

Failed Treaties

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Danny used to open the door and let me into his apartment downstairs at seven a.m. every Saturday. My mother would already be up, stooped over the kitchen table in our upstairs apartment, wearing her pale-blue nightdress, spreading tangy *lebanah* on a plate for my father before he left to open his grocery store. My baby sister Leena sucked on her chubby fist and squirmed in her highchair when I tickled her face. My mother blocked my way to the back door, holding a spoonful of yogurt in one hand and my chin in the other, sniffing my breath for traces of Colgate.

“*Tayib,*” she’d say, and I’d rush past her and swoop down the stairs.

Danny and his mother rented our first floor in the summer of 1980. She was a bartender, sleeping until noon in a room adjacent to Danny’s. When Danny and I triumphantly freed Lady from Donkey Kong, she’d yell at us in a scratchy voice to keep it down. Sometimes, there’d be a man with her, and he’d loom in the doorway in his plaid boxers and bare chest, telling us to knock it off.

We were ten years old and Danny was crazy about He-Man action figures. He’d pull me by the sleeve into his room and make me play Skeletor before letting me at his video games. The funny thing was Danny’s He-Man never tried to vanquish my Skeletor, despite my best efforts to lay ruin to his forts. Danny enjoyed forming treaties like those we’d learned in Social Studies. He’d say in a solemnly grown-up voice, “Accept these terms, sir, or face dire consequences.”

I’d choose the latter, but he’d say in his whiny real-voice, “No, Sameer! You’re supposed to agree to the terms.”

He wore clunky-framed glasses and couldn’t hit a baseball to save his life. When he got excited, his oversized White Sox cap

shifted all the way around until the bill faced backwards. He was the only kid the neighborhood bullies enjoyed tormenting more than me.

When they were short on players, they'd call us over. "Hey, Ay-rab!" And to Danny, they'd yell, "You, too, faggot! You wanna play?"

They'd position us in the outfield to retrieve fly balls from a neighbor's yard, or ones that skipped off the hoods of parked cars. I didn't mind jogging past bungalows with gleaming lawns and narrow driveways. I didn't care much about playing, but Danny could barely contain his excitement. He'd try to high-five the boys, and they'd just wave him away like they were swatting flies.

I couldn't figure out Danny's obsession with baseball when his room was filled to the hilt with every action toy and video game manufactured back then. My mother figured she could buy a few pairs of jeans or a nice sweater for me to wear on *Eid* instead of squandering money on one monster truck. At Christmas we didn't have a tree with piles of presents, but my father convinced my mother that purchasing one toy for their eight-year-old son from Toys R Us would not incur Allah's wrath. When we got there, she clucked her tongue and stared at parents pushing carts brimming with stuffed animals, board games, and snow sleds down every aisle.

"*Ya haram!* What a waste of money! Kids are starving in the *mokhayamat*," she'd lament. "Do you know how many refugee kids don't have a decent pair of shoes?"

Against one wall in Danny's room was a mid-sized shelf with the entire Hardy Boys series and an illustrated *Treasure Island*, which I'd pull out and read in a corner of his room when he was acting like a baby. If I threatened to leave, he'd beg me to stay. I'd settle back down on the floor while he looked at me with wary eyes behind those goofy glasses, afraid I'd still make good on my threat.

In the winter, I'd run down to Danny's in thick tube socks and my father's house slippers on frigid Saturday mornings. Danny wore green and brown turtlenecks that made him look like a giant bobble head.

That Christmas, Danny's uncle Paul moved in. His mother knocked on our back door to let my parents know her kid brother would be staying with them for a while. She brought a tin of red-and-green sprinkled shortbread cookies.

"It's only for a few months," she told my parents. "Just until he gets back on his feet."

"Family very good," my mother said with a wide smile, straddling baby Leena on her hip. Then, in Arabic to my father, "*Absan min zalama.*" Better than strange men in her bed. She continued to smile innocently at Danny's mother.

My father said nothing. We both looked away when Danny's mother caught us staring at her large breasts straining against her red cashmere sweater. She had a pin in the shape of a giant gift bow secured to the fabric where her bosom began to swell.

Danny's uncle Paul was tall and lanky, with a small paunch that protruded when he leaned back and locked his fingers around the back of his head. In our enclosed back porch, he smoked Camels and talked with my father about the "crisis in the Middle East." My father stood there cradling two bags of groceries he'd brought home from his store. Paul scratched the bridge of his nose with a tobacco-stained finger when he spoke about Vietnam where he'd served for two years. He was a member of the last combat troops to be withdrawn in 1973.

I eavesdropped as my father repeated some of Paul's stories to my mother. Though I vaguely understood as I listened through their bedroom door, I knew my father was leaving a lot of stuff out.

"*Allahu samibna,*" my mother would say. "God forgive us all."

I could not see their faces, but I imagined my mother's eyes were wet. She had spent her childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon where she carried her good shoes to school to avoid raw sewage splattering them. She and dozens of children crammed under a tent in a makeshift school for a few hours of lessons every day. Once a month, members of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency used the space for distributing sacks of wheat, rice, and sugar and for checking children for tuberculosis.

“If I hadn’t met your father, I would have rotted there,” she told me, straightening my collar before I headed to school. Then she’d hold me a little longer, gripping my shoulders and gazing into my eyes until I looked down at my brown leather shoes.

Danny was thrilled to have his uncle around and wasn’t so keen on inviting me over anymore. One morning, I knocked anyway, and he poked his head out the door like a rooster. “What?”

“Is that Suh-Meer?” his uncle called from inside. “Let him in, Danny-Boy.”

He opened the door just wide enough for me to slip through, my elbow scraping the lock plate. “You can’t stay long, Uncle Paul and me are planning stuff,” he said.

Two months later, on New Year’s Eve, Danny and his uncle were at our back door. My mother stood facing them, her lips pursed in disapproval as Paul tried to hand my father a six-pack of Budweiser to ring in 1981.

“Thank you. We don’t drink alcohol,” my father politely said.

Danny pulled me aside to boast. “Uncle Paul’s taking me to the Museum of Science and Industry to see the trains.”

I watched my parents standing awkwardly, then I looked at Paul, his face flushed with many beers, his eyes glistening with merriment, and I wished I had different parents.

I didn’t see Danny much after that and only in school. When baseball season commenced, even the bullies wondered about Danny.

“Where’s your faggot-friend, camel jockey?” they’d shout as I whizzed by them on my bike, nearly careening into a parked car when one of them charged me.

Danny’s mother started waitressing to pay for secretarial school. She still tended bar on weekends. His uncle couldn’t hold down a job and watched Danny during his mother’s double shifts. Through the bathroom vent, I could hear muffled arguing between Danny’s mother and uncle and the back door slamming. Sometimes, I thought I heard crying, but it didn’t sound like it was coming from a woman.

At school, Danny would lay his head on his desk until the teacher tapped his shoulder. He sometimes missed a few days, and when I'd ask him about it, he said it was because of bronchitis. I figured it was something white people got—like asthma.

Paul still smoked on the porch and outside when all you needed was a light jacket. He was usually barefoot and his Levi's jeans were frayed and hung low on his gaunt waist. He looked at me with hollow eyes, like he'd been in a dark room. He seemed annoyed when I said hello as though he'd been pondering something important, and I'd disturbed him.

"What? Oh, hey there, Suh-meer." He'd stub out his cigarette in an overflowing tin ashtray and absentmindedly kick an empty Budweiser can from a pile he'd left on the porch. I'd pick them up and smell their sweet metallic tabs, before swiftly discarding them in the alley so my mother wouldn't see.

It was my turn to be smug when Danny knocked on my door one Saturday morning in April. "What do you want?"

"You wanna come over?" He was chewing the neckline of his Superman T-shirt. He looked thinner with dark circles under his eyes like scuff marks.

"Only for an hour, *habibi*," my mother said. "We're driving to Ashland for shoes."

In his room, I picked up Skeletor as usual, but Danny just sat on his bed with his baseball mitt, listlessly rubbing his thumb against the worn-down leather.

"Play whatever you want," he said dully.

"Neat!" I gave Skeletor a friendly toss across the room. I planted myself squarely in front of Danny's twenty-inch television and concentrated hard on his Atari. After a while, his uncle opened the door.

"Hey there, Suh-meer." He tousled my hair and sat next to Danny. "Hey, Danny-Boy."

"You can't come in here when I have friends over," Danny said. "Mom said so."

I paused. I had been silently pressing buttons with eyes glued to the screen. Danny's tense voice shook like a plate rattling in a sink.

"You know something, Suh-meer? Time to go home, buddy," his uncle said. "Danny's not feelin' too good."

I sprung up from the floor, but Danny leapt off his bed and grabbed my wrist. I couldn't help thinking of the neighborhood bullies calling us "a couple of homos" when they saw us sitting side by side on my front stairs. I shook free.

"No, I'm not sick," Danny pleaded. "Really, Sameer, you can stay."

I was a little scared. "I think my mom's calling me. We're going to Ashland to buy shoes," I said, and though it was completely true, it sounded flimsy and weak.

Danny and his uncle were cemented to that space on the floor of his bedroom. He gave his uncle a stiff sidelong glance, then looked straight at me.

For a long time after, Danny's look clung to me like photographs on the yellowed, sticky pages of an old-fashioned album. It was a look of fear and shame so thick it made Danny's eyelids droop behind his glasses; the look of someone who'd been through a war—the same look his uncle Paul had, revealing he'd endured as much pain as he'd inflicted.

That summer of 1981, Danny and his mother moved out of our first-floor apartment after his uncle Paul shot himself on a toilet at a Shell gas station.

In September of 1982, I was outside carving my name under the front stairs when my mother's shrieks brought me running into our house. She was standing in front of our television set as news broke of the massacre of men, women and children in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in west Beirut. On the floor, my baby sister was also shrieking and pumping her fists, terrified and confused by our mother who was clawing at her floral housedress until she tore it down the middle. I swiftly carried Leena away and soothed her in her crib until she fell asleep.

When I returned to the front room, I was afraid to touch my mother, who had crumbled to the floor. Her eyes had become dull and empty as she stared at the images on the screen. I sat beside her and we stayed like that long after the sun set. The only light came from the TV and the only sounds drifting inside the room came from my mother's whimpers and the voice of the American reporter standing amidst the carnage. We did not speak until my father came home. He lifted my mother and carried her like a limp doll to their bedroom. She couldn't speak for two days afterwards.

Twenty years later, I remember that day when I visit my parents. I climb up their back porch, two steps at a time. The stairs are worn down after another decade of paint has chipped away.

I remember Danny, too, and his He-Man action figures and treaties for peace.

Before I reach the landing, I hear my aged mother on her new cellphone, chattering with a relative overseas. I turn the doorknob to enter the kitchen. For a moment, Danny's face appears, then quickly slides away like a fly ball we used to chase before losing it to the gutter. ∞