

No
Land
to
Light
On

Yara
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Sama,” she said and he heard, though she said it lightly. It rang, clear, across an oak room in Massachusetts, over effervescing champagnes and violins, over the sea of dark suits. He turned and saw a white chiffon dress.

A pause on a melody, quarter note rest. The piano he left in Douma, the sheets inside the bench. He held his breath, afraid that if he exhaled, he would wake up. She took a sip from a long-stemmed flute rimmed with fine etchings that caught chinks of light.

“It means sky in Arabic.”

2011

Pro-democracy protests erupt in Syria, demanding the end of the authoritarian practices of the Assad regime, in place since 1971. The Syrian government uses violence to suppress the demonstrations. Opposition militias form.

2012

The Syrian uprising escalates into civil war.

2015

By the end of the fifth year of violence, the number of Syrian refugees reaches 4.27 million, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Of those, the United States pledges to resettle ten thousand within the year.

Poised on the split second between light and dark, a flock of red knots—thousands upon thousands of sandpipers—fills the sky above forty miles of shore and dunes in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The birds are the color of the setting sun, so small, so frighteningly light, their bones thin as soda straws, and flimsier.

They stop to rest and refuel before resuming their 15,000-kilometer journey across the planet. These little birds are on their way from the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego, a feat as unimaginable as a paper plane reaching the moon.

January 27, 2017

EXECUTIVE ORDER 13769
PROTECTING THE NATION FROM FOREIGN
TERRORIST ENTRY INTO THE UNITED STATES

By the authority vested in me as President . . .

5(c) . . . I hereby proclaim that the entry of nationals of Syria as refugees is detrimental to the interests of the United States and thus suspend any such entry until such time as I have determined . . .

*. . . The sky is studded with stars, timeless and infinite.
On the shore, there aren't enough crab eggs to feed the red
knots. The decline of horseshoe crabs, due to hunting and
land degradation, has caused more than 70 percent of red
knots to disappear. The birds still go, but each year, fewer
and fewer alight in Massachusetts.*

January 28, 2017

SAMA

It is much too hot in here. Only my hands are freezing, even as they sweat onto the railing. *Come on, Hadi, call.*

So loud in this airport. Someone is shouting. More join in. I wish they would stop, that they would stop pushing. Officers and dogs. Angry protesters. Discombobulated chanting. Something is going on, but I don't have the strength, or the space, to turn around. I just want to sit down. My feet won't hold my weight, and the baby's, much longer. I contemplate dropping to the floor. If I do, I'll never get up. I think of the old woman I saw trip at a demonstration once.

The stampede crushed her fingers. How she screamed. This isn't Syria, this isn't Syria. People don't get crushed in Boston. People don't get crushed by frantic mobs at Logan Airport.

A heavy woman—her shirt is soaked—pushes me from behind, digging into my back, shoving me into the railing. A cramp. Too mild a word. A punch to my abdomen. I wish I could tell her to stop. I wish you were here; you would. But she knocked the air out of me, and you are somewhere beyond Arrivals. Another shove, cramp, like hot pliers reaching in, squeezing. I shield my

stomach with my arm. A cowardly, futile attempt to protect the baby.

The iron rail seeps cold through my sweater, yours, the soft white one you wore the day before you traveled. I told you the stain would come out. I had to roll the sleeves. It doesn't smell of you since I washed it. *Come on, Hadi, call. Please call.*

You should be here. No, we should be home. Your plane landed too long ago. I didn't want to call; it would have ruined the surprise. Now, I don't want to because of the cold, heavy stone in my stomach. And another feeling, higher, like when you miss a step on the stairs, except longer.

The table is set at home. I left the hummus on the counter. A sudden force from behind hurls me into the barrier. My breath bursts out of my lungs. The phone nearly flies out of my hand, lighting up in the same moment.

"Hadi?"

"*Allo?* Sama!"

My breath catches. I know that *Allo*, those soft, gravelly *as* in my name.

"Hey! Where are you!"

There is much shouting around you too, but in your chaos, unlike mine, one voice thunders over the others, barking words I cannot distinguish.

"Hadi! Can you hear me?"

"Sama?"

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You cannot. I press my mouth to the phone:

"I'm outside!"

"At the airport? What the hell are you doing here?!"

"I—"

"Are you crazy? Go home!"

"What? No, no, I'm waiting—"

"Sama, I can't come out!"

More shouting on both ends of the line. The shoving behind me. Crescendo. Distinct chanting, pounding: *Let-them-go! Let-them-go!* The ground shakes with their anger.

"What do you mean you can't come out?"

Another blow in my gut. I double over.

"I don't know! No one's told us anything! They took our passports . . . it's . . . What the hell is going on around you?"

"They took your passport?!"

Let-them-in! Let-them-in!

"Sama, the baby!"

I know.

"Is it your travel permit? It can't be!"

"No, they didn't even look at it! Listen—"

But the pounding, this time on your end of the line, drowns the rest.

". . . just go home! I'll figure it out and—"

"Hadi? Are you there?"

Another spasm. My awareness crashes back into Arrivals. The crowd in furious waves. *Let-them-in!* A shove. I lose the phone. The

next blow throws me headlong, belly, baby first, to the ground. Instinct buckles my knees; they take the impact.

The mob rages. My memory hears that woman's fingers break, but through blurry patches in my vision, I see the phone and lunge for it. Bursts of fire in my stomach, but I nab it.

Gasps for air and light. I grab someone's jeans.

"Help me, please!"

But my voice is too hoarse, the chorus too loud. I pull, and pull, and pull at those jeans. Then I bite. The foot kicks me in the nose. I yelp but do not let go, crying through my clenched teeth until I am yanked, finally, up, feeling something wet and sticky run down my upper lip. I taste salt.

Surface. White spots of light and cool, cool air.

"Please!"

I sputter, begging the faceless arms that lifted me.

"Please, I'm pregnant!"

The grip tightens. A voice shouts:

"The lady's pregnant! Get out of the way! Get her out of here!"

In lurches, he pulls me, using his back to part the crowd. Every hit is a stab in my gut. I hold on like I am drowning.

"Move out of the way!"

More voices join. More arms drag me out of the raging sea, to the exit. The spots in front of my eyes clear: signs, people waving flags, some wearing them like cloaks and capes. Not all are Ameri-

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can. I recognize the Syrian flag: red, white, black, the two green stars. Some have painted it on their cheeks.

“Ma’am!”

Another voice. A uniform.

“Do you need an ambulance?”

I try to speak but another contraction hits. *Too early*. I gasp and nod violently.

“Do you have your ID?”

My purse . . .

“Who are you with?”

Hadi . . .

Gurney. Steely hands, blue gloves. A rotting smell of sweat on rubber. We burst out into the icy air. Ink-black sky, and ahead, blue, white, red lights, wailing like a diabolical arcade game.

Spasm through the ER doors. The blood drains from my face.

Another bang. My fingers grip your sweater, soaked with my sweat, and clench. Every muscle follows, hardened lead. I bite my scream.

“Ma’am, is there someone you can call?”

“My husband!”

“Is he on his way?”

“He doesn’t know I’m here!”

Blindly, I wave my phone.

“Hadi. His name is Hadi!”

My voice is chalky. I try again:

“Hadi . . .”

She takes the phone, dials, eyes on me.

“No answer. Is there someone else?”

Whirring, chafing rubber wheels on linoleum. Shouts, but unlike at the airport, these are cold, disjointed.

“Still no answer, ma’am.”

The contractions come, too fast. The pain shoots up, down. My feet jerk, teeth crash against one another. My lungs suck shut, cling to my ribs, like I’ve been plunged into ice water.

“How far along?”

I cannot see the faces. *Twenty-eight weeks*, but there is no air underwater.

“We need to stop the contractions.”

“How dilated is she?”

“Seven centimeters.”

“Too late. Get an OR ready.”

Drowner’s reflex.

“No, wait!”

Fire as I force air in.

“My husband is coming!”

Though that cannot be true. You cannot even know I’m here, but maybe if I scream louder.

“Sama.”

Someone said my name. Someone said my name.

“Your placenta has ruptured. We need to get this baby out, now, or it will die. Do you understand? Sama?”

Sama Zayat, wife of Hadi Deeb who won’t answer his phone, who promised he’d assemble the crib, who promised he’d be back, who promised all would be well, and duty-free Baci chocolates. I nod and shut my eyes against this entire scene.

Now, it isn’t happening. I am not in labor and the baby isn’t dying. No one took your passport. I misheard, Hadi. You said you forgot to buy the chocolates, or you bought dark, not milk, or left your passport at the register.

Someone found it, found you, and now you will find me. I don’t want the chocolates, Hadi. Just come, find me. Let’s go home. The hummus will have soured. We’ll throw it out. You’ll be angry because of the starving people in Syria. I’ll feel guilty, but I’ll still be pregnant, and it will be all right and we’ll just order a pizza. I’ll give you my olives, you’ll give me your crust. Contraction. I howl.

“The OR is ready!”

Your sweater is ripped away from me, my last proof of You-

and-I. Cold hands strip me naked and slip me into a robe: blue, anonymous.

“Ma’am, give me your arm!”

No one and nothing waits. An IV in my right arm, a name bracelet on my left. The stretcher bangs through more doors. *Boom! Boom!* like bombs. Why were there Syrian flags at Logan Airport? Hadi, why aren’t you here?

How careful we had been; no coffee, wine, air travel. How futile now, slamming into the OR, sweating and freezing. I look around for you, frantically, stupidly, knowing you are not there. I look anyway, heart convulsing. Green scrubs. Blue walls. Three round white lights.

Voices and surgical tools dart about. Something cold, a blade. I scream.

My arms flail. Hands hold them down. My legs are strapped in, spread.

“Ma’am, calm down!”

But my screams are all I have left.

“The baby is crowning! You need to push! Hard!”

I push and cry, like that night of raining glass. My ears scream. My eyes are squeezed so tight that around them I feel blood vessels popping.

“Good! Keep pushing, ma’am!”

“I can’t!”

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“Come on, Sama!”

I push. For you, Hadi. For our son. Pain bursts out of me, but this explosion is fireworks shooting and burning pink and green sulfur, and I keep pushing and crying, and my entire life is this moment. Nothing ever existed outside it.

HADI

No clock, no windows. Must be forty of us in here. The room stinks of breath and sweat. There aren't enough chairs, and politeness ran out hours ago. I sit on the floor.

It smells better down here, of rose water, to my left. An elderly couple. Iranian? Her face is drawn and shaded, like with a blunt pencil. One thin line of dried kohl runs down the cheek I can see, but she sits perfectly straight and looks ahead. Her husband drowns, his head bobbing on her shoulder. That scent, the warid, wafts out of her chador each time she adjusts his head.

What was she making with warid before she boarded the plane? *Riz bi haleeb*. With rose water and orange blossom, like yours. Mama uses hal, but I prefer yours—I'd never tell her. The way steam and aroma seep out of the pot and swell, so the apartment, all weekend, smells of warid. And your clothes, and your hair. And the way you look, all pink, stirring the rice in the milk till it gets so soft and round it will dissolve the instant I put it in my mouth, and you asking me to taste it and me burning my tongue and not caring. I'd eat the whole pot now, if I could. When all this is over, I want riz bi haleeb for days. Samati, I hope you're home.

I hope someone told you what's going on. I wish someone would tell us. I don't know how long we've been here. They took our cell phones, Sama. You must be sick with worry, popping berry antacids. You always take too many. I hope you ate, at least. I know you didn't. You're waiting for me. Please eat, Sama. Please sleep. Think of the baby. I don't know how long we'll be here. My God, I'm so hungry.

The husband moans. His wife apologizes to me, without meeting my gaze. Her voice cracks, and the streak of Kohl: *Diabetes. He must eat. His sugar levels, they are . . . down . . .* Yes, Iranian. I give her a piece of gum. Sugar-free, useless, but it is all I have. She bows her head, and when she takes it, her finger brushes my hand, and more warid. Pangs in my stomach and chest.

A girl across from me—Sudanese? Ethiopian?—is shaking. She looks your age but nothing like you, dark as you are pale. Her chin trembles like yours when we fight. I should be as scared as she, more, because of my shit, shit Syrian passport. They took it. My papers are in order though. I know that at least. We checked and checked. We went through them together, one by one, before I left: refugee travel permit; permission to travel—I-131 application *and* approval; marriage certificate; driver's license—mine and yours; our lease; my last three pay stubs. *Khara* Syrian passport. *Khara* Syrian war. *Khara 'aleihon*, what's taking so long? I'm so hungry.

I replace the piece of gum in my mouth, rubber now, with another. Pineapple-coconut, for takeoff and landing, you said

as you slipped it in my breast pocket. Only you would buy pineapple-coconut gum.

The piña coladas the weekend after we got married. The buffet. The oysters, crab, jumbo shrimp. Blood-orange salmon, pink beef. I'd gorged myself shamelessly, then been so ashamed, and sick. You kept saying it was okay, that I was on my honeymoon. That I could eat as much as I wanted, that *here*, there was food. But you didn't binge. You'd been in America longer, I guess, long enough to forget, or maybe you never stood in the bread lines. You were never in the cells.

It returns now, that hunger that tastes like fear, that came with fear and the cold, wet smell of the basement rooms of Far' Falastin. I couldn't describe that feeling exactly: base, not human fear, until they fed us cow fodder after three days on brine.

Two years. Two whole years between me and that prison. Still the taste resurfaces. I shove another piece of gum in my mouth. It's cold in here too, but dry.

I have three pieces of your gum left, then . . . I will not think of that. I take my mind, instead, back to those three piña colada days. You in the morning, falling back to sleep, rolling out of bed for food. Swimming, eating, drinking, sex again, sunbathing by the pool while, under your hat and parasol, you read Gibran or Thoreau and I pretended to listen.

Then the flight home, to Boston. The first time I said *home, to Boston*. Saying *I live here* to *What is the purpose of your visit?* at Customs and Border Protection.

I live here, and I have a home, a wife, papers to prove it. I said the same thing, exactly, to the officer tonight. I was polite, I promise, Sama, distracted but polite, my mind already on duty-free chocolates, suitcase, cab, fast-forwarding to bed, clean clothes, and my arm over you—

What happened next did not happen. It cannot be real. The officer did not call for backup then wait behind his plastic booth, not looking at me. Then two of them, armed and in black with insignia, did not handcuff me. They did not grab me, each by an arm, push-drag me down a bright hall, ignore me when I asked where we were going or what I had done. They did not speak to each other, over my head, not bothering to whisper: *Where is he from? Fucking Syria, man. Speaks English though.* Then silence.

I tripped and one of them caught me by the collar. I heard it rip, but at least I wasn't choking anymore. They yanked me right back up and pushed me on, into this room. It's been hours.

It never happened. It's too unreal. We've been here so long, and I'm so hungry and exhausted my thoughts must be muddled. I'll have some more gum—

"Hadi Deeb?"

My head jerks up.

I am yanked up and handcuffed again. The piece of gum shoots out of my mouth, barely missing the old woman's foot.

"Where are we going?"

No answer, again.

“Sir, I need to call my wife. She’s waiting for me. She’s pregnant—”

I trip, over my laces, or someone’s backpack, or someone’s legs outstretched on the floor. It doesn’t matter.

“Pick up your feet!”

A hairline crack through which something like hate flashes out of him, then the uniformed man moves me on, with one hand, gripping my elbow as though all I am is that square bit of bone and skin. His hand is thicker than my arm. His other is by his side, lightly swaying with my passport.

“I can hold my passport myself.”

Nothing.

“Sir, can I have my passport back?”

That feeling, that hunger-fear, the most visceral I ever felt, is back. In Far’ Falastin, I learned that if I hugged my belly and crouched, I could sometimes muffle it. But now my hands are behind my back.

“I want to speak to a lawyer. I want my passport and my phone. I need to call my wife!”

That sentence had started out so well.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to calm down, or I will have to restrain you.”

I’m already handcuffed, stripped of my ID, in a one-way corridor lined with security cameras. But the rising fear is greater. I fight the grip.

“Sir! Calm down!”

His one hand twists my arm and paralyzes me. I go limp to stop the nerve flashes of pain. He does not loosen his grip. *Don't fuck around like that again*, it says and shoves me forward. This time I obey, and tell myself I'm rational, not a coward.

Not scared. *Just a feeling. It's just a feeling*, Mama used to say when I woke up, sweating, shaking from a nightmare. *It will pass*. I believed her; she never lied, I reminded myself, years later, in the cells. *Just a feeling*, I repeat now.

Another room, smaller. No window or clock here either. A swivel chair and a metal stool on either side of a table. I know which seat is mine. I will not sit. The grip on my arm loosens. One of the men remains. The handcuffs stay on.

The officer—same man from the booth? Same black uniform, short sleeves, gold badge, blue insignia, something under the eagle I can't read—shifts his weight around the table like a jellyfish, and sinks onto the swivel chair. It protests. Not muscular. Big. His grip had been misleading. He looks—clear blue eyes—at me as his finger caresses the pistol at his waist, shiny.

The stool sits between us. He does not seem to notice. He turns to my passport, flipping through it like it's a free pamphlet, with a practiced disinterest that, through the fear, begins to irritate me. I wonder if this man has ever left the country. My stomach grumbles. I wonder if he has ever been hungry, really. Ever seen, or smelled, someone die. People shit themselves when they

die. Their bowels loosen. Does he know this? They don't on television, so maybe he doesn't.

"So, you're from Syria?"

He asks casually, as though Syria were a college or a town just outside Boston. I envy him for not hearing gunshots and screams when he says it. *Syria*, not *Sooria*. How would he know what *from Syria* means? I wonder whether he has ever had to pull the trigger of that shiny toy pistol of his.

"Oh, is that what it says on there?"

I look at my passport, astonished. His thick neck snaps up. He heard the venom. Now he sees it.

His eyes are tiny beads in a large, round, glistening face. Disinterest has become disdain.

"That's funny," he says, "but not very smart. I would calm down if I were you." He looks pointedly from my arms, behind my back, to his hand, by his pistol. I should shut up, and almost do, but he tosses the passport back on the table so callously . . .

"You have no right to detain me! It's called racial profiling, and it's illegal! I know my rights. I demand—"

His fist pounds the table, once.

"You 'demand' nothing! You have no rights, you—"

His fist, raised again, stops in midair. He puts it down but does not unclench it. His smile does not return.

"Sir, I'm going to ask you, once again, to calm down. Pursuant to Executive Order 13769 I have every right to detain you and ask

you as many questions as I want. If you resist again, you will be subdued and incarcerated. Attacking an officer who's just doing his job—"

"Attack? I didn't attack you!"

Now he smiles. His gaze calmly peruses the small room, and my own, in spite of me, follows. This is what he wants.

No cameras. The door is closed.

"Let's try this again," he says, his eyes back on me, his voice almost sultry.

"Where did you fly from? Damascus?"

"Amman."

"What were you doing in Amman?"

I pause.

Baba, rigid and a grayish white, his hands still, as I had never seen them, clasped piously, comically, over his black suit. His neck thick and swollen over the starched collar. That silly tie. That cold blue room.

"My father died. I was taking care of the burial arrangements."

"Your father is Jordanian?" he asks, tone and countenance unchanged.

"No, Syrian."

Now the eyebrow is raised.

"So why was your father in Jordan?"

He hated ties, and that suit. He only had the one, and he only wore it to marry Mama and to funerals. One suit was all a *fallah*

needed; his life was in the orchard. He would never have let himself be buried in a suit and tie.

“My parents had an interview at the US Embassy. The one in Syria is closed. I was trying to get them visas—”

“You have refugee status?” he interrupts.

“Yes.”

He opens my passport to check anyway.

I try to explain:

“It’s called family reunification. I can—”

“Yes, I know, apply on behalf of direct relatives. You had applied for your parents?”

“Yes, as soon as I arrived in the US—”

“When was that?”

“A little more than two years ago.”

He looks up.

I say, “That’s how long it takes.”

I do not go through *what* it takes, the alphanumeric forms, the DNA tests, the fees, the lawyers, the pleading letters, the phone calls. The supporting documents and the tragicomedy of getting them in a country at war. For two years. For nothing. Baba’s heart stopped the night before the interview, and Mama missed the appointment.

I do not bother the officer with the details. He is looking at his watch. My pride won’t let me ask him for the time, but my stomach, shamelessly, thunders. He hears it and smiles.

“Hungry?”

I curl my lips in so I don't beg for a piece of bread. I've begged before, but I won't, to him. The officer snaps the passport shut. His amusement has passed.

"So you flew all the way to Amman for a burial."

He would never have let himself be buried in a foreign country. He would never have left from the start, but I was so insistent, and Mama so heartbroken after I left . . .

"My mother was alone. I—"

Another smile.

"You're a good son. Where is she now?"

"Back in Syria."

His nod of approval makes me want to hit him. His eyes then narrow, though his tone remains conversational. He says, like the thought just occurred to him:

"ISIS recruits quite a lot of Syrians in Jordan . . ."

The sentence trails but the gaze remains sharp.

"In fact," he adds offhandedly, "I think their biggest training camps are just outside Amman."

My torso jerks forward. My chest heaves.

"I *am* not," I say, jaw so clenched the words barely come out, "a terrorist."

But the look on his face is triumphant; he broke through. Now he prods:

"No, of course not. None of you are . . ."

"I told you my father died! I went there to bury him!"

"Don't raise your voice at me, sir!"

His spittle hits me in the face. It's over.

"I was in the Marines, you know. Served two tours in I-raq."

So he has been out of the country. His eyes shoot rounds at me.

"I've seen men like you. Mobs outside the embassy, shouting 'Death to America!' The next day, I'd see the same men in line, inventing sob stories, trying to get a visa . . ."

"I told you, I'm a refugee! I've never fought a day in my life! Call my case officer!"

The door crashes open behind me.

"What's going on here?!"

The officer jumps up.

"This guy's being belligerent, sir!"

"No, I'm not!" I shout as I spin around. The handcuffs throw me off balance.

The newcomer is older. There is an extra patch on his sleeve. He does not look at me. To the other officer, he says:

"What country?"

"Syria."

He nods.

"He says he's a refugee."

"Of course, they all are. Does he have papers?"

"Yes."

Sir extends his hand. The officer gives him my passport. A cursory glance; a much longer look, no words, between him and

the officer. He snaps the blue booklet shut and only then looks at me.

“Sir, we regret to inform you that you are inadmissible to the US.”

The words are in English. They must be.

“What?”

“According to Section Three of Executive Order 13769, and based on information discovered during this CBP inspection—”

“Section what? What information? I told him—”

“—you have been denied entry to the US. You have two options—”

“I live here! I have legal status!”

“Your status is no longer valid.”

He has remained calm this entire time. His tone has not risen at all. Unperturbed, as though I had thought, not shouted, my protests, he continues:

“As I was saying, you have a choice: You can either leave the US voluntarily—we’ll give you a document to sign—or be forcibly deported. If you are, you should know that you will be barred from reentry for five years, if not permanently.”

I teeter backward.

“Either way, your deportation officer”—he nods to the man, still standing at attention behind the table—“will make arrangements for your departure on the next scheduled flight.”

He turns to the door. My passport is still in his hand.

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I want to shout to him to wait. Demand to speak to someone. My case officer, a lawyer! I know my rights. I have the right to—

But he is already out the door. I lunge after him, eyes on the disappearing blue document that is all I have. I forgot the handcuffs. I lose my balance. My chin hits the floor first, the dirty, grimy floor. I taste the tooth first, then the blood.

There is shouting, alarm, boots approaching, arms grabbing me. My head is jerked upward. Something cold presses hard against the back of my neck. I was wrong; it's not a toy pistol.