he concluded, prepared him for navigating an American shopping mall. How Juliette knew where to find gloves, boots and a coat in this morass left him awe-struck. Soon he had all that he needed. “That should do you until spring,” she assessed. “Then it’s wet. But I have a spare umbrella.”

From the mall, they went to a warehouse-style grocery store. “If we get separated,” Juliette instructed him, “come back here.” She showed him the information desk. “There’s only one of these, and anyone can point you back here.” She worried that she sounded patronizing, but the store was crammed to the gills. “And we need to get you a SIM card soon. Then if we get separated in a place like this, we can text.” The idea that two people shopping for food would potentially need to text each other within a grocery store was beyond anything Tareq had ever imagined. But he admired her foresight.

They took the groceries to the car and loaded up the trunk. As he opened her car door for her, she spied a shop across the street where they could buy a SIM card. “Let’s just get that taken care of now,” she said.

“What about the groceries?”

“It’s as cold as a refrigerator out here. The food will be fine.” She looked him up and down. “But you may not be.” They returned to the trunk, found Tareq’s new coat and pulled off the tags. “And your gloves,” she said, handing him the pair. Tareq was now the most bundled up he had ever been in his entire life. The gloves were fine, but the coat was heavy and would take some getting used to.

Errands completed, they returned home. Tareq moved quickly to open her car door and then went to the trunk for the groceries. The loose gravel drive shifted under his steps; it was not quite sand, he observed, but neither was it solid. The sky above was dark and clear, and a few stars twinkled. The scent of fresh pine mixed uneasily with that of burning timber. “The wood is not dry,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Juliette asked.

“The fire. Someone is burning wood that is not dry.”

Dinner that evening consisted of another phase of leftovers. Tareq now experimented with mixing items on his plate, overlapping tastes and textures. After dinner, they cleaned up from the holiday, putting serving dishes and infrequently used pots and pans away in the basement. After the last trip down, Tareq returned to the kitchen and declared, “All done.” He picked up a towel to wipe off a wet spot on the counter and then turned around and leaned back against the counter’s beveled edge. “I think everything is now put away,” he said, throwing the towel over his shoulder in conclusion. “Juliette,” he called to her from across the kitchen.

“Hmm?” she replied as she rearranged perishables in the refrigerator. She closed the door and leaned against it. “What is it?”

He walked toward her, leaned his shoulder on the door opposite hers, and wrapped his free arm around her. Still at a loss for words, he tried again to tell her everything with his eyes alone. She couldn't read the story clearly, but she could see his vulnerability. In her experience, most men – most people for that matter – hid themselves behind the curtains of their eyes. But when Tareq looked at Juliette, he drew everything back and stood unprotected. It was this vulnerability that terrified her: her responsibility for his vulnerability, and the vulnerability he created in her.

“Juliette,” he sighed and entwined his arms around her like a vine. As he pressed his cheek against hers, a memory pressed up against him from the early years of his career. He was standing at a checkpoint when he heard the blood-curdling scream of a woman. His first impulse was to duck, but then he saw the woman run toward a man as he entered the camp. The man's eyes were hollow with fatigue and much more, but Tareq watched him resuscitate in the arms of his beloved. If Tareq could find that man again, he would tell him that he understood.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Juliette.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Tareq.”

He pulled her head under his chin and stood still. He remembered how he had held her the same way in Berlin, however briefly, and how in the line at the Embassy he had thought of holding her forever. He knew, too, that he could ask her to take the photo of Mark off the mantle. But he couldn't stop Rana's voice in his head. He couldn't deflect Mark's repeated blows.

Juliette raised herself on her toes and kissed him, her arms tightening around his body. “Juliette,” he stopped her. His tone alarmed her, and Juliette stepped back. His eyes looked even more vulnerable than before. But now they also looked conflicted, even uncertain, and Juliette felt a chill run through her. She stepped back further, studying his eyes, waiting for them to change with his mind. But his eyes took shelter behind closed lids and ended the conversation for the evening.

On the Monday after Thanksgiving, Tareq awoke well before sunrise. His eyes opened to the blank, white ceiling, and he stared up for a few minutes as a realization dawned: he had no idea what he was going to do that day. He had no plans, no destination, no task at hand. Juliette, he presumed, would return to her editing; she had mentioned a deadline that was coming up. But he had no deadlines, no appointments, nothing to draw him from the warmth of the bed into the cold morning air.

He rolled first to his left and then to his right, but the bed was narrow and did not accommodate much tossing and turning. He tried lying on his stomach, too, face down in the pillow, but then gave up. He got out of bed slowly and walked to the guest room's sole window. It faced west, to the front yard and main road. The morning sun was still only a promise behind him; at this hour, he could discern no pending sunrays.

He tried to imagine the Egyptian sky on a December morning, but came up as blank as the ceiling. Tareq walked away from the window, put on some clothes and socks, and walked quietly downstairs, trying unsuccessfully to keep the steps from squeaking. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and listened for Juliette, but heard nothing.

Tareq grabbed his laptop from the dining room table and then ensconced himself on the sofa in the living room. He found maps online of the western morning sky in Cairo and looked out the window to compare them with the view from New York. The maps on the computer screen told him that the two views were remarkably similar, and he matched the stars as best he could.

Eventually the sun hinted a greeting and the stars faded. Tareq closed his laptop and looked over to the clock on the mantle. It was still early, but in the growing light, he could see the photos above the fireplace: the children, smiling; Juliette and Emily in a cap and gown; and Mark and Juliette together, Mark's grip on Juliette as tight as it was the first time Tareq had looked at the photo.

But Mark's arms could no longer hold Juliette, and Tareq knew this. Mark had no active role to play and no voice with which to object. He was neither a risk nor a threat; he posed no danger to Tareq's head or his heart. And Emily, son Mark, and Samantha had been warm and friendly at Thanksgiving. With Emily, Tareq even felt a rapport. Whatever had closed his eyes to Juliette the night before, Tareq acknowledged to himself, it wasn't Mark.

Tareq looked over to the desk in the foyer in search of Rana's condolence card. The card was gone, he noticed for the first time, but Rana's voice was not. She needled him now, just as she had needled him when they worked together. With Tareq, Rana had always been free with her opinions. She would be sitting at her desk at that very moment, Tareq thought, and if she could see him on Juliette's sofa, she'd have plenty to say about it. *What are you doing, he could hear her clearly, an unmarried man staying at the home of an unmarried woman? And with no one else in the house? Why aren't you at home with your mother? And for that matter, why aren't you married? And to be more specific, why aren't you married to me?*

Tareq bolted upright, banging his shins against the coffee table. He remembered Rana as being forthright, but her imaginary, uncensored remarks still shocked him. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, trying to catch his breath. He looked back out the window, searching for any remaining familiar constellation. But the stars were now completely invisible.

Tareq leaned over the sofa, his hands on the windowsill. His breath frosted the window, and the wind whistled beneath the front door. A car drove up in front of the house, and Tareq saw the newspaper fly over Juliette's car and land in the gravel. He found his shoes by the door and ventured into the crispy air to fetch the paper. On the way back to the house, he buried his eyes in newsprint, shivering as much with the predictability of the headlines as with the cold.

“It’s too cold to be out there without a jacket!” Juliette piped cheerfully from the front door as he walked up the steps.

“I was not outside for long,” he replied.

“Can I make you something hot? Tea?” she offered.

“Yes,” he replied, handing her the paper. Juliette took the paper and closed the door as Tareq removed his shoes.

They drank their tea together at the kitchen table, each with a section of paper in hand. As they turned the pages, the edges rustled against each other. Juliette folded her section in half and put it on the table under her mug of tea. “I’m going to need to do some work today,” she apologized into the section of paper he held open. “My deadline is the 20th.” Juliette had considered taking more time off while Tareq was in New York, but two months would have been a long time to go without an assignment, and she also wanted to experience life with him as it might actually be, not just as a vacation.

“I understand,” Tareq replied, lowering the paper and finding a smile for her. Tareq did understand, and in truth, he was relieved.

“Thanks,” Juliette said. “After the 20th, I’ve got a good 10 days free.”

Tareq nodded, rose from the table without explanation, and started walking to the foyer.

“Where are you going?” Juliette asked into his back.

“To the town,” he replied over his shoulder.

Juliette’s first impulse was to tell him no, that he couldn’t go. She wanted him to stay near her, even if she was at her computer. But she sat still and mute, listening as he opened the closet door for his coat and found his gloves in the drawer. When she heard the clunk of his boots, she got up from her chair quickly and joined him by the front door. She watched him tie his bootlaces resolutely.

“It’s awfully early to go to town,” she said. “Maybe one more cup of tea and then go?” Tareq buttoned his coat and pulled on his gloves like a surgeon adjusting them to ensure maximum dexterity. “Okay,” she gave in. “Give me a minute to get dressed and I’ll drive you in.”

“I will walk.”

“But that’s more than a mile away.”

“Yes.”

“And what are you going to do there?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Explore.”

“Tareq, this is small town New York, there’s not a lot to explore.”

“There is always something to explore,” he countered with a forced smile that she did not recognize.

Juliette drew a map of the village center in her mind: near the train station there was a diner, a hardware store, a convenience store, a post office that seemed to open only when it felt like it, a white clapboard church, and a library. He wouldn’t be gone for long.

There was Romeo’s, too, she remembered, a restaurant that was putting her little town on the map. People came from all over, hours by car, to eat at Romeo’s. The eponymous owner was contemplating buying an old Victorian nearby and turning it into a bed and breakfast to accommodate some of the people who came for dinner and then wanted – or needed – a place to rest their well-sated bodies. Romeo had told Juliette about his plans right after she returned from Berlin.

“Well, I guess so,” she conceded and looked over at the clock on the mantle. “By the time you get there, things should be opening up. But take your cell phone with you. I’ll pick you up if you get stuck.”

“I will not get stuck.”

“And you know where you’re going? It’s not like we’ve driven around a lot.”

“There are not many roads here, Juliette.”

Juliette scrunched up her lower lip in agreement. He was right. From her driveway, there were only two options: left or right. Right took you to the main highway, left took you into town. There was no chance he’d get lost.

“Okay, then, see you later? Back by lunch?”

“Yes.” A brief embrace, and then he was out the door.

Tareq was not accustomed to the dry, biting cold and the winter landscape it produced. Its infinite shades of gray required concentration, the limestone deposits told their own stories and the rocky banks made promises of creeks below. The stark skeletons of trees formed wild patterns against the silvery sky, which was neither cloudless nor sunny. *In the frosty air*, he remembered a voice singing in the shopping mall. Perhaps this was the scene.

It was a jarringly empty land. He had done his best to prepare for this before he bought his plane ticket and consciously chose a return date roughly nine weeks after his arrival. The population of Juliette’s town, he had learned, would easily fit into one block in Cairo, just on the ground floor alone. The population of Cairo – based only on the actual city limits – was perhaps 20 times the size of the entire county in which her town was located. Before arriving, Tareq had struggled to imagine what that would look like. Whether in Cairo, Aleppo, or Damascus, Tareq had always lived among masses of humanity. Now he walked down a two lane

road completely alone. He looked back now and again, thinking that maybe a car would drive up behind him. But none did. No one cycled past; no other pedestrian appeared. Tareq shared the road only with his thoughts.

When he arrived at the town it was, as Juliette predicted, just starting to open its doors. He knew his destination precisely: the hardware store, immediately next to the train station. He had nearly fixed the basement sink the other night, but the washer in the faucet needed to be replaced. The store owner helped him pick the right one based on the photos Tareq had taken that morning. The wind was blowing under the front door, Tareq also explained, and the owner showed him several options. Tareq selected some weather stripping he thought he could make work.

“Anything else?” the store owner asked, taking his reading glasses from his nose to get a better look at Tareq. He was not accustomed to unfamiliar faces in his store.

Some hinges were squeaking in the kitchen, Tareq continued, and needed oil. And picture hangers, too. The store owner asked a few more questions and then showed Tareq what he thought would suffice.

Tareq filled his backpack with these purchases and left the store, spying a fire extinguisher as he exited. Next time, he thought. He proceeded down the town’s main street. The train station, where they had dropped Emily the day before, was quiet. At the library, a man was sweeping the last of the falling leaves off the front steps. He raised his hand to Tareq and waved, and Tareq returned the gesture. He noticed Romeo’s across the street, a “closed” sign hanging in the window.

Tareq stopped in the small grocery store to take stock. It would do in an emergency, he thought, but he understood why Juliette had driven so far the day before to go to a larger supermarket. He did one lap around and noticed the cigarettes behind the counter. It had been weeks now since he had bought a package.

He had now pretty much explored the town and concluded that this was the quietest example of human habitation he had ever known. There were many houses in the area, and the location warranted a train station. But did anyone really live here? If so, where were they? Was it just a function of the cold weather? Would summer bring more evidence of life?

He decided to try the coffee shop. In Cairo, a café would certainly draw a crowd. As Tareq opened the door, a bell startled him with its bright jingling. To his relief, no one looked around to see who had entered. But there were plenty of people gathered here, at least in comparison to the sidewalks outside. An older couple ate breakfast at a booth. A younger man sat alone with a paper. He was dressed in a suit and carried a brief case; he must be waiting for the train, Tareq thought. Two women in leggings and sweatshirts appeared to be either coming from or going to an exercise class, but where that class might be held was a mystery to Tareq.

Tareq took a seat by the window and ordered a coffee. “That’s it?” the waitress asked, sticking her pencil behind her ear. Tareq might have ordered more, but he

was dumbstruck by the woman's make-up. The dark lines drawn around her eyes were as thick as any painted in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the color of her lips was beyond his recognition. He changed his order to tea.

Waiting for the tea to arrive, he cast his eyes about the diner, comparing it to his café at home. But in the end, he could make no comparison. The two seemed too many worlds apart. *Except*, he said to himself, rising from the table and squinting across the room. On a shelf by the diner's long counter, with its fixed seats that looked like red buttons attached to chrome columns, he saw a chess set. He passed the waitress bringing his tea on his way to inspect it. He raised his hand to her to say he'd be right back, but he wasn't sure his body language meant the same thing in this place as it would in Cairo. He picked up the game and took it back to his table.

Sipping the distinctly American tea, he moved the pieces around the board, but by the time his teacup was empty, he had grown bored of trying to beat himself at a game meant for two. If he left the café now, he surmised, he would return before lunch and perhaps interrupt Juliette's work. But with his errand accomplished and the chess match a draw, he had no reason to remain in the town. So he set off down the road again, in the only direction he could go.

Juliette heard his steps on the front porch and opened the door for him. "Nice walk?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Cold." He removed his winter layers. "And successful."

"Successful?" she asked.

"Yes." He proceeded to empty the contents of his backpack before her. Juliette watched as one neglected household projected after another got its due. She considered herself independent, but at that moment, all she could think was that it was nice to have a man in the house.

"How did you know all of this needed to be done?" she asked.

"What did Emily say? Eyes and ears open?"

"And mouths," Juliette added, rubbing her hand over his shoulder. "Come in the kitchen and I'll make us some lunch."

Tareq's morning adventure provided ample fodder for conversation. They talked about where to hang the pictures, and Tareq recounted Earl's instructions about how to use the weather stripping. Tareq scrunched his nose disapprovingly when he mentioned the convenience store, but his face relaxed a little when he described the chess set at the diner. It was small with plastic pieces, he noted, but perhaps that was all for the better in such an environment. Juliette said she had never noticed the set before; in fact, she explained, she couldn't remember the last time she'd even been in the diner.

After lunch, Juliette came to a verdict about the pictures, and Tareq busied himself with nails, washers, hinges, hooks and weather stripping while Juliette beavered

away on her assignment. When she appeared in the foyer to thank him properly for his work on the front door, he felt an appropriate pride of place. “Is this your only box of tools?” he asked, pointing to the red plastic box he had found in the basement.

“I think so,” she replied. I didn’t need much when I lived in the city. I just called maintenance if something went wrong.”

“I see,” Tareq replied, pulling his phone from his pocket. He sat down on the floor and began arranging the meager collection by type and size of tool.

“What are you doing?” she inquired.

“I am making a list,” he informed her, “Tomorrow I will return to the hardware store to buy tools.”

She ran her hand across his head, messing up his hair. He reached up and briefly pressed her hand against his scalp but kept his eyes and other hand on his phone.

“Tomorrow,” he said again, rising from the floor and placing his hands on his hips, “you will have tools.” He turned his face from the paltry collection at his feet and gave her one sharp nod.

Tomorrow was settled, but Juliette now wondered about that night. He appeared visibly calmer with a tool in his hands, but he still stood uneasily. “You want to get out of here, Tareq?” Juliette asked. He looked at her quizzically. “Go out for dinner?” she rephrased. “I think we’ve had enough cooking and leftovers.”

“I want to get out of here,” he agreed in distinctly American English. The words elbowed each other on the way out of his mouth.

“Anything in particular you’d like?”

He shook his head.

“Let’s take a drive then. There’s a little town near here that goes all out for Christmas. Their decorations will be up by now.”

Juliette took the long route, away from the main highway. At first the sun lit the way, but soon it gave way to a dusky late afternoon, and lights began to twinkle from scattered houses. The sun did not set much earlier here in winter than in Cairo, Tareq thought to himself, but the cold made the sky seem darker. Occasionally a school or other sign of communal life appeared, and eventually the houses became more frequent. Soon they were on the main boulevard of a small but bustling town. Unlike Juliette’s town, this one was a hive of activity: whole families strolled on the sidewalks, store fronts shone like a mile-long ribbon of light; and sugary aromas were strong enough to waft into the car.

Juliette took one of the few parking spaces left on the street. She searched for coins to pay the parking meter and strained in the darkness to read the rates. Tareq

paid close attention over her shoulder and held up his phone as a flashlight. “Do you have these in Cairo?” she asked him.

“Not quite,” he replied. “Show me how this works.”

“It’s easy,” she explained, “as long as you have the right coins. And in some places, you can feed the meter with credit cards, or with an app.” Tareq was starting to think that parking in Cairo might actually be easier. “Okay, two hours!”

“What happens if we don’t *feed the meter*?”

“Might get a ticket,” she replied. Tareq deemed this consequence to be fairly mild, but he still noted the time when the meter started. “But it shouldn’t be necessary to feed the meter after a certain time at night.” She looked around. “But I don’t see a sign.”

Tareq looked around, too, but wasn’t sure what sign he should be looking for.

Tareq plunged his hands into his pockets with a shiver. She took his empty elbow and began to lead him down the street. “I know you don’t really do Christmas, but I still thought you’d like to see this.” She pointed around at the brightly decorated street.

Tareq studied the scene carefully, relieved that it was nothing like the shopping mall. Real pine garlands, fresh with scent and roped with white lights, twisted around historic lampposts, and red velvet ribbons with clusters of pinecones hung from just below the gas-lit lamps at the top. Between each lamppost were strands of spherical lanterns, alternating in gold and silver and lining the street like suns and moons. And straight ahead, where the main street intersected with another thoroughfare, a Christmas tree rose from a landscaped roundabout. A gold star crowned the tree, and ribbons of red cascaded from the star to the ground, where they were anchored in spotlights that made the tree glow.

The exteriors of each store were decorated differently, but with common elements: wreaths, poinsettias in window boxes, strands of colorful ornaments hanging down, across and even diagonally. And lights. Some stayed on, some blinked, some flickered. The lights shone mainly in red, white, and gold. But some shops had chosen blue and silver, even the occasional pink and purple.

They walked down the street and peeked into each window. Some sported trees, some displayed nativity sets, and some mixed trees, nativity sets and menorahs together. Juliette answered Tareq’s questions and recounted childhood memories of opening presents on Christmas morning. Gazing into the window of a bicycle shop, Juliette reminisced warmly about how, on one very special Christmas, she had found a red bike on the porch with a note from Santa. Tareq pondered her stories; some things about America, he thought, were not that different after all. Children were children, wherever you went.

But at the next store window, Tareq stopped and said definitively, “Juliette, I do not understand America.” The head of Tutankhamen wearing a Santa hat peered at them with glassy black eyes. A poster next to the unlikely Santa advertised a

contest to win a trip to the Luxor Resort in Las Vegas. Below the poster was a tub of water in which rubber ducks, adorned with Egyptian headdresses, floated about.

“If it’s any consolation,” she replied, rubbing her fingers on her forehead in disbelief, “neither do I.” They laughed, a tension broke, and she felt his hand at her back for the first time in days. She had missed his hand. “Let’s eat,” she put her arm around his waist, and they walked along looking for a cozy spot. A neon sign across the street glowed “S’mores”, and Juliette’s mouth began to water. “Tareq,” she looked at him mischievously, “how do you feel about spoiling our dinners?”

He had no idea what she meant, but he liked the look in her eyes. “Yes.”

They walked across the street to the café that promised the sweet treats of moonlit campfires. Juliette ordered a “S’mores Set for Two” and two coffees. They took their coffees with them and sat down to wait.

“What will we eat?” he asked, sipping his coffee. That much was familiar.

Only then did Juliette realize that she hadn’t bothered to explain the concept of s’mores. Her response rambled, and to her relief, a waiter arrived with all the necessary ingredients and tools: a stack of graham crackers, a bowl of marshmallows, and two chocolate bars, along with two skewers and a Bunsen-burner like appliance.

Tareq picked up each piece of equipment, bemused. “What do we do with this?”

“I’ll show you,” Juliette giggled. “Just promise me you won’t tell the kids. They’d never let me live it down.”

She opened the bar of chocolate and put one piece on a cracker. “Got that?” He nodded. Then she pierced a marshmallow and held it over the flame to melt, rotating it so that it browned all around. “Now here’s the tricky part,” she warned him. She put the marshmallow on top of the chocolate and then topped it with another cracker, the skewer still in the marshmallow. “You’ve got to slide the marshmallow off the skewer without making a mess.” The open flames cast moving shadows across her face, and her eyes gleamed. “Here,” she said, handing him the confection. “Give it a try. But be careful. Don’t get burned.”

Tareq bit into the crunchy, sticky dessert. His face at first looked displeased; the texture took him by surprise. But then the mischief in his eyes matched hers.

“Do you like it?” she asked nervously.

“It is very sweet,” he replied, wiping stray strings of marshmallow from the sides of his mouth. “But I like it.” He told the truth, but he liked the sight of her making the s’more more than he liked the s’more itself. “Make one for yourself,” he told her. She made s’mores until the ingredients were gone, alternately passing one to Tareq and taking one for herself.

Tareq held his last s'more in his hand. "I would like another coffee," he laughed. "This is very sweet." The still-glowing burner deepened the creases around his eyes.

"Sugar and caffeine," she laughed with him. "You can't go wrong."

All the tension of the last few days seemed to dissipate, and he again smiled easily at her. "Juliette," he sighed.

"Yes, Tareq?"

"What is the song? *You don't realize what you do to me?*"

"*And I didn't realize what a kiss could be.*" She suppressed her tears, but her eyes glistened in the light from the fire.

"Juliette," his voice became grave for what seemed to her like no reason, "I am from Egypt." He said this almost as though telling her that he had an incurable disease.

At first, his statement struck her as absurd, but confusion overtook her sarcasm, and she wondered why he was telling her what she already knew. "I know," she said, reaching across the table for his hand. "We sailed on the Nile, remember?"

"I do." He looked down at her hand and tried to accept its warmth.

"And in Berlin, you promised to teach me to swim."

He remembered that, too. The water, she had told him, was cold and dark and deep. He retracted his hand, turned off the burner, and felt for his phone in his pocket. "We must go," he told her, showing her the time display on his phone, "or we might get a ticket."

Turning Right

The next morning, Tareq was already finishing his tea when Juliette first appeared in the kitchen. “I overslept,” she yawned at him, leaning against the counter by the sink. “Seems you found everything, though. But I’m sorry,” she sat down across from him. “You could have woken me up, you know.”

“I will make you coffee before I go,” he announced as he stood up.

“Go?”

“Yes. More tools. Remember?”

“Yes, I remember.”

He turned away from her to the coffee maker and began preparing a fresh cup for her. When Tareq didn’t need his hands for the coffeemaker, he rested them against the lip of the countertop, his wrists angled sharply. When the coffee was ready, he served her and then walked to the foyer to make peace with his winter wardrobe. When he opened the door, he saw the newspaper on the front porch. He turned around to bring it to her and found her standing before him.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the paper. She put her on his forearm. “Tareq?” she asked no particular question.

Tareq’s mouth pursed nervously, and his eyes didn’t know where to focus. He said goodbye again quickly and left, returning to the nearly frozen road. The morning stood still: nothing flew, shook, or fluttered. Tareq defied the stillness, step by step, moving in a direction that stood proxy for forward.

At the hardware store, the same man who had helped Tareq the day before greeted him warmly. “You’re back!” he said, raising his hands in the air.

“Yes,” Tareq replied, looking around him to see if there were someone else in the store who warranted the enthusiastic welcome. But Tareq was the only customer in the store. “I need more tools.” Tareq showed the man the scant list of items in Juliette’s possession.

The man shook his head knowingly. “You’re at Ms. Grant’s, right?” Exactly how the store owner would know this was unclear. But, Tareq thought, perhaps this town was more like Cairo than he had initially thought. People watched people,

and Tareq would certainly have attracted someone's attention at the station when he helped get Emily to the train on time.

"Women." The store owner stated as though that both articulated the problem and solved it. He led Tareq up and down the aisles as they decided what constituted essentials. Back at the counter, they inventoried the lot. The owner packed up Tareq's bag and said, "Let me know if you need anything else."

"I would like three fire extinguishers," Tareq requested without a pause.

"One kitchen-type? And then one each for the basement and the upstairs?" the veteran owner asked. Tareq now knew that he had found a friend.

"Yes. Exactly."

"You on foot?" Tareq nodded. "Let me give you a lift. The Laroche house is only a mile from here, right? Let's get in the car."

The offer struck Tareq as unnecessarily generous and he wanted to refuse. But he was so stunned by the man's helpfulness that his mouth couldn't move. They left from the store's front door, and the owner, who now introduced himself as Earl, flipped the "open" sign over to a side with a clock face with plastic hands. He adjusted the hands to indicate that he'd "be back soon" in about 30 minutes.

"Where you from?" Earl asked, and Tareq realized he had not even responded to Earl's introduction by providing his own name. "Egypt. I am Tareq."

"Tah-Rek," Earl said slowly. "Got that right?"

"Yes, thank you," Tareq replied. Earl had pretty much gotten it right.

"You moving in, Tareq?" Earl asked the question in the same tone he might ask someone if they wanted matte paint or glossy. The question startled Tareq, but he also sensed that Earl wasn't being nosy. He was just surveying the scene.

"I used to work with Juliette's husband, Mark."

"Ah, sad business, that."

"Yes," Tareq echoed. "Sad business."

They pulled into the drive. Earl got out of the car with Tareq and helped him carry the fire extinguishers up to the house. Juliette heard the activity on the porch and opened the door to find Earl and Tareq comparing tools in the United States with those in Egypt.

"Ms. Grant!" Earl greeted her, reaching out to shake her hand. "You seem to have found yourself a handyman!"

Juliette wasn't sure how to react. The person she thought of only as "the man at the hardware store" knew her name. "Juliette," she said, extending her hand.

“And have you eaten at Romeo’s?” Earl joked, perhaps even thinking he was the first one to say this to her.

“Yes, I have,” she nodded with a slim smile. “Nice place for our little town, huh?”

“A bit fancy for around here, if you ask me,” Earl wiggled his ears. “But tasty! You’ll have to take your guest there.”

“Good idea. I will,” Juliette agreed. “I need to do something to say thank you for all this work around the house!”

And with that Earl saluted from his cap, said he hoped he’d see Tareq again soon, wished them both a Merry Christmas, and returned to his car. They watched Earl drive away and then escaped from the cold into the house.

“Looks like you’re settling in to village life,” she teased him.

“I am,” he replied with a few slow, thoughtful nods. He looked at everything on the floor in the foyer: the fire extinguishers, the new tools, the basics of daily life. This is what he wanted to have with her. He wanted a life that was theirs to share, with dishes to wash, doors to fix, and pictures to hang on the wall. And if there were a fire, he’d use the extinguisher, and then they’d rebuild together.

“Juliette,” he looked her directly in the eye.

“Yes, Tareq.”

He drew her close and braced himself for the whirlwind to come: the weight of her body against his, the beat of her heart, the smell of her hair, the pressure of her arms around his torso. This was like nothing he had ever known before in his life. He kissed her passionately and honestly. He explored her face and neck and memorized the terrain.

And then he stopped. He buried his head in her shoulder, and he stopped.

“Tareq,” she whispered. “Are you okay?”

“I do not know.”

“What is it?”

“I do not know what to do.”

“I thought you were doing pretty well,” she said with a smile, bringing his eyes into her view. She saw the vulnerability again and kissed his cheek to protect it. She looked for the grief, too, but this time saw something different, something she could not immediately recognize.

Tareq ran his hands through his hair. First his right hand, then his left hand, and then his right hand again. He looked down at his feet and then up to the ceiling. He turned once in a circle. He paced. And then he stopped dead in his tracks.

“Tareq, what is it?” Juliette was now worried. She took his face in her hands and stared. This wasn’t grief, she thought to herself. This was panic.

He bit his lip and looked at her. “Juliette, in Egypt, this is the way a man kisses his wife.”

Now Juliette could see it, and the realization rear-ended her with the same force as the news of Mark’s death. Tareq didn’t just happen to be from Egypt. Tareq was Egyptian. Juliette felt the whiplash. Tareq had explained it all in Cairo: Yasmeen was Christian Armenian. He was Muslim. For them to marry was forbidden. *Forbidden.*

“You’re saying this is impossible.” She dropped her hands and spoke with an eerie calm that unnerved him further. He stared at her, his hands on top of his head like a prisoner, his body tense. The panic made him look harsh.

“Tareq,” she asked slowly, “you’re saying this is impossible?”

He did not like the way she said his name.

“Why did you come all this way if this is impossible?” Her tone remained calm and deliberate, but he could hear the anger rising in her voice.

He crossed his arms on his chest and looked down, but she took his face in her hands again and forced his eyes on her. “If this is impossible, why did you come all the way to New York?” She spoke as evenly as she could, trying to keep her own panic at bay. This couldn’t be the end, she told herself. It couldn’t be.

“I do not know what to do.” A part of him knew exactly what to do, but the war raged on. He wasn’t supposed to be in love with her. He wasn’t supposed to be in New York, in her house, in her arms. He leaned back against the front door for support. “Someone asked me if I had forgotten who I am.”

“Forgotten who you are?”

“Yes,” he stood on his own two feet again and looked at her.

“I don’t know if it’s a matter of *forgetting* who you are,” her tone was fierce. “I think it’s more a matter of *knowing* who you are right now.” Her words stung. “Who are you, Tareq?”

He was silent for what felt like an eternity. “I am not sure.”

Juliette looked at him in anguished disbelief. “If you’re not sure now, then maybe you never knew in the first place.” She kissed him on each cheek and went upstairs.

Tareq watched her go up the stairs and then stood in the foyer in shock at what had just happened. He felt dizzy and disoriented and leaned back against the door again. He looked down at himself, still in his boots and coat. He was dressed for the cold and decided to make use of it. He felt for his gloves in his pockets, opened the door, and left.

From her room upstairs, Juliette heard the door close behind him. She lowered herself to the edge of her bed and wept, her heart collapsing within her. She remembered her own moment of panic in Berlin. In Berlin, he had held her, and their embrace had made them both feel better. But now, she knew, he had to go his own way.

Tareq turned right onto the road this time, toward the main highway. He paid little attention to where he was going, concentrating only on putting one foot in front of the other. He walked and walked and was fairly certain that at least once he had gone in a circle. By late afternoon, he realized he had arrived back in the town, but at what he thought of as the far end of the main street, near the church.

A small group of people huddled outside on the church's slate tile pathway. From Tareq's distance, their darkly coated bodies seemed to recede into the building's white clapboard exterior that was glowing faintly in the misty dusk. A burly man carrying a bag over his shoulder arrived with a key and opened the building's bright red door. The crowd rushed into the church's warmth like sand through a funnel.

Tareq crossed the street and took a seat in the back of the church as the people he had been watching gathered at the front. The large man took black folders from his bag and handed one to each person, chatting gregariously as he went, and then sat down at a piano. From the piano, he raised his left hand high and suggested they warm up first. A second later, his right hand began a series of arpeggios, and the voices sang out in unison. The choir rehearsed numerous Christmas carols, some of which were familiar to Tareq from movies, car radios, and homes of Americans he knew in Damascus. He recognized the Bach cantata, too; the choir director said something about working on that for two Sundays from now.

Tareq closed his eyes and allowed himself to think of Juliette, to think about kissing Juliette. He remembered the kiss he had given her late at night in the dim light of the hotel lobby in Cairo. He had taken the day off work that day. But now he realized he had also taken that day off from himself. He had stepped outside of his life as he knew it to embrace a life that he wanted.

The rehearsal ended, and Tareq felt the weight of his heart again. As the singers left the church, Tareq stood up to leave, too, but the choir conductor stopped him with a greeting. "Hello, there!" he called from the piano. "You new here?"

Tareq stood where he was as the man approached him down the church's center aisle. When they were nearly face to face, Tareq put one hand on his chest and shook the man's hand with the other. "I am Tareq. Thank you."

"For what?"

“The music. It was beautiful.”

“You’re welcome. Any time. You sing?”

“No,” Tareq shook his head. “I used to play the piano.”

“Don’t say *used to*,” the man slapped him on the back. “Once you play the piano, you never forget. That right Betty?” A petite elderly woman nodded vehemently from well below Tareq’s shoulder. “Betty here’s been teaching piano in these parts for 50 years.” Betty tilted her head back to meet Tareq’s eyes. “I’m Bob,” the man continued. “I play the piano at the church and direct the choir. Just for fun. What about you?”

“I am from Cairo.”

“Cairo? Egypt?” Bob queried. Tareq nodded. “We don’t get many people from Egypt around here.” Tareq knew this. “Well, the least I can do is buy you a drink!”

“I do not drink alcohol.”

“I don’t drink alcohol, either,” Bob leaned in to say, “but probably not for the same reason as you.” Tareq didn’t understand. “Coffee shop or Romeo’s then? On me!”

“The coffee shop,” Tareq replied, not entirely sure he had just heard himself accept an invitation from a total stranger. But then again, after the last 90 minutes of music, Tareq felt he knew this man well enough.

“You’re a man after my own heart, Tareq.” Bob pushed Tareq out the door and down the street to the coffee shop.

The bell jingled again, as it had before, and the same waitress waved her pencil in the air when she saw Bob and Tareq arrive. “Any table’ll do,” she told them. Bob grabbed two menus from near the door and made the table choice for them both.

“So what’re you doing here, Tareq?” Bob asked as they settled into a booth. Tareq explained that he had worked with Juliette’s late husband in the Middle East and that he had come to pay his respects.

“So you came all this way to see a woman whose husband rarely bothered to come all this way to see her?” Tareq nodded. Bob had pretty much hit the nail on the head. “And now you’re sitting at the town diner with me?” Tareq nodded again. “Sounds like you’ve got some thinking to do.”

“I do,” Tareq admitted.

“Well let me give you a little unsolicited advice, Tareq,” Bob started out. Tareq listened, but in the back of his head he was thinking that the United States was a land of unrelenting unsolicited advice. Bob on his relationship with Juliette, commercials on television telling people they needed all sorts of things that were unnecessary, and everyone commenting on the “situation” in the Middle East.

“I was married once,” Tareq now rejoined the train of Bob’s story. “But I had a drinking problem. My wife left me.” Bob looked down at the menu and scratched his balding head. “Now I’m sober.” He looked back up at Tareq. “Kids talk to me again. So that’s good. But my wife, she’s remarried now.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Tareq’s words were sincere.

“So am I, Mr. T, so am I.” Bob flipped the menu over to the side featuring food rather than beverages.

The waitress with the eyes appeared before them to take their order. “Tea again?” she said, looking at Tareq. Tareq nodded. “Anything to eat?” He shook his head.

“C’mon, Tareq, it’s dinner time. You gotta eat something.”

“Spaghetti?” Tareq asked. On television, he’d seen people eating spaghetti in restaurants that looked like this one.

The waitress wrote something down. “You, Bob?”

“The usual, Fran.” The waitress didn’t write anything else down and walked off toward the kitchen.

“And I’ll tell you this,” Bob continued, “you don’t want to be alone when you’re my age. Choir practice is nice, but I’d rather be at home with the missus.” Tareq thought of Juliette at home right then, alone, perhaps eating dinner at the kitchen table.

The two men sat silently for a moment. Bob changed the topic, asking question after question about life in Cairo. He wanted to know about Tareq’s family, the café, the river Nile, the pyramids. Their dinner plates came and went, and Bob pressed on. He wanted to know who Tareq was.

“Bob, honey,” Fran called from the other side of the diner. “Closing time.”

“Well look at that!” Bob exclaimed. “Tareq, why don’t I take you back home?”

Tareq accepted the offer readily. Giving strangers a ride home seemed to be common in the United States.

Back home, Juliette was growing anxious. She had long since given up on eating dinner. She had left her plate untouched in the kitchen and tried instead to get comfortable at the dining room table. Eventually she had pushed that chair back and moved to the living room sofa, where she had now been sitting for what felt like an eon. It was dark and cold outside, and Tareq hadn’t called or texted. Several times she’d started to dial his number, but had stopped herself. He needed to answer his questions, she thought, not his phone.

When the clock hands swept past 9 pm, she began to dial his number. But then she saw headlights sweep over her front porch, and waves of relief flowed over her.

Through the window she saw Tareq get out of the car and wave to the driver. She watched him walk towards the house and heard his steps on the front porch, but did not move. But then he knocked. She got up from the sofa and opened the door.

“I do not have a key,” he apologized.

She walked to the desk in the foyer and scrounged for a spare. “Here,” she said, placing the key in his hand. He closed his hand tightly around hers and held the rest of her with uncensored eyes.

“Don’t torture me, Tareq,” she said to him. Her voice was quiet, but her tone adamant. “You know how I feel.”

The idea that he had the capacity to torture her was unbearable, and she could see that in his expression. “I feel as you do,” he whispered.

“Then what’s standing in the way?”

“I am in the way,” he replied with quiet clarity. “You are right. It is more important to know than to remember.” He stood as near to her as he could without touching her. “I need to think.”

“Then I’d suggest you think,” she said, pushing the hair off his forehead lovingly. She could not stay angry with him. “For both our sakes.”

He nodded slightly and took her hand from his forehead. He kissed her fingers one by one and then returned her hand to her. “I will. I promise.” And then he climbed the stairs, still in his coat and boots.

The next morning Juliette kissed him on each cheek and hugged him briefly. Their interactions were awkward and contrived, but that seemed to be the order of the day.

“So what are you up to today?” Juliette asked. “Hardware store again?”

“I will visit the library.” Tareq had noted the library’s hours on the carved, wooden sign next to the main door. “Today it opens at 1.”

“I think that might be when the post office decides to be open, too,” Juliette tried to joke. “Honestly, they’re a federal agency. How that post office gets away with irregular hours is beyond me. But after lunch is a good time to try. I’ll drive you in.”

Tareq spent the morning arranging and rearranging the treasure trove of new tools that had never moved beyond the foyer from the previous afternoon. He would need to return to the hardware store after the library, he realized, to get another toolbox. But the main exploration for the day would be a public library in a small town in the United States of America.

Juliette dropped him in front of the library before continuing on to the post office. She'd swing by the hardware store for the extra toolbox; she reassured him she'd defer to Earl's selection. Then she needed to go to the next town over and would return for him in a few hours.

Tareq walked up the bricked path to the library. Narrow flowerbeds, planted with purple and green cabbages, lined the path and were flanked on either side by patches of fading grass. Tareq took hold of the wrought iron railing that served the three concrete steps up to a small landing and opened the library door slowly. No bell jingled and he entered unnoticed. He reflexively removed his shoes and then hung his coat on a rack that stood right by the door.

The library was silent, but unlike the empty roads, it was warm and inviting. Immediately before him stood rows of book cases – tall, darkly stained, with decorative cornices. To the left was a formally arranged seating area with a fireplace that gave the library a homey ambiance. To the right was the librarian's desk, a mahogany table with heavily carved legs ending in clawed feet that held spheres in their talons. The chair behind the desk was empty, but Tareq could hear someone in the shelves immediately behind the desk.

A woman appeared from around the corner of one of the shelves. "May I help you?" she asked. Tareq didn't know how to respond. He didn't know if he needed help, but he was also not sure what he should do. "Hello," she continued, stretching out her hand as she walked toward him. "I'm Marian. I'm the librarian here." Marian waited for him to make a joke about her name as they shook hands, but Tareq heard nothing humorous.

"I am Tareq."

"Hi, Tareq. That's a beautiful name," Marian replied. "And you get the prize for being the first person not to smirk at my name." She could see the confusion in his face. "Marian. The Librarian." She waited for a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. "You know, *The Music Man*?" Tareq shook his head. "It's a silly musical," she continued, "and God bless you for not knowing it." Tareq did not know what divine blessing had to do with it, but he was happy for her. "Have you moved here recently?" she asked.

"I am new to this town."

"Where are you from?"

"Cairo."

"Well, welcome! Is there anything in particular you'd like to know about?" Tareq shook his head. Marian crinkled her forehead. "Well, then, maybe you can help me." She looked at him expectantly. "Do you speak Arabic?"

"Of course."

“We just received a small Arabic collection,” she told him. “It was donated by someone who used to live in the area. But honestly, I don’t know what it all is. Would you mind taking a look?”

“Of course,” Tareq agreed, and she showed him two shelves of books with spines written in Arabic.

“This is the Koran,” he said immediately, taking the book from the shelf. He explained to her the conventions of respect for the holy book of Islam and suggested ways she could store it appropriately at the library. “These books here,” he pointed to a grouping of five or six, “some would say you ought to burn them. But in my opinion, you should put them on display.” He thought back to the monument in Bebelplatz, he and Juliette kneeling down to look at the sorrow of burning any book. “These books over here,” he ran his index finger over about a dozen volumes, “are poetry. This one,” he pointed to a book with a particularly beautiful binding, “is the poetry of Rumi, a famous Sufi. Very beautiful. Very old.”

“Is any of the poetry contemporary?” Marian asked.

“No,” he replied, scanning the titles again. “These are all from the past.”

“And these?” she pointed to the remaining books.

He studied the titles. “Histories, geographies, ancient stories. I am familiar with some, but not all.” He took one of the books from the shelf and explained the contents to her in detail.

“Very helpful, Tareq. I’ve been looking at this collection for weeks, but had no idea what to make of it. Do you think you might come back again and help me document the collection?” She explained to him what that would entail, and he agreed. “Thank you, Tareq. This clearly was my lucky day.”

“You are most welcome, Marian. The Librarian.” He began to smile at her, but then stopped short. To tease required familiarity and confidence, neither of which Tareq possessed in this new milieu. He took a few of the Arabic books and settled into the chair by the fireplace to await Juliette’s return. One volume had especially kept his attention: a collection of folktales he had read as a child but had not seen in many years. He was engrossed in a story about a cat when he felt Juliette tap his shoulder.

“Good afternoon?” Juliette inquired.

“Very good,” he replied, rising from his chair. His face glowed at the sight of her. “Do you know Marian?”

“The Librarian?” Juliette asked. “Yes.” It was clear to Tareq that Juliette got the joke. “Hi Marian!” Juliette called at full voice. The library was empty, and Marian was not at her desk.

“Juliette!” Marian replied, emerging from the books. “How good to see you!”

The women exchanged hugs. "I see you've met Tareq."

"Yes!" Marian exclaimed, eyeing Juliette curiously. "I should have guessed this reader was with you. You're probably the only person around here who would have a visitor from the Middle East."

"Tareq used to work with my late husband."

"I see," Marian's voice turned somber. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Juliette said. "Tareq will be here for a few weeks," she changed the subject, "so I'm guessing you'll see more of him."

"I hope so. He's very helpful. I had no idea what to do with some books in Arabic. But Tareq's going to help me get them properly catalogued."

"This one," Tareq handed the book of folk tales back to Marian, "took me back to my childhood. I will come for it again."

"See you tomorrow then?" Marian asked Tareq. Tareq looked at Juliette and then nodded. "Great. Come in the morning, before the library opens. It's easier to get housekeeping stuff done then."

Tareq put on his coat and gloves as he and Juliette left the library. "Where to?"

"I was thinking Romeo's. I ran into Earl parking the car, and he asked me again if I'd taken you there yet, so I think I'd better fulfill that duty. We're early enough that we won't need a reservation."

Juliette and Tareq crossed the road. There was hardly any reason to look both ways before crossing the street in this town, Tareq thought. He opened the restaurant door for her and was happy not to hear any bells. The restaurant was open, but nearly empty, and the waiters were still setting up. A young man approached. "Good evening, Miss Juliette," he greeted her. "You are welcome to sit, but the kitchen will not be ready for another 15 minutes."

"That's fine, Giancarlo," Juliette said after exchanging a quick glance with Tareq. "Where's Romeo tonight?" Romeo always greeted Juliette at the door.

"He is in New York. He orders things for the holidays. Italian specialties." Giancarlo showed them to a table and handed them menus. Tareq glanced over the menu quickly. He recognized the names of the dishes, and there wasn't much pork to avoid.

"How was your afternoon?" Tareq asked, putting down his menu.

"Good. Yours?"

"Very nice. Marian showed me many books at the library."

Juliette lowered her menu and signaled to Giancarlo to take their orders. Tareq waited for Giancarlo to leave and then explained that Marian wanted his help with something she called *documenting the Arabic collection*. Tareq would write up short biographies of each of the authors represented, prepare short synopses of each of the books, and make a list of translations into English that he deemed acceptable. He was clearly enthusiastic about the project, and Juliette felt increasingly at ease with him again, but held herself at a distance.

As they were finishing their meal, Giancarlo appeared at their table with a cell phone. "Romeo wishes to greet you," he said to Juliette. He handed her the phone and then walked to the restaurant's entrance to welcome some new arrivals.

"Hello, Romeo," Juliette said into the phone, rolling her eyes for Tareq to see. "Yes, dinner was delicious." Tareq could hear Romeo's voice over the phone. "Giancarlo was very polite, yes, he's doing an excellent job." Juliette swayed her head back and forth impatiently. "Okay, Romeo, see you soon." Now she tapped her fingers on the table. "Yes, I'll be by after Christmas to try that." Juliette tried several strategies to end the conversation, and finally one worked. Tareq was more relieved than Juliette. He disliked Romeo already.

Juliette caught Giancarlo's attention and returned the phone. "Just the check," she said.

"I will take that," Tareq stated firmly to Giancarlo when he returned to the table.

Juliette waited for Giancarlo to walk away and then leaned over the table to Tareq. "We made a deal in Berlin, remember? My treat in New York."

"No. You made a statement. I said nothing."

"Really, Tareq," she shook her head. "You can be the most stubborn person in the world."

"Yes," he agreed, almost breezily. He looked stronger now.

The wind was up the next the morning, and Juliette offered to drive Tareq into town. But he preferred to walk; the routine offered comfort even if the weather did not. She'd come for him at noon, they agreed.

When Juliette knocked at midday, Tareq opened the door in stocking feet. "Having fun?" she asked. He nodded and extended his arm to welcome her into the library.

"Almost ready," he replied.

"Hi Juliette!" Marian called, emerging from the shelves behind her desk. "Should we all go across the street and grab something?" She asked them both, but looked at Juliette.

"Sure," Juliette agreed. "Tareq should know what an American diner is all about."

“I’d say so,” Marian replied. “Yeah, Tareq?”

Tareq kept his mouth noncommittal. Neither Juliette nor Marian could have guessed that he already knew the diner fairly well. This time Tareq was more than prepared for the jingling bell, and he grabbed three menus as they walked to a table.

“You again?” Fran said to Tareq when she arrived at their table. Juliette threw him a confused look, and Tareq shrugged his shoulders. “I know it’s tea for him,” she launched in, “and coffee for you, Marian. What about you?” she looked at Juliette through her thick eye-liner.

“Tea.”

“And to eat?” They hadn’t had time to look at the menus, but her customers generally knew what they wanted.

“Greek salad,” Marian ordered.

The waitress looked at Juliette impatiently.

“What is the soup today?” Juliette asked meekly, feeling like Oliver Twist asking for more.

Fran pulled a piece of paper from the pocket of her pink and white striped shirt and lowered her glasses from her head to her eyes. “Roasted tomato and red pepper with basil pesto garnish,” she read haltingly.

“Excuse me?” Juliette asked.

“The cook ate it at Romeo’s the other day and wanted to try it out for himself.”

“I see,” Juliette said, “it sounds delicious.”

“Sounds like eight more words than *tomato* to me,” Fran rolled her eyes, “but the cook says he’s been *inspired*.”

Juliette tried not to chuckle. Marian failed in her attempt. Tareq simply looked on in amazement. “I’ll have the soup,” Juliette ordered, “and a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“And you, doll face?” the waitress looked at Tareq. He tried to imagine himself with a doll’s head propped at the top of his neck. “What do you want?”

“I would like a hamburger,” he ordered as confidently as he could. This was the other thing he had seen people on television eating in a restaurant like this.

“With everything?” Fran tapped her pencil on her notepad. Tareq looked at Juliette, who explained that meant lettuce, tomato and onion.

“Yes,” he stated tentatively.

“Ketchup, mayo, mustard?”

“Yes,” Juliette helped out, “but on the side.”

“Fries, mash or slaw?” Fran’s rapid fire continued.

Juliette turned to Tareq again, and not thinking about Marian and Fran, gently placed one hand on his forearm. “Would you like potatoes or something made from cabbage?”

“Cabbage,” Tareq’s stated clearly. His arm twitched. Juliette remembered they were not alone withdrew her hand quickly.

“The cole slaw,” Juliette continued the translation. Fran made a few scribbles on her pad and left the table. Juliette let out a sigh of relief.

“So Juliette,” Marian launched in, “have you taken Tareq to the city yet?”

“No,” Juliette shook her head apologetically. “We were busy with the kids over Thanksgiving, and I’ve got deadlines for the next week or so. But then things free up.”

Marian shot her glance that in a split second said, *Girlfriend, if I had this man living in my house I wouldn’t be worrying about deadlines.*

Juliette blushed instantly, and returned the look with embarrassed eyes that chided, *Marian, really!* She hoped Tareq hadn’t seen the exchange. If only Marian knew.

“Well Tareq needs to see Rockefeller Center at the holidays. The tree. The skating rink. The whole shebang.” Marian had both elbows on the table now and was waving her fork in Tareq’s direction.

“You’re right,” Juliette said to Marian, “I’m not much of a tour guide.” She turned to Tareq. “We’ll go to the city as soon as I finish up. Rockefeller Center. The tree. The skating rink.” She turned toward Marian. “The whole shebang.”

Tareq placed his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hands, his eyes on Juliette. “I would like that,” he nodded. He stopped his shoulder from swaying involuntarily toward Juliette, but just barely. Marian observed him closely and concluded that while he may have worked with Juliette’s late husband, when it came to the widow, it was all about play.

After dinner that night, Juliette sat down at her computer and reviewed all her financial information. She already knew she could afford to take a month off of work, but she reassured herself anyway. She logged out of her accounts and opened her email. “Not even 100 waiting for me,” she laughed to herself, and then she wrote to her editor.

“Dear Stephanie,

“I’ve got company in town. I’ll make the December deadlines, but I’d like you to find someone else to take my next assignment. I need to take a break for a few weeks.”

Juliette

She hit *send*, happy again that she could not remember how to recall an email.

Homecoming

On Friday, Tareq had an afternoon shift at the library. The local garden club was having its holiday lunch in the library, so it was after 3 o'clock before he settled into what was now his table. When he arrived, Marian was cleaning up some cupcakes that had real flowers in them, supported by green plastic straws. "Would you like one?" Marian offered. Tareq shook his head. There were some things about American culture, he was confident, that would never make sense to him.

Marian put her own cupcake on her desk. "Well, I've got something you're going to like better than that cupcake anyway." She picked up a book off her desk and pointed to the Islamic tile art design on the jacket cover. "I wanted the Arabic collection to have some contemporary poetry, and I found this one." She pulled her chair next to Tareq's and handed him the slim volume. "It's a collection of Arabic love poems. Look," she paused to give Tareq time to see for himself. "It's got the poems in Arabic on one side and the English translations on the other. Isn't it great? And the poems themselves are gorgeous."

Tareq gingerly flipped the pages. "May I read this now?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied. "That's why I'm showing it to you."

Tareq left his desk and made himself comfortable by the library's roaring fireplace. Marian didn't usually turn on the fireplace – *fire and paper don't mix*, she'd told him the first day they'd met – but the garden club had insisted.

"It's a gas fireplace anyway," Marian observed from across the library. "Should be safe enough." The idea of a gas fireplace was as odd to Tareq as a flower in a cupcake, but he appreciated the safety benefits it offered. And even without wood, the fire cast a warm glow.

Tareq read through poem after poem, reveling in the rhythms of his native tongue. He read some the shorter poems in translation, too, but stuck mainly to Arabic. And then he read the words he had been looking for without knowing that he was looking for them. He read this particular poem several times, both in Arabic and English. The translation was good, he reassured himself; he would not have to explain a word. He got up from the chair and returned to his table, hoping Marian would not notice him. He hurriedly found pen and paper and then steadied himself to write out the poem in English to give to Juliette.

She said: My love...you will forget me
And you will forget that I, one day
Have granted you my heart
And you will adore another wave
And you will leave my beaches' warmth
And you will sit, as we used to
To listen to some of my tones
And you will not care for my sorrows
And my name will fall as hope
And my address will get lost
So, my Love, will you say
That you (once) loved me!?

So I said: your love is my faith
My forgiveness and my disobedience.
I met you with hope
Remaining in my arms
Like Spring without a bird.
On the ruins of a garden,
The winds of sadness squeeze me
And laugh in my chest.

I love you ... like an oasis
On which all my sorrows have calmed down.
I love you like an aura that tells
My songs to people's silence.
I love you...like ecstasy that runs
And fires my volcano.
I love you...you. Hope
That like morning light meets me.
Love has killed many lovers,
And your love has given life to me.
And if I were to choose a home
I would say my home is your love.
And if I were to forget you,
My heart would forget me.
If I lost my way,
I would live in your eyes.

He folded the paper and put it in his shirt pocket for later. "Very beautiful," he said impassively as he handed the book back to Marian. "A good addition to the library."

"I'm glad you like it. I took a risk and bought two copies, thinking you might. Merry Christmas, Tareq." Marian handed him a copy tied with a red ribbon. "Once you're back in Cairo, I hope it's a nice souvenir."

Tareq studied Marian's eyes, slowly absorbing the knowledge that a woman he had only met a few days earlier had just given him a book of love poems.

“Merry Christmas, Marian.” He didn’t entirely know what it meant to wish someone a Merry Christmas, but he exchanged the greeting sincerely. Marian’s face beamed back at him, the warmth of her expression matching the brightness of her orange sweater. The sweater’s V-neck offered a peek of cleavage that reminded Tareq that he was not at home. “I am sorry I have nothing for you.”

“Tareq, honey, believe me, you’ve given me plenty. And if you’ll take some of those cupcakes,” she pointed over to a plate on the next table, “I’ll thank you even more.”

“There are some wishes I cannot grant,” he shook his head, feigning disappointment. “But may I look at one more closely?”

“Be my guest,” Marian retrieved a cupcake for his inspection, and as he rotated it in his hand, they both burst out laughing. They were just discussing how to dispose of the remaining desserts when Juliette entered the library.

“Is it time already?” Tareq asked.

“6 o’clock,” Juliette confirmed. “You two look like you’re having fun.”

Tareq showed Juliette a cupcake. “We do not have these in Cairo,” he informed her, and then he and Marian began cackling again.

“I think it’s time for me to get you out of here,” Juliette joked. “I think you two have been cooped up in this place too long.”

“Merry Christmas, Juliette,” Marian greeted her with a hug. “And if you can spare him some more, I can always use a good recruit.”

“We may be busy, but I’ll see.”

When they turned into the driveway, Tareq sighed contentedly at the crunch of the gravel beneath the car’s wheels. He got out quickly and opened her car door as always, and then opened the front door for her as well. He felt for the poem in his pocket and handed her his coat, leaving the book with its red ribbon in the jacket. He did not want her to know that Marian had given him a gift.

“Juliette,” he took her hand and held it. “I have something for you.”

His hand felt calm, and she felt no need to let go. “Don’t you want to wait until the 25th?”

“No.” The 25th of December held little meaning for him, and his gift was urgent. “I would like to give it to you now. Please,” he pointed to the living room and walked her to the sofa. He turned on the reading lamp and sat down next to her, his knees angled into hers. “Marian bought a new book of poems for the library. Arabic poems. I wrote one out for you. I would like you to read it.” He took the folded paper from his pocket and handed it to her. Juliette picked up her glasses from the table, unfolded the paper carefully and read the poem for what to Tareq

seemed like an eternity. He wanted to say something, to hear her say something, but he kept quiet as she absorbed the words of a poet faraway.

When Juliette finished reading the poem, she folded the paper slowly and held it in her hand. She breathed deeply and then put the poem on the table and placed her glasses on top of the poem. She reached out for him with one hand, eyes on the folded paper. Breathing deeply again, she turned her face toward him.

Tareq could see the tears welling in her eyes, and he took both of her hands in his. "I know who I am now." His voice was quiet but confident. "And I know that if I forget you, my heart will forget me."

"And I know that I live in your eyes."

"Juliette," he whispered. "You must know. I have wanted to make love to you since Cairo."

"I know, Tareq."

"Juliette, I am not," he stopped, unsure how to explain himself. "I am not a *modern* man. I think people here would say that I am old-fashioned."

"Yes, Tareq, sometimes you are old-fashioned. But it's one of the things I love about you."

"Juliette, for me to make love to you is to marry you. They are the same. If I make love to you, I marry you. I do not take this lightly."

"Nor do I, Tareq," she whispered.

"Juliette, you know this. I never married."

"Never? Yasmeen?"

"No, no. We were young. I loved her as a young, unmarried Muslim man should love a young, unmarried woman." His statement was definitive. "But," he continued, almost as a confession, "I suppose I made love to her with my eyes. Touch does not have to be physical to be real, to be felt." He took Juliette's face in his hands. "I have made love to you with my eyes."

"Yes, you have."

"To marry, though, is not only a matter for you and me."

"I'm not worried about my family," she said. "Please don't worry about my family." They both knew her family wasn't an issue. "But your family..."

"My family," Tareq sighed heavily. "But I belong now to you. I cannot say, *this is the moment when I ceased to be my own*. But this is what has happened. I belong to you." He placed his forehead on hers. "You are my address. I live in your eyes."

“I’ve belonged to you for a long time now, Tareq.” She couldn’t recall the exact moment, either, but she knew it had happened in Cairo. “But this is a big commitment. It’s between us, but it’s bigger than us.” She could feel him nod his head against her brow.

“If we marry, I will never again be at home in Egypt.”

“I can’t ask you to make that sacrifice, Tareq. I want you here with me. But I won’t ask you to make that sacrifice.” She was glad she was looking down. He was going to have to figure out this visa on his own, and she didn’t want to see his eyes. Not right then.

“Juliette, I know who I am now. But I need time to understand this.”

“I understand, Tareq. Really, I do.” She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her face into his neck. “Just don’t let go while you’re figuring it out.”

“I will not. I promise.”

“Maybe this will help,” she said, taking the blue pashmina from her shoulders and wrapping it around him. They curled up on the sofa, just as they had on his first night in New York, and said nothing more.

Juliette’s phone rang early the next morning, waking her from a solid sleep. It was Emily.

“I’m on the train, Mom. Thought I’d come up to see you and Tareq. Is that okay?”

“Sure honey.”

“Good, I guess, because I’m already on my way. Sorry I didn’t ask first.”

“You never need to ask, sweetheart. This is your home.”

“Thanks, Mom. See you in an hour or so.”

“Call when you get close, and I’ll send Tareq to the station with the car.”

Juliette walked down the hall to look for Tareq, but he wasn’t there. She found him in the kitchen, sitting at the table, his back to the dining room, paper in hand, and a cup of tea before him.

“Juliette,” he called to her softly, rising from the table. He reached for her arms and kissed her cheeks as calmly as he had held her hand the night before. “Good morning.” His eyes looked like the ocean after a storm.

“Emily’s coming today.”

“She is?” he asked, pleasantly surprised.

“She just called to say she’s already on the train. Can you pick her up at the station when she gets here?”

“Of course.”

“Great.” She reached one hand to his neck, ran her thumb across his jaw quickly and then let go. “So what are you cooking for breakfast?” He shrugged his shoulders and then walked to the cupboard. “No koshary,” Juliette joked. “Let’s look in here.” She opened the refrigerator and took out some eggs. “Can you work with these?”

“Of course.”

Juliette sat at the table and watched Tareq make breakfast. He boiled eggs, made toast, and worked his magic at the coffee maker. “Home sweet home,” Juliette said aloud.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“Just a phrase we have in America,” she replied. “Home, sweet home.”

“Home is sweet,” he agreed. He kissed her cheek and rested in her for a moment.

As they were finishing up breakfast, Emily called. She was 10 minutes away.

“You go,” Juliette handed Tareq her car keys as he put on his boots and coat. “I’ll clean up the dishes. And don’t forget these,” she said, handing him his gloves. “Be sure Emily sees you wearing these.”

“Of course,” he replied, kissed her and was off.

By the time they returned, the kitchen was clean and Juliette was dressed. She met Tareq and Emily at the car as they came up the drive. She opened the door for her daughter and hugged her close. “Good to see you, honey,” she sighed. “Thanks for the unexpected visit.”

Once inside, Juliette and Emily sat at the kitchen table and watched Tareq make coffee for Emily. Coffee secure, Emily went to the desk in the foyer and returned with a deck of cards. “Know this game?” she asked Tareq. He shook his head. “Mom and I will teach you,” she threatened playfully.

After Tareq had mastered the game, they dug into another round of Thanksgiving leftovers. Tareq had now eaten more turkey in a week than he had consumed in his life, and now he heaped the holiday staples on his plate without decorum. As they ate, Emily regaled them with stories from her office and updated them on her own writing projects as well. Juliette and Tareq chimed in with their own experiences from offices and from life. As they chatted, Tareq pressed his knee against Juliette’s under the table.

“Are we decorating the tree tonight?” Emily asked as she began to clear the table.

“Sure,” Juliette replied, “But I need to pick up a few things first. Tareq, would you like to come along?”

“He can’t,” Emily declared. Both Tareq and Juliette looked at her in confusion. “Tareq needs to learn how to make chocolate chip cookies.”

“He does?” Juliette asked, perplexed. “That’s not usually the sort of cookie you make at Christmas.”

“He didn’t get a visa for Christmas, Mom. He got a visa for America. And this,” Emily found a bag of chocolate chips in the cupboard, “is America.” Emily was teasing, but she was also completely serious. “Do you know what these are?” Emily asked Tareq.

“I believe so.”

“Well today, Tareq, you’re going to *know* so,” she handed him the chocolate chips. “The only recipe you need is right on the package. Start by finding all of these ingredients,” she pointed to some small print, “and I’ll get out the mixer.” She was as focused as any commanding officer, and Tareq fell into line.

Juliette looked at Tareq to make sure this all sounded like a good idea to him, and he nodded. “Okay then,” Juliette said to Emily. “By the time I get back, I expect this house to smell really good.”

“It will, Mom. We promise.”

Juliette took her shopping bags and car keys and headed out the door. She looked back at Tareq once more to see how he was faring under Emily’s rule. They were focused intensely as Tareq showed Emily how to juggle using two sticks of butter. Juliette closed the door behind them without their knowing that she had left.

Emily walked Tareq through the steps of making the perfect chocolate chip cookie. He listened attentively and, Emily complimented him, asked the right questions. When the first batch came out of the oven, Emily handed him a spatula while she adjusted the cooling racks. “Put them here,” she pointed to the racks. “I’ll get us some milk.”

Emily put two glasses of milk on the kitchen table and then fetched a plate. She confirmed that the cookies were cool enough and then put six on the plate for them to share. “Don’t tell Mom,” she said to him surreptitiously. “She’d say two per person was enough.”

“They are not big,” Tareq lied, peaking his eyebrows.

Tareq sat in his now usual chair, facing into the dining room. Emily sat to his right in the third chair Juliette had squeezed into the kitchen, and raised her milk glass for a toast. “To your first homemade chocolate chip cookies! May there be many more!”

“Many more!” he agreed.

Emily took a bite followed by another gulp of milk. She sat silent for a moment, wondering how much of a risk she should take with Tareq. A part of her counseled herself to err on the side of caution, but this was not her normal *modus operandi*. So she spoke her mind. “Tareq, I can tell you care about my mom. I can see it in the way you look at her.”

Tareq stopped mid-bite and then put his cookie down on the edge of the communal plate. “I do, Emily,” he said, trying to insulate himself from her statement. He would not pretend he was not in love with Juliette, but he was not used to speaking so openly. “I care for your mother very much.”

“And she cares about you.” Tareq thought about Juliette’s pashmina, which he had tucked in the pocket of his winter coat. “She doesn’t talk about you a lot,” Emily pressed on, “but that’s the way I know she cares. There’s too much for her to say, so she doesn’t say anything.” Tareq appreciated Emily’s insight. “It’s not my place, which has never stopped me before,” she forged on, “so I’m just going to say it. You two both seem like it’s all a done deal. I don’t know what you’re doing in the guest room.”

Tareq was not even 30 years older than Emily and had been born and raised on the same planet Earth. But his universe and Emily’s might as well have been light years apart. “Emily, it is appropriate that I sleep in the guest room.”

“Whatever,” she replied. “I’m just saying: if you two love each other, then go ahead and love each other. There’s nothing to stop you. She’s a widow, you’re unattached.” She paused. “You *are* unattached, right?”

Tareq guffawed as leaned back in his chair, his eyes wide with the humor of Emily’s question. When he managed to stop laughing, he stared at Emily, trying in vain to imagine her in Cairo, sitting at his family’s table, chocolate chip cookie in hand. But then his face darkened. “Your father has not been gone even a year,” he countered.

“Tareq,” Emily stated his name firmly, “my father died.” Tears filled her eyes, and she bit her lip. “Dad’s gone,” she stated with resolve. “He’s just as gone today as he was six months ago. And six months from now, he’ll be just as gone. Dead is dead is dead.” She bit her lip again and ran her hands through her hair. “But,” she was emphatic, “alive is *alive*.” She tracked his eyes to make sure he was paying attention. “And alive today is not what it was six months ago, and it’s not what it’s going to be six months from now. Alive changes all the time.”

Tareq felt the waves of her words, and the kindling of an unfamiliar love stirred in his heart. He guessed this was what fathers felt for their daughters. “Thank you, Emily,” he said softly. Just then they heard car wheels on the gravel. “Your mother is home.”

“Sounds like it,” Emily said, rising from the table. “I’ll get the next batch of cookies started in the oven. Make sure the house smells good for her.”

Tareq got up from the table, too, walked to the foyer, and slipped on his shoes. He placed his hand deliberately on the door handle and opened the door. As he stepped onto the porch, the icy wind blew through his shirt. He decided against going back for his coat, closed the door behind him and walked to the car. When the engine stopped, he opened Juliette's car door and stood close to the driver's seat, one hand on the car door and the other on the roof. As she got out of the car, the only place she could go was his arms.

"Juliette." His eyes bathed her in love.

"Yes, Tareq," she replied. His eyes were at peace. The war had ended.

He hugged her in a way that banished the past and defied the future. "I love you, Juliette," he whispered into her ear. "With all my heart."

"I love you, Tareq," she pulled herself back so that he could see her eyes. "More than I can say."

"We have cookies for you," he whispered, squeezing her once more. "Let me take the shopping bags."

At the front door, Tareq pulled his house key from his pocket, unlocked the door and pushed it open for Juliette.

"House smells good," Juliette called to Emily. Tareq put the bags down in the foyer and they walked into the kitchen.

"Sit," Tareq ordered Juliette, pulling out Juliette's chair a few inches to the side. "You must have one of Emily's cookies."

"One of *our* cookies, Tareq," Emily corrected. "You juggled the butter, remember?"

Tareq sat down across from his half-eaten cookie while Emily got Juliette a glass of milk. When they were all seated, Tareq raised his milk glass for a toast. "I must tell you the truth, Juliette. I prefer chocolate chip cookies to s'mores."

"You fed him s'mores?" Emily asked her mother, astonished.

"She spoiled my dinner," Tareq admitted sheepishly, and then Tareq and Juliette giggled under their breath in unison and put their arms across each other's shoulders. It would be a Merry Christmas after all, Emily thought to herself.

After coffee on Sunday morning, Tareq took Emily back to the train. They arrived at the station early and sat together on a wooden bench next to the track. "Emily," he said when he saw the train approaching, "I am grateful for you."

"I'm grateful for you, too, Tareq." She squeezed his hand. Tareq walked with Emily to the platform's edge and handed her her backpack as she stepped onto the

train. Emily found a window seat near the door and waved goodbye as the train pulled out of the station. When Emily was fully out of sight, Tareq took off his gloves and reached into his coat pocket. Juliette's pashmina was soft and warm against his bare hand.

Back home, Tareq unlocked the door with his key and called for Juliette. Her voice called back from upstairs. He hesitated briefly, took off his shoes and coat, and then walked up to her room, the pashmina in his hand. Her door was open, and he stood in the doorway and watched her putting things away in a drawer, her back to him. The sun's rays shone through the window and landed at her feet.

He knocked.

"Tareq?" she turned around.

"Yes."

"Emily got off okay?" She extended her arms as she walked toward him.

"Yes," he said. "This is yours." He held the pashmina up for her to see and then draped it over her shoulders, lifting her fair hair from beneath the folds of blue. His hands stayed behind on her neck. "No curtains?" he asked, looking at the window behind her.

"All that's out there are trees. And I like having the sun in the morning and the moon at night."

He turned his eyes from the window to her face. "I belong with you," he said. "I belong here."

"Now that you're here, I belong here, too."

"But I must go. In a few weeks, I must return to Egypt."

"But then you'll come back."

"I will come back."

"And?" she asked.

He moved closer to her and curled some of her hair around his finger. "When I come back, I will stay here. With you."

"Stay, Tareq."

He placed his cheek against hers and whispered into her ear. "Juliette, I know now: *your love has given life to me*," he quoted the poem from memory. "*And if I were to choose a home, I would say my home is your love.*"

"You're my home, too, Tareq."

“And if I forget you, then my heart will forget me. If I forget you, I will forget who I am.”

“Then don’t forget me.”

“I will not, Juliette,” he looked at her now with patient longing, his hands planted on her arms. “I will marry you.” He searched her eyes and saw her plainly.

“Juliette, I will be your husband.”

“Yes, Tareq. You will be my husband.”

“And you will be my wife.”

“I will, Tareq. I will be your wife.” She pressed her face to his, and tears streamed down her cheeks and merged with his. They wept at first, and then reveled in the sound of their laughter.

Tareq released her long enough to remove the signet ring from his hand. He rotated it before her eyes and then slid it onto her ring finger, kissing both her hand and the ring on it. “This can do for now.”

And they married.

When Juliette’s alarm went off the next morning, the first thing she saw was Tareq’s arm across her side, hanging loosely over the white sheet. She lifted it with as little motion as she could, but he awoke and gripped her tightly.

“Good morning,” he mumbled into her back.

“Good morning,” she replied. “I have to get to work.”

“No you don’t.”

“And you, too. What if you’re late to the library? What will Marian say then?” she teased.

Tareq peeked his head above her shoulder. “I will tell her I was making love to my wife. She will understand this.”

“I think she would understand,” Juliette giggled. “But the printer would not. Magazines go to press. No excuses.”

He released her at once and watched her rise from the bed. She put on her robe, found her computer on the bureau and returned to bed to check her email.

A reply from her editor was in her inbox telling her to enjoy her company. The email closed with a request:

Would you consider doing a story on Berlin? I just read that Berlin rivals NYC for diversity. Might be something our readers would like. Thought of you. Let me know.

Steph

Juliette replied immediately. “Yes,” she wrote. “I’ll do the story on Berlin. I’ll send you an outline before Christmas and get to work on it in Feb.”

“I’ve got a present for you,” she rolled over to Tareq. He propped himself up on one elbow to receive the gift. “Once I finish this assignment, I’ll have plenty of time. I wrote to my editor and told her I didn’t want any assignments until after January. I’m free for the rest of the time you’re here.”

He wasn’t sure he had heard her correctly. “You give me the present as a present?” The ways in which English words piggy-backed on one another intrigued him.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“Thank you, Juliette. I do not have the words.”

“I think you do,” she corrected him. “They’re on the coffee table under my glasses.”

The Eve

Tareq arrived for an afternoon shift at the library. Marian greeted him at the door as he removed his shoes and coat. He put his gloves in his coat pocket and hung the coat on a rickety stand that strained under the weight of the garment. "I will fix that for you, Marian," he said as he took his seat at his table. His eyes scanned the neat stacks of books, cards, bar code stickers and papers in front of him, and then he found the place where he had left off the previous Friday.

"Time flies when you're having fun," Marian said to him several hours later. He looked up at Marian from the book he was reading. "It's time to go, Tareq," she motioned him out of his chair. "I need to close up the library early today." She offered him a lift home, but Tareq shook his head. It wasn't quite 4 pm, and Juliette would still be working. "Then what'll you do?" Marian quizzed with concern.

"I will walk," he said, pointing in the direction of the church.

"The weather's turning nasty," Marian tried to dissuade him. "Are you sure?"

He nodded and held up his cell phone. "I will call Juliette if necessary."

Tareq walked down the town's only real street, reflecting on the week that had just passed. Earl waved to him from the front door of the hardware store, and Tareq could see Fran through the coffee shop window. Tareq wondered what sort of soup she'd have to explain that day and contemplated showing the cook how to make *koshary*.

As he walked toward the church, Tareq remembered that Bob had needed a key to open the door. But he kept going, and when he pressed the door's handle, it opened for him. Tareq walked the length of the aisle and approached the piano. He sat down on the bench and reflexively adjusted the height, shifting his weight back and forth. His feet fumbled for the pedals, and he ran his fingers silently along the keyboard. He could not remember the last time he had played a piano, but he would try.

He began with scales, recalling his hatred for them as a child. They were boring and repetitive. Now as an adult, he had a greater appreciation for their predictability, and they soon led him to more interesting exercises, and then on to full pieces of music he had memorized decades earlier.

As Tareq reacquainted himself with this old friend, Juliette was at home, staring out the living room window and wondering why he wasn't home yet. She called his cell phone, but it went straight to voicemail. The icy wind was intensifying, so she set out for town to find him. She parked in front of the library, which was dark and obviously closed, and knocked at the door. She rifled through her handbag for her cell phone and called him again, but still no answer. She turned off the alarm bells in her head, and crossed the street to the diner. "Have you seen..." Juliette began to ask, and Fran shook her head; Juliette thanked her and left. She looked through the window of the convenience store, but didn't see him there, either. The hardware store, though, was a more likely spot anyway. She found Earl behind the counter, helping a customer.

"Looking for Tareq?" Earl asked, spying her from the corner of his eye as he rang up some purchases for a customer at the counter. She nodded. "I saw him walking down the street about half an hour ago. Toward the church."

Juliette walked in that direction, too. She had been by the church many times, but had never been inside. As she neared the door, she could hear someone playing the piano – it was the *Moonlight Sonata*, she was certain of it. Tareq would be inside listening, she thought. That made sense.

But when she opened the door, she saw Tareq at the piano, playing the piece, his shoulders at ease and his hands fluid. She walked noiselessly down the aisle and stood behind him until he had finished.

"Is that the hand that cries out?" she asked, taking his right hand.

"Juliette," he murmured, turning around to her. "Not anymore." He looked at her serenely; she could find no trace of grief or panic.

"Ready to go?" she asked. "Or do you want to play some more? I'm not in any rush."

"Later," he said, closing the cover over the keyboard. "I wish to go home with you."

The days going forward were all different. The trees outside the bedroom window were the same, but they were different. The furniture in the room had not changed, either, but it was still not the same. The switch on the table lamp was still loose, and the alarm clock-CD player was still the outdated model that made Emily shake her head. But everything was different. The room had gone from being *hers* to *theirs*. His clean clothes hung in the closet and his worn clothes laid next to hers on the chaise at night. He had a side of the bed, and his books were stacked on his bedside stand.

The kitchen was different, too. New spices populated the shelves and the kitchen took on a different scent. Cinnamon was now purchased in sticks as well as

powder, and cumin was a staple. Juliette had always liked cilantro, but now it made more frequent appearances.

New foods settled in, too. Juliette had never consciously avoided olives and dates in the past, but she had also never sought them out. Now there were several types of olives in the refrigerator, and dates were always on offer. And honey, and sesame, and pistachio: the kitchen opened its arms to these pale yellows and greens, and the North American garden varieties made room for their relatives from abroad.

New utensils were also added to the kitchen's stock, too. When Tareq went shopping, he invariably came back with a new knife, sometimes in a shape Juliette had never seen before. Improved graters had been a priority, as had proper grinders, one for coffee and a separate one for spices.

As new foods moved in, others went on hiatus. They'd skip the ham this Christmas. Juliette never bought much bacon, but now when she saw it in the store, she looked at it as a food of her past, not her future. Nothing about Tareq made her feel she couldn't have pork in the house, but she didn't want it there. She wanted to have what they could share.

Routines evolved as well. On some days he rose earlier than she did and coaxed her from sleep with a cup of coffee. They curled up with the paper and eased into the morning. She took her computer, he took a book or went to the library. They shopped, they cooked, they washed the dishes.

And then, deadlines past, the time opened before them to take whatever form they wished. "Do you want to go to the city?" she asked him one morning over coffee. "Marian certainly thinks you should go." They both laughed.

"Yes," he replied. "And we may see Emily?"

"Absolutely."

Tareq's first visit to New York City was like most people's first visit: his neck was quickly getting sore. "I have seen many tall buildings," he said to Juliette. "But never so many tall buildings in one place, and so close together. This I have not seen before." Juliette gave his arm a squeeze. She didn't live in the city anymore, but she still considered it hers, and she enjoyed watching him take it in.

They arrived at Rockefeller Center at noon and waited for Emily to meet them. They circled around the skating rink and looked at the tree. "Where do they get such a tree?" Tareq asked.

"I don't know. I never thought about it before," she replied.

“It must be over 25 meters,” Tareq marveled. “And the lights.” He turned from the tree and looked back at the rink.

“Do you want to skate?” she asked him.

He shook his head vociferously. “I do not want to be on the ice with a thin blade attached to my foot. This does not seem amusing.” He watched the skaters glide across the ice and had to admit they looked like they were having fun. “But I would like to know how the ice feels.”

“Haven’t you ever been on ice?”

He shook his head.

“Then you’ve got to at least find out what it feels like.” Juliette walked him over to the opening where the skaters took to the ice. A man stood at the entrance directing traffic and validating tickets. He looked gruff, but Juliette was pretty sure she could get Tareq near the rink. She pointed to Tareq and explained that he was from Cairo and had never touched a sheet of ice like this. Could he just put his hand down and try? The man looked at her like she was crazy, but said to Tareq, “Knock yourself out, kiddo.”

Tareq kneeled at the edge of the rink, took off his glove, and placed his hand flat on the ice. It wasn’t as smooth as it looked, and he ran his finger along an indentation carved by the blade of an ice skate. “Thank you,” he said and put his glove back on.

Just then they saw Emily coming toward them. “What’s that on her head?” Juliette asked Tareq.

Tareq swallowed a laugh. “I have never known anyone like Emily,” was all he could say.

“Mom! Tareq!” she hugged them both together. “Like the hat? Kenji gave it to me. He was trekking and thought I’d like it.”

“Who’s Kenji?” Juliette asked.

“A person of interest,” Emily replied, winking at her mother.

“How’s it going, Tareq?” Emily took his arm. “Mom says Marian’s had you locked up at the library.” She shot a glance at her mother to warn her not to let Marian get too close. Emily couldn’t have known that this was superfluous; Juliette had not yet breathed a word to anyone about the decision she and Tareq had made. “Marian’s really nice, isn’t she?” Emily queried further. Tareq’s response was polite but non-committal, and Emily felt relieved.

“Where’s your brother?” Juliette asked.

“Where do you think he is, Mom?” Emily rolled her eyes. “Somewhere up there.” She pointed up to the many glass windows above them. “Forget it, Mom. It’s not going to happen. But you’ve got me!”

“Which is wonderful, sweetheart.”

“And you’ll see him and his better half in a few days anyway. What do you two want for lunch?”

Juliette turned Tareq to decide.

Emily looked at Tareq, too. “You’re the guest, Tareq! Your choice!” Her suggestion was polite and sincere, but Emily gave her mother a look to show that she knew that Tareq was no mere guest. “What would you like?”

“Juliette, what did we eat in Berlin? At a Mexican restaurant?”

“Burritos.”

“Yes! That is what I would like. A burrito.”

“Done,” Emily said. “This way.”

She led the way to one of her favorite Mexican restaurants. As she walked ahead of them on New York’s crowded sidewalks, she looked back now and then at her mother glowing next to Tareq. She noticed Tareq’s hand at her back, his shoulder edged behind hers.

Emily turned ahead again, and then felt Tareq’s hand on her own shoulder. “It is good to see you, Emily,” he whispered to her. “You are a very kind daughter.”

“And you are a very kind UN security officer,” she giggled as her eyes darted toward her mother. They understood each other perfectly, and Tareq could feel his face grow warm.

The restaurant, like everything else in New York, was crowded. Tareq felt perfectly at home. Crowds he knew. They ate their burritos – Tareq’s with the hot sauce that merited three little chili pepper icons on the menu – and then started to think about the rest of the afternoon.

“Would you like to meet Kenji?” Emily asked her mother.

“Sure.” Juliette replied confidently. In truth, she was only *fairly* sure that she was sure, but could not imagine saying no.

“Great. He’s working at a used bookstore near here. Wanna go?”

“Yes,” Tareq answered for him and Juliette. He was as curious about Kenji as Juliette and had a growing sense that he had a right to an opinion.

They arrived at the bookstore, packed with a sea of humanity in search of just the right gifts. The main floor swarmed, but Emily found Kenji quickly. “Kenji, this is my mom, Juliette.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kenji said, shaking her hand. Juliette had to look up to see him eye to eye.

“And this is Tareq,” Emily continued. Tareq had to look up, too, but not as far as Juliette.

“It’s busy here today,” Juliette made small talk, looking around at the masses on the first floor and the people sitting on the stairs leading up to a loft with more books.

“Holiday shopping,” Kenji said. “Good for business. It’s not as crowded up there, though,” he said pointing to the loft. “That’s reference, foreign language.”

“Not a lot of demand for old dictionaries, I’d imagine,” Juliette joked.

“And not like over there,” he pointed to a corner where young adults were packed like sardines. “Manga. Don’t go there.”

They all laughed. Juliette liked Kenji already.

“What are you all looking for today?” Kenji asked. “We’ve got some floor maps, but maybe I can direct you.”

“Classics, maybe travel?” Juliette said. “And I can smell coffee!”

“Café’s over there, right by classics,” Kenji pointed to the back, but away from the Manga readers. “And Emily knows where the travel section is.” Both Juliette and Tareq took note of the way that Kenji smiled at Emily, and then smiled at one another. “And how about you, Tareq?”

“Egypt,” Tareq replied. “Do you have any books about Egypt? And any CDs?”

“You are in luck, my man. We have a huge CD section over there,” he pointed in one direction, “and a lot on Egypt more toward the front. Let me show you.” He rubbed the top of Emily’s head and then walked off with Tareq toward Egypt.

“Coffee in an hour,” Juliette called to Tareq. “Meet us there.”

The travel section was relatively quiet. Juliette perused the titles, wondering if she should pick up a book on a place she had visited or find one about a place she had never seen. Then she remembered her next assignment and started looking for travel books on Berlin. It would be fun to compare guidebooks over time and see how the descriptions had changed. She found a few and settled into a beat-up but inviting chair. Its faded chintz fabric told the story of many happy hours of reading.

Emily joined her, sitting on the arm of the chair. “Well, you two seem to have it all wrapped up,” she said to her mother.

“All wrapped up?” Juliette asked, trying and failing to pretend that she didn’t understand Emily’s statement.

“You know what I mean.”

“I think it’s a little early for that,” Juliette fibbed. She and Tareq hadn’t set a date for a wedding, so she persuaded herself she was being sufficiently honest.

“Not from what I can see. I wasn’t entirely sure what to think at Thanksgiving. He was pretty tired then, and fair enough, probably overwhelmed. But he seems to have settled in very nicely,” she gave her mom a look that embarrassed Juliette. Juliette felt her face redden. Blushing was becoming a normal part of her life.

“Mom,” she said, looking at her straight on, “he’s great, I like him. And he *certainly* likes you. He’s so, so....”

“Attentive,” Juliette finished her daughter’s thought.

“Yeah, attentive. And protective. It’s very sweet,” Emily continued. “And to be honest, it’s a relief. I don’t want you to be alone. I don’t want you to go the rest of your life without someone to love. Without someone who loves you, too.” She waited for Juliette to say something, but then barged ahead into her mother’s thoughts. “But I know it must be weird on some level. Probably for both of you.”

It was like Emily could read her mind. Maybe Tareq’s too. But Mark, both Marks actually, always claimed she could.

“All I’m saying, Mom, and I know I speak for Sam, too, is that we’re fine with it. As long as you find someone who really cares for you, we’re fine with it.”

“What about Mark?”

“Don’t worry about Mark. He always takes longer than the rest of us. But I’ll handle him. Sam and I’ll handle him.” She put her arms around Juliette’s shoulders and squeezed hard.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Juliette said. She wanted to tell Emily that she now had a word for Tareq: husband. But she held back, and was glad that her hand hinted at nothing. His signet ring, too big for any of her fingers, now hung on a chain around her neck, hidden beneath the blue pashmina.

Juliette glanced at her watch. “Tareq will be waiting.” They left the Travel section and found Tareq in the café, coffee in hand, reading a book at a table that miraculously had two empty chairs. As soon as he saw them, he stood, pulled out chairs for each of them, and went to the counter to order two more coffees.

“I could get used to this, Mom,” Emily teased.

“Kenji seems nice,” Juliette replied.

“He is. I met him at a book club.”

“That’s a good place to meet someone,” Juliette observed. “As long as the club isn’t devoted to – what do they call it? – teenage paranormal romance?” They both were laughing when Tareq returned. He liked seeing Juliette with her children.

“Having fun?” Emily asked Tareq.

“Of course!” Tareq replied. “Kenji was most helpful. But tell me. His face is most unusual to me. Where is he from?”

“His mom is Japanese and his dad is African American. They met when his dad was stationed in Japan. They were together two years before they told any one in their families.” Tareq could understand this. “And then they decided they’d just get pregnant, and then nobody would be able to force them apart.”

“That’s one strategy,” Juliette acknowledged. “Did it work?”

“Well, he seems to get on pretty well with both sets of grandparents, so I guess so. His mom’s parents are in Japan, so he doesn’t see them as much.”

They finished their coffees and began to say their goodbyes. “I’m sorry, honey,” she turned as they were leaving the store, “Tareq and I didn’t even ask you about work. Everything going okay?”

Emily nodded. “Great. More later. I’ll be up on Christmas Eve with Sam and Mark.” Emily hugged them and walked off in Kenji’s direction. *Tareq and I, Emily thought to herself. They’re definitely a couple.*

Juliette and Tareq walked back to Grand Central Station and grabbed a train to the suburbs to reclaim Juliette’s car. Once in the car, Juliette turned on the engine and let it idle a moment to warm up. “Tareq,” she turned to him, “After Yasmeeen, no one came into your life?”

The question surprised him, and Rana’s face flashed briefly before his eyes. “Certain women, yes,” he replied. “But not really. And my job. I knew I would be an absent husband at best. At worst, I would make a widow.” He could have been describing Mark. But he was not. He was reliving the decisions of a lifetime.

“There were other women, too!” he exclaimed lightheartedly. “But not for me. Or for Mark,” he paused in thought. “Juliette, Mark was never unfaithful to you. He and I both walked away. We walked away together.”

His recollection of Mark was reassuring. No marriage is perfect, she thought, but her marriage to Mark had been good in many ways.

“And then I retired. To safety. Alone.” He reviewed the past briefly in his mind. “And then I met you.” He looked around the parking lot to confirm they were the only people around, leaned over and kissed her. “I love you, Juliette.”

“I love you, too.”

He leaned over to the driver’s seat and kissed her more. She loved the sensation of his beard on her cheek and neck as much as she loved the feeling of his hand on her back. “You better cut that out,” she giggled, “you’re going to make the windows steam up. I still need to drive.”

“Then we go home,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

When they arrived home, two large packages were on the front porch addressed to Tareq. “What are these?” she asked him.

He read the return address label. “Ah!” he exclaimed with delight. He picked up the boxes and took them to the kitchen. He opened the cupboard and began removing all the mismatched American style mugs, which, he was convinced, negatively impacted the taste of the coffee. Their hodgepodge of faded logos from public television fund drives and destinations visited long ago reduced coffee to a beverage when it ought to be an event. He opened the first box to reveal beautiful coffee cups with proper handles and saucers. The colors and patterns reminded Juliette of ones she had seen in Egypt.

“They’re beautiful. Where did you get them?” she asked. She was fairly certain there was no store for miles that carried this type of pottery, and neither of them had been into the city until that day.

“The Internet!”

She reached for one of the cups and turned it in her hand. “This is lovely, Tareq. Thank you.” She kissed him lightly, truly happy not to have sole decision-making authority over this kitchen, this house, this life.

“And these,” he pointed to the second box on the floor, “are for tea.” He opened the lid to reveal clear glass tumblers like those often used in Egypt for hot tea.

“Feels like home now,” she said, putting her arms around his neck. He put the cup down on the counter and returned her embrace.

“I am home wherever you are.” He let himself rest in that truth for a moment. For the first time, he was sharing his life with someone he loved. This was a privilege, he knew, and he did not take it for granted. And then his mind returned to the coffee cups: “And now when people visit, they’ll know this is my home. When I make them coffee!”

“We’ve got to tell the kids,” she blurted out all of a sudden, checking for his ring around her neck.

“Of course,” he agreed, but not with her sense of urgency.

“I know we haven’t had a wedding, but for me, it almost feels like we eloped and didn’t tell them. I need to tell them. They’re my children.”

“Of course. As you wish.”

“They’ll be here Christmas Eve, but honestly, I don’t want to tell them then.”

He stood back and eyed her askance. “Why not?”

“I’m not worried about Emily,” she went on. “But Mark. I know he’s going to tell me it’s too soon, and then all of Christmas will be taken over by getting him comfortable with it.”

He took her face in his hands. “After Christmas, then,” he concurred with a kiss. “For now, our secret.”

“Really? You’re okay with that?”

He nodded. “But,” he was emphatic, “I sleep in our room.”

“Mark won’t even notice.”

“Emily will,” he chuckled.

“She probably already knows,” Juliette laughed. *But she’ll think I’m just following her advice.*

Emily, Mark and Sam arrived mid-day on Christmas Eve. Emily bounded into the house, followed by Samantha, who walked carefully, and Mark, who shut the door behind the three of them. Emily apprised Tareq of the day’s activities immediately upon arrival. They would watch all the traditional Christmas specials in between batches of cookies and cookie decorating. She listed off the titles in order of viewing: *Charlie Brown, Frosty the Snowman, Rudolf the Rednosed Reindeer, The Year without a Santa Claus...*

“Not that one,” Sam and Mark protested jointly. “Really?”

“He’s got to see Heatmiser! If he’s going to live in America, he has to know this stuff. It’s a part of popular culture. You don’t want him to be the only kid on the playground who doesn’t know Heatmiser, do you?” They all laughed very hard at this, and Tareq knew it was funny, but he didn’t know why.

“Tareq, I’m doing you a favor,” Emily continued. “Besides, if you see all these shows now, you’ll know which ones you to avoid once the baby’s old enough to watch.” She settled the question definitively. “We’re going to the basement.” Tareq followed without protest. “When the cookies are ready to frost,” she threw her head back to her mother, “let us know.”

“I’m not going to miss this,” Sam said to Mark. “Bring me a cookie when they’re ready, huh?”

Mark nodded and looked at the oven timer. “10 minutes if you don’t need frosting. I’ll stick around here and help Mom and then bring some down.”

Juliette leaned back on the counter to take in the scene. Her loved ones were together, cookies were baking, songs would be sung, even if they were just silly ones from children’s holiday videos. Who cared what they had for dinner that night?

After dinner, they gathered in the living room to open presents. “No Trivial Pursuit?” Tareq asked Emily. “Tomorrow,” she replied. She said this with an authority that made Tareq wonder for a moment if all families in America played Trivial Pursuit at an appointed time on Christmas Day. “Now we open presents.” She handed him a gift wrapped in paper decorated with green and red woodblock trees.

“This is beautiful,” he said to her.

“Thanks,” she replied. “I made the paper myself.”

Without opening the package, he gave Emily the gift he had chosen for her: a book of Egyptian myths and stories he had bought for her at the used bookstore. She flipped through the pages with delight. “Which is your favorite?” she asked, and Tareq pointed in the table of contents to the story of *The Prince and His Three Fates*.

“Read it to me?” Emily asked.

Tareq obliged. He read to Emily, but soon had Mark’s, Sam’s and Juliette’s attention as well.

Once upon a time, the Queen of Egypt gave birth to a baby boy. She summoned her fairies to bless the child, but one of them refused. “The prince will die by a crocodile or a serpent or a dog,” the fairy said sadly and flew away.

The King and Queen wept for the fate of their beloved child. “We will build a fortress,” the King said to his Queen, “to protect him from his fate.” They built the fortress high on a mountain, and guards stood watch over him every day and every night.

One day the Prince saw a puppy playing outside his window. He loved the dog and wanted it for his own. Because the dog was young, the King and Queen granted the Prince’s wish and trained the dog to be his protector.

The young Prince thrived and grew into a man. One day he told his father that he wanted to travel beyond the fortress gates. “Do

not worry, dear father,” the Prince said, “my dog will protect me from my fate.”

The King looked at his son with all the love of the world and granted the wish. He prepared his safest ship, and the prince and his dog set sail on the Nile. When they reached the other side, a horse greeted the Prince, and he rode throughout the land, his dog at his side.

The horse led the Prince to a beautiful kingdom where jasmine flowers were always in bloom, and here the Prince fell in love with a Princess.

“I wish to marry you,” the Prince told the Princess. “But you must know: my fate is to die from a crocodile, a serpent or a dog.”

“Our love is strong,” the Princess said. “I am not afraid.”

And so they married.

The Prince and Princess lived in joy until, one day, guards arrived from the fortress to say that the King was ill. The Prince and his wife rode their horses back to Egypt, the dog at both their sides.

One night, as they slept in the Fortress, the Princess heard a noise that startled her. She lifted her head and saw a serpent coiled near the door. She was a wise Princess and knew that serpents loved milk. She rose silently from their bed and found a bowl with milk. She placed it near the snake and watched the greedy creature drink its doom. When the serpent fell asleep, the Princess called for the guards to take it far away.

The next day, the Prince went out to hunt with his dog. He stumbled over some stones and landed face down at the edge of a river. A crocodile opened its mouth and said, “Not even a Prince can escape fate. I will find you wherever you are. You will only find safety in a hole in the sand that can hold water as though it were made of stone.”

The Prince fled to his beloved wife. “All is lost,” he told her.

But she shook her head. “Our love is strong,” she reminded him. “On the driest mountain in the driest desert grows a plant that will keep water in sand for an entire year. I will find it.”

That night, under a sapphire sky, the Princess mounted her horse and set off for the desert. She found the driest mountain in the driest desert and began her ascent. A chasm split the mountain between her path and the place where the leaves grew fresh and fair. But the Princess was prepared. She took her rope, tied a loop

in the end, and threw it across the gorge. She climbed the rope and retrieved the precious plant.

The Princess sped back to the Prince and found him digging a hole in the sand. “Quickly,” she ordered, “pour the water!” The Prince took a jug of water by his feet and poured as the Princess dropped the leaves into the pit. The sides of the pit turned to stone, and the water did not seep away.

The Prince gazed upon his Princess with all the love in his heart. “You have saved me again, dear wife.”

“Our love is strong,” she replied. “No harm will come to you.”

As they stood on the riverbank, a flock of birds filled the air. The prince's dog chased the birds wildly and knocked the Prince into the water. The Prince could not swim and he called to his wife in fear. But the Princess still had her rope, the loop still tied to the end. She threw it to the Prince and pulled him to safety.

Again, the Prince looked at his wife with all the love in his heart. “Your love is stronger than my fate,” he said.

“Your love is my fate,” she replied.

And they lived happily ever after.

Tareq closed the book slowly. “It’s been a long time since I read that story,” he murmured. He wanted to look at Juliette, but kept his eyes fixed on the book, stroking the spine with his hand.

“That was beautiful, Tareq,” Samantha broke the silence. “After the baby’s born, you definitely need to sign up for bedtime story duty.”

Tareq cracked a smile but still kept his eyes away from the others. But then he raised his face to Sam. “I would like that very much. And I have something for you.” He returned to the tree and picked up the packages of CDs he had found for them with Kenji’s help. They opened the gifts with appreciation and hugged him. Mark and Samantha had gifts for him, too: field guides covering local flora, fauna and birds. Emily presented him with another pair of gloves, just in case his first pair got lost. Gloves were like that, she explained. They went missing on their own.

“This is something just from me, Tareq,” Samantha said handing him a small package. He opened it carefully to find a framed photo of himself and Juliette at Thanksgiving. “I wanted you to have a souvenir of your first real Thanksgiving.”

Tareq was overwhelmed. “Thank you, Samantha. Thank you.”

“And open the other one I gave you,” Emily reminded him, pointing to the package in the woodblock paper. “It’s something I found at the book store after

you and Mom left.” Tareq carefully unwrapped the book, trying not to disturb the paper, and shuddered slightly at the cover of a pictorial history of Damascus. The shudder was part happy, part sad, and he hoped Emily would only see the happy. This was a city he knew well, but the city he knew barely existed anymore. He opened the book sensing that to look at the pictures would be like looking at photos of a loved one displayed at a funeral. He looked up at her from where he was sitting on the floor and thanked her for the gift.

“That’s where you met my dad, right? In Damascus?” she asked.

“Yes, the first time I met your father was in Damascus.” Tareq’s throat tightened. “*I’m Mark*, he said, and he slapped me on the back as if we had known each other many years. I remember.” Tareq continued to flip through the pages as he spoke. “And then he took the seat next to mine and reached for the papers I had brought to the meeting. I had them in order.” It was not clear if this were simply information or a rebuke. “Here!” Tareq exclaimed. “Look here.” He pointed to a photo of an ancient building. “This is the building where I first met your father.” Emily was stunned. When she selected the book for Tareq, she never expected this.

“Let me see,” she asked.

Tareq handed the book to Emily, relieved to no longer have it in his hands. He got up off the floor and sat down by Juliette. When he was sure none of the others were looking, he pulled at her hand to ask her to follow him to the kitchen. In the kitchen he whispered, “I do not have a gift for you.”

“You already gave me the poem, remember?” she replied. “I didn’t wrap anything for you today, either.”

“You already gave me the gift of your time, remember?” He glanced around to make sure no one could see them and nuzzled her neck. They were kissing and laughing when Emily walked into the kitchen, their arms around each other, Juliette off-balance against the kitchen counter. Tareq saw Emily from the corner of his eye and began to laugh even harder. He buried his head in Juliette’s neck in embarrassment, but he kept his arms around her.

“Nice coffee cups, Tareq,” Emily said wryly. She laughed and walked away, but then poked her head back in the kitchen, “Glad to see you’re making yourself at home.”

No one woke up early the next morning. It had been years since any children provided a pre-dawn wake-up call for presents under the tree. But that time was around the corner, Juliette thought to herself. Within a few years, her grandchild would have them all up early on Christmas morning again. But for this morning, she could lie quietly in bed, Tareq asleep beside her, and look out the window. A cardinal landed on an icy, leafless branch near her window, cocked its head at her, and was gone.

Mark and Samantha had to leave in the early afternoon to join her family, so the Trivial Pursuit game began right after brunch. This time it was boys versus girls, Mark insisted. He and Tareq would make a formidable team. Tareq was prepared this time, not so much for the questions about Sports and Leisure, but for the bantering dynamic that went with the game. The game was in full swing when Samantha told Mark they had to be going with no winners on the horizon. “Next time, Tareq,” Mark shook his hand. “We’ll get ‘em next time.”

After Mark and Samantha had gone, Emily and Tareq joined forces to finish clearing up in the kitchen. Emily turned on the radio, and Johnny Mathis crooned over their shoulders: “Come, they told me...”

“What is this song?” Tareq asked. “I have heard it many times now.”

“*The Little Drummer Boy*,” Emily replied. “It’s a TV show, too. I can’t believe we missed that one! But we can watch it now.” She poked her head into the living room where Juliette was looking at the photo Sam had given to Tareq. “Mom, I’m taking Tareq to the basement to watch *The Little Drummer Boy*. You coming?”

“No, I’ll skip that one. I want to look at the books Mark and Sam gave Tareq.”

“Okay, we’ll only be 22 minutes,” she joked. “No commercial breaks.”

“Emily, don’t you think Tareq has had enough holiday TV?”

“No.” Emily replied.

Emily found the DVD and pushed all the right buttons on all the right remotes. “You’ll recognize the song,” she said to Tareq, who had sunk into the sofa next to her.

Within minutes, however, Emily felt regret grip her to the core. The depictions of Arabs in this children’s show were appalling. She hit pause, and then turned the TV off entirely. She turned to Tareq with deeply apologetic eyes. His eyes were expressionless. “I’m sorry. This is a really awful portrayal of Arabs.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I’m really sorry, Tareq.”

“You did not do this.”

“True, but I’m still sorry. Sorry that anyone did this. Sorry that these images have been out there for so long. This is what I grew up with. Honestly, until we had you in our family, I never noticed.”

Her words startled him. She had called Tareq a member of the family. “I’m really sorry, Tareq,” Emily continued, thinking his body language was a response only to the movie.

“It is reassuring,” he spoke kindly, “to think that you grew up with these images. This shows that people of good will may always find a way to see each other as they are.”

On the evening of the 26th, Tareq and Juliette took Emily to the train station together. They huddled on the small platform, Emily’s backpack in Tareq’s hand. They hugged and kissed, and Emily departed. “See you soon,” she called as she climbed into the train. “Don’t be a stranger,” Emily giggled. Tareq waved at Emily until she was out of sight and then returned his hand to Juliette’s back.

“Should we see if there is room for us at Romeo’s?” he asked.

“Good idea,” Juliette replied.

When they entered the restaurant, Romeo approached them immediately. He was tall, elegant and impeccably dressed. He stood close to Juliette and spoke with familiarity. “Buon Natale, Giulietta!” he greeted her. “Where is Emily tonight? Mark? Samantha?”

“They’ve left already,” she replied. “And Merry Christmas to you, too.” She gestured to Tareq as way of introduction. “Just me and Tareq tonight. He’s here from Cairo.” Tareq nodded politely but said nothing.

“Table for two?” Romeo confirmed, looking at Tareq as though noticing him for the first time. Tareq’s hand slid along Juliette’s back and settled firmly on her waist. Both men read each other’s body language fluently, and Romeo tilted his head with a smirk. “Please,” he said, extending his arm. He directed them to a quiet table away from the entrance.

Once they were seated, Juliette whispered from behind her menu. “Romeo’s been flirting with me since Mark died.”

“I can see. I am sorry he will be disappointed.”

“No you’re not,” she corrected him happily.

“You are right. I disappoint him with pleasure.”

“Poor Romeo,” Juliette sighed.

“He will never have this Juliette.”

After dinner, they returned home, and Tareq went to the living room to start a fire. Juliette’s fireplace was real, not like the one in the library. He arranged the wood and kindling, found the long matches, and started a blaze. Fire warming the room, he sat back in one of the winged-back chairs, put his feet up on the ottoman – a term that perplexed him – and thought about the story he had read to Emily.

Juliette walked up behind him and put her hands on her shoulders over the back of the chair. They could both see the photo of her and Mark on the mantle. “I’ve got

an idea,” she thought aloud. She looked through the presents still sitting under the tree and found the photo that Sam had given to Tareq. She placed it on the mantle in front of the photo of her and Mark. The older photo remained visible, but the past graciously stepped aside to make way for the future.

She turned from the fireplace and looked at Tareq, seated comfortably in what had been Mark’s chair. “Tareq, I just realized we haven’t made any plans for New Year’s Eve.”

“The 1st of January is not the new year in Egypt,” he replied.

“So you don’t care what we do on the 31st?”

“I care what we do, but not because it is the 31st.” He reached out for her hand.

“Then let’s just stay home.” She took his hand and pulled him out of the chair. “We can watch the ball drop on television.”

“The what?” He clasped his hands behind her back.

“Never mind,” she kissed him. “It’s not important.”

The new year began with his calling her name.

“Juliette,” he shouted from the basement. “Juliette!” She didn’t answer, so he started up the stairs, calling her name once more. She met him at the top of the stairs, and he kissed her cheek. The time would come, he thought, when her presence would be so normal that he would not always greet her with a kiss. But that time had not yet come.

“What is it?” she asked, kissing his cheek in return.

“A man on the television says there will be a storm.”

“How bad?”

“Severe,” Tareq quoted the weatherman. “He says we must *prepare*.”

“Hmm,” she replied. “Sometimes they exaggerate.” She went back to her computer in the kitchen. Tareq followed and went to the coffee maker. “Looks like they’re telling the truth this time!” she sighed. “So here’s how we *prepare*.” She explained the basics of a snowstorm and what it meant to be *snowed in*. He remembered her using that phrase in Berlin. At least this time neither of them would be lonely. “So we need to go to the hardware store for a new shovel and some salt, and then to the grocery store,” she closed her eyes in concentration. “Yeah, that’s it,” she concluded. “Ready?”

“I will go to the hardware store,” he offered. “You may go to the supermarket.”

Tareq still didn't like the big market, with or without a SIM card.

"The supermarket will be open on a holiday, but I don't know about Earl. I'd better call."

"I will call him," Tareq volunteered. He reached him quickly, and Earl confirmed both that he'd be open this New Year's Day because the storm was on its way. And before Tareq could ask, he offered to give Tareq a lift home.

After Earl dropped Tareq back at the house, Tareq settled into the living room sofa to check the storm visually from the window and follow its progress online. He could see on the computer that the storm was moving fast, and he was relieved when Juliette turned into the driveway. He got up quickly and helped her with the bags of groceries, relating to her all that Earl had told him to expect. In addition to the shovel and salt, Earl had advised on some flashlights and batteries. Juliette had obtained the other essentials at the grocery store: more of Tareq's favorite coffee beans and the milk, eggs and bread people always stocked up on before a storm.

"Now what do we do?" he asked her.

"Nothing," she replied. "Normal life."

"Normal life," he echoed. He returned to the laptop with his coffee and continued his research on snow and snowflakes. Looking out the window, he found confirmation of what he read online. At first, the skies turned a silvery grey, and the moisture in the air visibly increased. On one website, the author had written that the skies would shimmer; in Tareq's opinion, this was an accurate description. As the day progressed, the grey deepened as the sun set somewhere beyond the shimmer. But then the skies lightened again: the snow fell white and bright against the dark sky.

"Juliette!" he called, putting on his boots and coat. "Snow!"

She joined him in the foyer, and he helped her put on her coat. He took her gloved hand in his and led her out to the garden.

"These flakes are the kind you can really see," she told him, looking closely at the snowflakes that landed on his dark hair. As she brushed a flake from his eyelash, he caught her hand and held it.

"Beautiful," he said, looking at the sky. "Beautiful," he repeated, looking at her. He pulled her inside his unbuttoned coat, and they kissed to his first snowfall.

When their heads became too wet and cold for comfort, they went back inside. As they entered the foyer, Tareq stopped at the door to take off his boots, but Juliette hurried toward the kitchen for some towels to dry their heads. "Juliette," he grabbed her hand and stopped her, "in Egypt, we do not wear shoes inside the home."

"Oh," she said, "You're right. I forgot to take my boots off. I was rushing." But then it occurred to her that Tareq didn't just remove his wet, dirty boots at the

door, he removed his shoes, too, in any weather. “And from now on, I’ll take my regular shoes off, too.” She smiled at him and at the blending of traditions. “And we can ask the kids to do the same when they come over.” She took off her boots and put them next to his by the door.

In the kitchen, she grabbed a towel and rubbed it over his head. He shook his head free, took the towel and tossed her hair as she ran her fingers through his short, dark waves. She peeked out the kitchen window from underneath the towel. “Looks like you’re getting a real winter storm. You know the song? *Oh the weather outside is frightful?*” she sang. Tareq shook his head, so she continued,

But the fire is so delightful,
The lights are turned way down low,
Let it snow! Let it snow! Let it snow!

“So I must build a fire?”

“And I’ll get the lights.”

Later that evening, a tree branch cracked loudly under the weight of the snow, followed quickly by the sound of electric wires shorting out. Tareq didn’t recognize the first sound, but they both knew the second. Juliette reached for the lamp and flipped on the switch, but nothing happened.

“Do you know where those flashlights are?” she asked, rolling toward him.

“Do we need them?” he replied.

“Don’t think so,” she said calmly. “I can find you in the dark.”