

The Fig and The Olive (an excerpt of a short story)

Maysoon had only made it to the second row of students when she saw it: A rudimentary drawing that clarified itself as she stared into a woman draped in a scribbled hijab, a long triangle of a jilbab, and that same circle in the center, the line coming from it that she had seen before — a bomb with a sparkling fuse of asterisks. She wanted to grab the paper and march the kid out, to give Dr. Pulkowski proof that she was being harassed and present him with a culprit.

But then she looked at the other side of the aisle and saw the same drawing in a different hand, another beyond that, and then another. Maysoon's eyes darted from desk to desk as she realized that half her students were doing all they could to conceal sniggers and cover laughter while deliberately displaying their drawings of that shocking subject: her holding a bomb.

They had planned it.

Maysoon's whole body flushed, throbbed with heat. Her hijab seemed to cut into her throat. What could she do now? There were still 10 minutes left in the class.

"Everyone write your names on your papers and pass them forward," she managed to choke out, trying to smooth her voice over the little bursts that heaved out of her chest. "Make sure the papers coming in from behind have names on them, if not, write them in."

She wanted to say something — to defend herself against the drawings. To tell them that she was born an hour away in Cincinnati, that her favorite food was pizza, that she had a weakness for Pepsi. That she was a mother, a daughter, a wife. That some days, she wasn't sure why she put on the hijab either, what the point of it was when all it

did was bring more attention to her instead of less, made her have to prove she belonged by babbling on too long with her Midwestern twang.

As a teenager, she wondered what it might've felt like to go out without her coverings, to pull loose her mousy brown hair and let the sun freckle her arms, to let herself be seen without being sized up, without being cut down to size. Now, most of the time, she was ok enough with herself and her faith to disregard the glances; cared more about how she was seen by God than by anyone around her. But how could she explain any of that?

Anyway, the students hadn't *said* anything to her — it was all there in the drawings in a way that was so concrete and yet so deafening. That's what she wanted Dr. Pulkowski to understand the first time it happened. That no one needed to say anything, that the drawings, deliberate and anonymous, were worse. Even so, she still had no idea what to say to the squirming, sweating *children* in front of her.

Maysoon slunk into her chair and waited for the bell to ring. She didn't remind her students of their homework, written on the board, she didn't tell them to enjoy the rest of their day. She didn't even look up at them as they shuffled past.

Once the classroom was empty, she launched herself down the stairs and pushed into Dr. Pulkowski's office without asking his secretary if he had time for her, without even knocking. This time, she barged right in and laid the drawings on his desk.

"It happened again. And not just one student – 10, 12, maybe more," she hissed. "Now tell me: what are you going to do?"

He flipped through the stack of papers, scrutinizing them and then looking up at her, as if trying to find the best rendering of her body. "Look, I know this is hard," he

said finally. “I can have that talk you wanted to have the last time you were in here. They’re good kids, Maysoon. They’re just testing your boundaries. We’ll work it out.”

All the silence Maysoon had swallowed down at the end of class to keep from screaming now slithered out her throat: “You realize this is a hate crime, don’t you?”

“You want to call the police on your students?” He asked, pushing back in his chair, letting his voice undulate with the movement like a wave. His eyes, two dark holes in a pool of clear blue, held her steady as a predator. He wouldn’t be moved. She knew that.

Maysoon did a quick twist to grab the papers up from in front of him before taking one a step back and then another. She found herself stumbling into a run to get away, to get his gaze off of her — his eyes had the ability to turn venom into nothing. To turn her into nothing.

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“The hummus is good too, right?” Maysoon said, settling at the table across from Shadi, trying to bring levity into her voice. She had gone back to the restaurant after she picked up Layan. She craved the comfort of a shawarma and Pepsi, and the smile on Raya’s face when she walked in was unlike the look she got everywhere else she went in town. It made Maysoon feel that she belonged there at the Fig and Olive, that she was home.

“I like yours better,” Shadi said.

“Look, Shadi,” she said, switching to Arabic to make sure he didn’t miss a single word. “I can’t stand in front of a classroom all day and then come home and stand in the kitchen to cook dinner and watch Layan at the same time. I just can’t.”

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He refused even to eat leftovers. He wanted her in the kitchen every day and since they had married, she had felt guilty for every day she hadn't cooked. For every pizza she ordered and every call she made for take-out. Did he feel guilty for anything? All his expectations of her, all of his demands. He never wanted to know anything about how her day went, how she managed. He didn't seem to care that she was starving by 5:00 but made herself wait until he got home to eat everyday.

"Then quit your job, Maysoon," Shadi said, stressing her name. "The kids don't even like you."

"Why do you say that?"

"I saw those drawings."

For a moment, she wanted to lash out at him for looking at the papers that had been stuffed in the side of her work bag – didn't she have any privacy? – but the feeling flickered out into a plume of relief. She was glad he knew. "Aren't they awful? I showed them to Raya. She gave me the number of her cousin, Susu. She's a lawyer who's going to help me file a case."

"You're going to sue the school?"

"Well, I'm going to talk to her first. But Raya told me it would be well within my rights."

"Who's Raya?"

"The girl at the restaurant – the Fig and Olive – where this food is from."

"You showed her the drawings?"

"Yeah," Maysoon said, feeling Shadi fall further back into the distance that seemed to always persist between them. Desperate to keep him from pulling away from

her entirely, Maysoon tried to explain. “We met the other day. She’s actually really smart. She gets things.”

“And when were you going to show me?”

“Right after,” Maysoon paused, her eyes searching the corners of everything in the room for her next words. “I needed another American perspective. A Muslim-American perspective. You didn’t grow up here so I wasn’t sure you’d understand that —.”

“You’re right,” he said and pushed back his plate, still scattered with broken kabobs and heaps of rice. “I don’t understand. My perspective is you quit.”

“And let those kids believe they scared me off? That it’s ok to hate people because of their religion? No. I’m not going to do that.”

“It’s their country,” he said.

“It’s my country too,” Maysoon said, surprising herself.

Never before had she claimed her citizenship so fully. Her parents always stressed that they were Muslim, that they were Syrian — that they weren’t like Americans who wasted their food and had sex before marriage and put their parents in nursing homes. All her life, she had been told she wasn’t like *them*, that she could never be like *them*.

But she was American — she had been born in America, a seed planted in its soil that grew in its dirt. She had a right to claim the roots that had grown beneath her as much as the crown of leaves that had managed to sprout above her.

“This is my country,” Shadi said and lifted his plastic knife to point at her before cutting a circle with its tip in the air. “This house is my country.”

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Her eyes filled with tears before she could stop them, before she could turn away. “So what about me, Shadi?” Maysoon choked out. “Don’t I have a place here? Don’t I get to say what I think?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” he said, and a mean little laugh crackled through him. “That’s the problem with you Americans. You’ve never experienced any hardship so any little thing breaks you.”

Maysoon sucked in her breath. She wanted to get up, to retreat to the kitchen, to soak her hands in the warm water and let the rush of the faucet fill her ears, but now she fell back in her chair, as if knocked back.

“We had to sing the praises of that bastard every day in school,” Shadi said, rising to his feet even as his voice quavered. “I was there when I heard them beating my mother for refusing to lead her classroom in that nonsense. I heard her crying out, Maysoon. I saw the welts they left on her arms — never the hands or face because that would be too obvious to her students. Do you have any idea what that was like for our family?”

“You never told me that before,” Maysoon breathed. She could see that his face had grown red. He was biting back tears of his own.

“What’s the point in talking about any of it? There’s nothing left to talk about. We tried to talk, to demonstrate — and what happened? Assad came and bombed whole neighborhoods, shot anyone who protested.”

“You need to talk about these things to understand them, to move on from them.”

“That’s the American perspective again, Maysoon. What will talking change? Nothing.” She saw him look towards the door. She knew he wanted to leave, to drive, to

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let the slamming door be the last word of their fight, same as always, but she refused to let it be that way this time.

Maysoon got up and took slow steps towards him, as if he were a wounded animal. She wrapped her arms around him, held him tight. She felt his body begin to shake, to convulse.

“That’s why you don’t want me working? You want to save me from what happened to your mother,” Maysoon whispered. She didn’t expect him to answer, she just needed to say it aloud. “But things aren’t like that here, Shadi. We have to stand up for ourselves so it doesn’t get to be like it was in Syria.”

He pulled himself away. “You think no one stood up to it there? You think no one tried to stop Assad? To stop him and his father before him — my father,” he said and stopped, started again. But his throat closed around the words, caught. “My father —”