

A Half-Truth Is a Lie

I'm always searching for the pieces of myself I'm missing, reaching for fragments of my identity scattered in places just out of reach. Catching a shard means seeing a reflection of myself in a way I can't bear, forcing myself to meet my own fraudulent eyes. The more desperately I struggle to make myself look, to hold onto that shard, the more it hurts, and I split and bleed on my own jagged edges.

What ground should I bleed on? That depends on the contents of my blood. I imagine to myself that it separates itself within my veins, splitting me cleanly in two, although I know it's not a clean split, not even in my imagination. When it spills, whatever minute differences there could be between cells aren't discernable. The cut on my right knee bleeds just as red as the cut on my left knee.

'Hey, Waheed! Are you okay?'

'Yes, fine!'

It's not a difficult name. Easy enough to pronounce. Even so, four years at this school and still others stumble over it, awkwardly tonguing the syllables like children learning to read. Sound it out, don't be scared, now, say it slow and quiet and mumble the end and you can't be wrong. Two syllables, phonetic spelling, still too unfamiliar for new teachers to manage without checking. *Is this right? Correct me if I say it wrong. That's exotic! What does it mean?* Although my name is all I have, I never correct the mispronunciations.

'Wait up, I'll walk with you!'

David catches up to me as I scramble to my feet off the hot pavement. His shaggy blond hair bounces as he jogs over with a broad, open grin on his freckled face. I don't think David has ever questioned himself. He knows exactly who he is.

The first time I met David, he asked, 'What are you?'

I didn't know how to answer. I didn't know what I was. I told him I was Arab, as that was the answer we were both looking for. It was half true. More than half, maybe. I haven't seen enough of my blood to know.

'Cool,' he had said. 'Say something in Arabic.'

When I swear in Arabic it's a prayer. When I pray it's a lie. It feels wrong for me to use this tongue; I'm clumsy and uncertain and it doesn't feel natural in my mouth the way it should. I'm a

liar. David didn't know that though, and so I wracked my mind for a phrase I knew. *Ana la aitakalam alearabia*. I don't speak Arabic.

'Waheed,' David says, snapping me out of a daze.

'Yes?'

He stops walking and looks down at my knees, where my grey uniform is torn and stained. I conceal my hands behind my back, gripping so hard that fresh blood is drawn.

'Yes?' I repeat.

'That's why you were just –'

'I fell.'

I shift my gaze ahead and start walking homeward. After a hesitation, David follows me.

'You were just sitting on the ground,' he says.

I know he's waiting for me to explain, but I don't really know what to tell him. That I was sitting on the ground because I couldn't decide whether I was right or wrong? That I wanted to stay still and silent and watch my blood soak through cloth and drip onto the hot concrete in viscous drops under the blazing sun, to wait for it to boil away and leave me an answer? That the tiny stones embedded in my palms belonged on that pavement, and I couldn't bear to rip them away from the place they were meant to be?

One foot after the other, homeward, David trailing behind, silent in his concern. What is home? Baba speaking rapidly on the phone in a language that should be my own but isn't to relatives I should know but don't. Mum laughing with the neighbours, leaning over the fence. Or is it something else entirely?

'Did you get that thing fixed?' David asks without looking at me.

'Not yet.'

It's been months since we were looking for our biology grades and stumbled across the mistake. David laughed and slapped my back when he saw it, thinking it absurd. I felt sick.

'With your face, and your name? That's insane!'

I told him it was half true, and he shook his head and told me to get my parents to change it. I told Mum, that night, and she saw no issue.

'What does it matter if you're listed as Caucasian?' she had said. 'It's half true. Why do you care?'

Baba had thought differently, however. He frowned, and said simply, 'No.'

I didn't bring it up again.

David only brings it up now to get me to talk. He wants to know why I'm really bleeding. So do I.

I am walking homeward, slowly, limping slightly, the afternoon sun beating down, blood still dripping, dripping. One foot after the other, past identical houses down identical blocks, a white middle-class suburban paradise. As near to hell as I can get. David walks beside me, smiling.

Blood escapes through my fingers though I clench my fist tightly closed. An unhappy little trail of droplets follows me, ants teeming in each one to get their share as if it's gold and not just a collection of cells and fluid plasma evaporating from the dirty ground. But the way it gleams in the sun makes me think the ants are right; if it wasn't precious it wouldn't be so perfectly ruby sanguine. My blood doesn't belong on this ground, or any.

I have to go home.

'I know, we're going home.' David says, 'Are you sure you're okay?'

'Yes. Yeah.'

We both stop. We've reached the turning point, where David goes one way and I go another. David turns to go. Turns back.

'Do you want to come over? Dad won't mind.'

'No, I really gotta get home.'

I stand on the corner, scuffing my polished school shoes, and watch David walk down the road. When he gets to his house he turns and sees me still watching, and with a big cheery grin waves at me from behind the knee-high picket fence. I raise my hand to wave back, but he's turned away, distracted by his neighbour, or one of his parents, or his siblings, or his dog. I cross the road before he turns back.

I keep walking homeward. An hour has passed since school ended, and my parents will be unimpressed. I should have picked myself up off the ground sooner.

Some of the neighbourhood children are playing together on the grassy verge where someone strung an old tyre swing up in one of the oaks lining the road. I smile at the little girl on the swing as I pass by, but her brother glares at me.

'Dad told me you're a sand nigger,' he says matter-of-factly.

I don't respond. I don't know what to say. I don't stop walking homeward.

Sand nigger.

That's what Finn said too. *Sand nigger.* Am I too white, or am I not white enough?

Sand nigger. You people should stay where you belong.

But where do I belong?

‘Sand niggers like you belong in the desert,’ Finn had said.

What did I say back? I can’t recall. Whatever it was, he didn’t like it, though I don’t think that Finn would have liked any words that came from my half-breed ay-rab mouth. So why am I bleeding? It’s because Finn didn’t know what I was, either. There’s a lot that Finn doesn’t know.

That struck me as funny, even from where I was on the ground, bloodied and cut and covered in dirt, looking up at him as he grinned and postured, sweating in the scorching heat. And from his wrist, dangling from a delicate silver chain, a beautifully wrought *Khamsa*¹ caught and twisted the sun, well within reach but dancing a warning dance as Finn pulled back his arm once more.

I am walking homeward, bleeding, holding hands with Fatima. The *Nazar*² watches silently through a curtain of blood, as even now it flows like seeping mud from me, drying almost immediately only to be replaced with fresh liquid which soaks my uniform and overflows, splattering onto the scorched ground below. I hold onto this shard.

I will get home, eventually.

¹ *Khamsa/Hand of Fatima: Hand-shaped amulet with a Nazar in the centre used to ward away evil and offer the owner protection.*

² *Nazar: Eye-shaped symbol believed to offer protection from the evil eye. In Arabic, it means to look or surveil. In English, it is often referred to as the evil eye itself.*