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THE ABRIDGED AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF YOUSEF R.


JOSEPH G. RATHGEBER

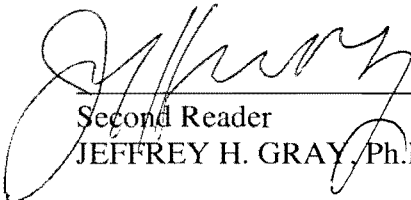
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Master's Thesis

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Abstract

The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R.

“The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R.” is a short story that explores the themes of cultural identity, societal violence, and the plight of Arab-Americans in a post-9/11 setting. The short story utilizes an alternating first-person/third-person narrative voice, intended to demonstrate the protagonist’s struggle to accurately and objectively express his experiences. The short story is broken into twenty-seven numbered sections in an effort to convey the fragmentation experienced by a Palestinian immigrant family in New Jersey. “The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R.” aims to reconcile a narrative depicting pressing social issues with an experimental structure and aesthetics.

Joseph Rathgeber

Seton Hall University

Master's Thesis

28 November 2011

Thesis Introduction

Authors Jonathan Franzen and Ben Marcus entered into a debate almost a decade apart in the pages of *Harper's* magazine. Each author elucidated his respective concerns, qualms, principles, and petty (in some cases, not so petty) trivialities regarding contemporary fiction and the novel. I seek not to participate in this debate, but rather I intend to situate my work within the context of two important issues I see arising from the debate: the question of social versus experimental concerns. It is my belief that fiction should attempt to operate within a framework that strikes a balance between the social and the experimental. The social side of the equation is largely a content-based consideration, while the experimental side is predominantly an issue of aesthetics, form, and structure. Still, aesthetic, form, and structure should be attuned to social implications, as these concrete and stylistic choices reflect and demonstrate the aim of the content. Conversely, content is significantly affected by structural decisions. These topoi can be assessed in my short story, "The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R."

In his April 1996 article, "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels," Jonathan Franzen laments a variety of interconnected subjects, not the least of which is the "death of the social novel" (Franzen 37). Franzen expresses his struggle with calculating the "equation of the personal and the social" (Franzen 36). This, even in 1996, was a valid concern. Writing fiction that balances the personal and social so as to calibrate the two, tamping down the

personal while still not allowing the social to dominate the narrative, is Franzen's objective.

Mine as well. Franzen recalls the realization of his responsibility as a novelist:

In college my head had been turned by Marxism, and I believed that "monopoly capitalism"...abounded with 'negative moments'...that a novelist could trick Americans into confronting if only he could package his subversive bombs in a sufficiently seductive narrative. (Franzen 37)

In 1996, Franzen was nostalgic for "[a] century ago, [when] the novel was the preeminent medium of social instruction" (Franzen 41). Still, he recognizes the limitations of the form. A fiction writer can end up "torturing the story, stretching it to accommodate ever more of those things-in-the-world that impinge on the enterprise of fiction writing" (Franzen 40). The risk of becoming too didactic is apparent.

Franzen's other major dispute with fiction revolves around "the economics of book publishing" (Franzen 38). Franzen is keenly aware that "the dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority" (Franzen 38). The function of literature within a capitalistic structure is disparaged and belittled. Money is the object; profit is the emphasis. Franzen recognizes the commodification of fiction. To write capital-L literature (or "literary fiction") is to be an outsider, an unmarketable oddity. The only hope the literary writer has is to market his- or herself through shameless, often narcissistic, promotional tactics and sales gimmicks. Fiction writers looking to operate outside the system find comfort in the Creative Writing departments on college campuses. This, too, is problematic.

Franzen laments the specialization of fiction writers. These are aspiring writers processed through MFA programs, writers who have "taken refuge from a hostile culture" (Franzen 48). These writers have, essentially, thrown up their hands and retreated into the wilderness to live a

life of insularity and solitude. MFA writers churn out only one of three story types: “‘My Interesting Childhood,’ ‘My Interesting Life in a College Town,’ and ‘My Interesting Year Abroad’” (Franzen 48). Again, Franzen is commenting on a process of commodification: commodification of the fiction writer, the fiction story, and fiction as a creative act. Fiction has become an industry, in short. What’s most depressing about this trend is that social issues have no footing in this industry—they fail to even get their foot in the factory door.

Though “The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R.” reads like a combination of all three of Franzen’s dreaded MFA story topics (it recalls childhood, college, and time spent abroad), it avoids becoming the standard fare because of its aesthetic choices. It also, and more importantly, is imbued with social concerns (presumably unlike the stories Franzen has in mind—self-centered and self-absorbed stories). Experimentation is a strategy that not only evades that which is commonplace, but it is a strategy that can be more suitable to the content of the story. Ben Marcus, in his article from the October 2005 issue of *Harper’s*, “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction,” argues in favor of such innovation. Marcus, though firmly in support of experimentation, ignores the matter of social awareness and attention. “The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R.” is an effort to wed the societal concerns of Franzen with the aesthetic concerns of Marcus.

*

The fiction writer cannot ignore social issues. Fiction, like all art, should serve a social function. The function need not be as deliberate as WPA artist employees or as overt as agitprop, but fiction should serve a function. Fiction should highlight, reveal, provide a holistic view, unsettle, and agitate. As Jonathan Franzen rightly points out, it is an artist’s obligation to

do so: “a country’s poets and novelists are often the ones obliged to serve as voices of conscience in times of religious or political fanaticism” (52). The world has never absent of these forms of fanaticism.

To write social fiction (my substitute term for “social novel”) is to resist. In the face of the publishing industry, the culture industry, and late capitalism, the artist is obligated to address these forces and ideologies, preferably with a level of subtlety that evades propagandizing, sloganeering, and polemics. To ignore the world is to be derelict in the duties of an artist.

Jonathan Franzen and other industry loyalists view experimental prose as incompatible with social relevance: “because I don’t write the conventional narrative language, and because I haven’t often foregrounded the consciousness of characters in my fiction, and livestocked those characters in a recognizable setting, I will never be considered a realist” (qtd. in Marcus 40). Contrary to this view, to resist the tenets of traditional storytelling *is* to resist the forces of profit-driven, free market publishing. Though the naysayers (some would say “reactionaries”) condemn a writer for writing experimentally, for if you do, “you are an elitist” (Marcus 40), they are intending to disregard the work of artists eager to upset the mode of production and cultural hierarchy.

The reactionary critics and complicit writers claim that “to leave the mainstream, to write experimental fiction, is to be a miserable narcissist” (Marcus 45). But what of jarring the reader? What of refusing to be co-opted by a literary industry that demands a standard template for acceptable fiction? What happens when traditions—as they historically do—crumble? The inadequacies of rudimentary fiction need not be ignored; they need to be confronted.

To ignore the social aspect in a post-9/11 world is impossible. A monolithic world event like 9/11 sets in motion a multitude of social issues that *can* be and should be the focus of fiction

(war, suspension of *habeas corpus*, warrantless wiretapping, torture, bigotry and backlash, airport security, presidential and executive power, post-traumatic stress disorder, and so), so long as one of these repercussive social issues does not itself become a monolithic world event, i.e., “the Iraq War.”

Theodor Adorno proclaimed that “To write poetry after the holocaust is barbaric.” Nobody abided. The material of the Holocaust was (and, for many writers, still is) too supple not to work with. The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 provide a similar opportunity. It is a world event too irresistible to pass up. Writers of fiction, in general, view it as too substantive to ignore; it can be integrated into fiction in myriad ways. First-person accounts of individuals at the event, third-person accounts of small-time heroes, the emotional unraveling and trauma of relatives, the loss, the awe, the fear. And, of course, the appraisals of Arab-American life after the event. These approaches became cliché the moment the second plane hit the South Tower. Similarly, the language of the event became trite with only a slight delay, including phrases I’ve used in this paragraph: “post-9/11”; “The attacks on the World Trade Center”; “heroes”; “second plane hit the South Tower.” The phrases become jargon and do not make for good fiction. They are boilerplate.

A monolithic world event like “9/11” cannot be the focus of a piece of fiction. It is not that writing about the horrific is uncouth, rather, it is a futile enterprise couched in the already established emotional ties readers have to the event. It should be avoided like the plague, the tsunami, the earthquake, the oil spill, and the terrorist attack. The only valid way to write about the event is by placing it in the background, referring to it only indirectly, tangentially, or offhandedly.

I can write about the myth of “Arab violence” as though it is a category in and of itself. I will agree to that, as long as a category is offered for “Western violence” as an even more destructive, barbarous, and hegemonic force. I can write about an American-born Palestinian, a first-generation Palestinian boy, a young man not so acclimated, assimilated, acculturated that he is completely severed from his Palestinian roots, yet also not so stereotypically “immigrant” (harsh accent, impoverished, ostracized) that he fails to be comfortable in his role as an Arab-American citizen.

To focus on the personal account within the larger sociopolitical context rather than the broad, sweeping, umbrella attempts at encompassing all the names, dates, historical details and jargon is the most efficacious maneuver. The experimental writer demonstrates a reliance on hints, nods, and offhand comments. The onus is on the reader to do the research, to piece together the historical narrative, the wider scope. Ben Marcus understands that the rule has long been to know “effort is the last thing we [writers] are supposed to request of a reader” (39). But to challenge a reader opens up the opportunity for greater rewards: “it is arguably sublime when a text creates in us desires we did not know we had, and then enlarges those desires without seeming desperate to please us” (Marcus 48).

The foremost experimental strategies employed in “The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R.” are fragmentation, multiple points of view, and meta-narration. Fragmentation should be familiar to readers by now: it is an effort to disrupt the narrative, disorient the reader, and demonstrate the instability of the text and the content. Likewise, a narrative that is broken into numbered sections reflects a culture inseparable from precise, economical, and mathematical codification.

A shifting point of view emphasizes the internal struggle of the protagonist. It is a meta-narrative attempt to maintain objectivity in a severely personal account. The switching from first-person to third-person is meant to demonstrate the push and pull of the protagonist's conscience. Ultimately, objectivity is futile for the narrator, thus the wavering from section to section. The inconsistencies in point of view demonstrate that the narrator is biased—not polemical, but firmly confident in his recollections and insights, because they are first-hand experiences.

Marcus's article, which reads much like a manifesto for experimental fiction, declares some of the goals of experimental writers: "to engrave the elusive aspects of life's entanglements, to represent the intensity of consciousness, to produce the sort of stories that transfix and mesmerize" (39). These goals are paramount, but they cannot be divided from social concerns. The content of experimental prose cannot be self-indulgent and insular material that caters to industry standards and requirements. Experimental prose must be coupled with class-conscious and social-conscious content. If "literary fiction" is to maintain its integrity and still be disseminated to the masses it needs to be fiction of resistance. Fiction needs to resist specialization in the universities, it needs to resist complacency and complicity in content, and it needs to resist traditional aesthetics.

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The Abridged Autobiography of Yousef R.

1.

We saw a horse on the highway—on Route 3—its mane was mohawked in the 65 mile per hour wind. I asked my father if the horse was from the rodeo. “It’s from the racetrack,” he said. We were driving through the meadowlands. The horse’s neck was craned out the rear opening of a trailer hitched to a pickup truck. “New Jersey doesn’t have rodeos,” my father added. “You’d have to go to Texas for that. Do you want to go to Texas?” Before I could even envisage a map of the U.S. in my head—before I could even think of geography—he asserted: “You don’t want to go to Texas.”

2.

Yousef’s main physical abnormality was his skinny neck. It would eventually expand to a sufficient girth, filling out his shirt collars, but as an adolescent it looked elongated. It resembled a cartoon character’s neck, one that protrudes from the collar like a stick in a bucket. It earned him the nickname “The Iguana.”

3.

I’m trying to be unbiased. I want to see my life without bias, as an outsider sees it, yet I refuse to dump this task in someone else’s lap (for fear they’ll get an erection and penetrate my very soul). I struggle with impersonality, though. I’m pretty personable. I speak to strangers when I deem it’s necessary, whether it be in lines, in elevators, or the lobby of the dentist’s office. What I mean is I find it difficult to describe myself as though I am not myself.

4.

Yousef is trying to be unbiased.

5.

I wanted to be a cowboy. “I want to be a cowboy,” I said to my father. He drove with two hands, always, at nine and three. The sleeves of his pea coat sheathed his knuckles. “Cowboys are killers,” he said. He said it definitively, authoritatively, with not the slightest trace of his accent, which was heavy. Still, I wanted a holster hanging off each of my hips. I wanted spurs on my Nikes so I could dig them into the hind of my faithful steed when not being faithful. I wanted to ruin the animal’s flawless, shiny coat for misbehavior or disobedience, like bucking at the shock wave of a gunshot. I wanted a vest made from the hide of a buffalo, with fringe at the hems. I wanted to welcome my father home from work with guns drawn.

My mother bought me a cowboy gun—a replica—but still real-looking, with a measurable amount of gravitas. (This was before it became law to put a bright orange nub on the butt of all toy pistols.) You loaded the caps into the barrel. I sniffed the air, inhaling the smoke the gun produced after each pull of the trigger. The first time I ever cursed was when I shot a dud (I said “shit”). My mother instructed me never to use the cap gun when my father was home. I kept the weapon under my bed, shielded from sight by the sham. My father, it should be noted, owned two guns.

6.

Yousef’s mother kept secret items. There were two: her carton of cigarettes and her pumice stone.

The pumice stone was located on the lip of the tub, not far from the soap dish caulked to the tile wall. Sometimes he'd find gravelly pumice residue in the bar of soap. He'd pick the particles off with his fingernail. He knew his mother used the pumice stone on her feet—he had seen it done. She ground the pumice stone against the calluses on her feet, which had developed because her waking hours were spent on her feet. The pumice stone wasn't so much a secret item; it was more of a mysterious artifact. It was something he shouldn't have seen.

The carton of cigarettes was hidden in the cabinet above the kitchen sink where the Tupperware was piled high, a shaky mountain of containers and lids. Yousef never knew why his mom was so hugger-mugger with her smokes. He knew she smoked. His brothers and sisters knew she smoked. His dad knew she smoked. Why the covert operation? He eventually worked up the courage to steal a pack of cigarettes and experimented with smoking the cigarettes in the garage. They were long enough to be pipe cleaners and he gave it up after the third time he felt vomit rising in his throat.

7.

We had neighbors up the block: the Jansen's. The entire family had names beginning with J. Janet. John. John Junior. Jacqueline. And Jason. John Junior—who we didn't call J.J., but Johnny—was the kid who bullied me the most. Johnny was also the first person I ever physically hurt.

One day in July, Johnny and Jason were arguing in the middle of the street. My mother never let me play in the street, but I took one step off the curb and treated the sewer grate as home plate—it was where I was safe from scorn. Johnny and Jason were arguing over a squirt gun. They yelled back and forth at each other. Johnny put Jason in a headlock and gave him

noogies. Jason called Johnny a faggot. Johnny called Jason a fag, faggot, faggy. They used the word *faggot* and all its variants more than anyone else I've ever come across.

Their father worked from home playing the stock market. He was formerly a roofer but quit after a bucket of hot tar tipped over and burned a large percentage of his body. I saw his scars at the public pool. My mother slapped me in the back of the head for staring.

Mr. Jansen shouted from the screen door: "You two faggots quit your hollerin' and get inside, dinner's almost up." My mother said Mrs. Jansen never cooked and their family always ate bowls of cereal for dinner. And they didn't use milk, she said, only apple juice. I sat on the curb kicking gravel into the sewer grate while Johnny and Jason ate their bowls of apple juice-soaked cereal.

Johnny came back outside first. He wielded the squirt gun and started spraying me in the back of my head. To prove this didn't faze me, I turned around and started catching the assault in my mouth. Johnny laughed loud. "I pissed in that!" he shouted, referring to the squirt gun. Jason came outside. "Did he piss in the squirt gun?" I asked. "He always does." Jason said. I ran home, washed my mouth in the sink, and went to bed without telling anyone.

I got my revenge the next time Johnny was chasing me, which happened frequently. He chased me into my backyard, I grabbed a crate we used for storage (balls, frisbees, shovels, pails), and hurled it in his direction. The hard plastic crate hit him in the shin. I must've hit him at the perfect angle because he began to cry. His parents ran down the block, blamed my parents for my behavior, and walked their sobbing son back home. I never felt better or more proud of myself.

I had a Boy Scouts of America handbook and a wilderness survival guide. If memory serves, I found them in our attic when we moved into the house on Piaget Avenue (that's Piaget pronounced *pie-aye-jit*—nobody in our family cared for theories of cognitive development or spoke French—we're Palestinians, not Algerians). The books were wrapped in parchment paper and tied with an arm's length of hairy twine, longitudinally and latitudinally, forming four quarters. It looked like a Pony Express package that popped off the saddle somewhere in Nevada, or a codex covered with sand in Egypt. There were myriad diagrams and drawings explaining how to tie knots and how to survive in the severest of conditions (the latter can be boiled down to "blow your whistle, hug a tree, and pray to a Christian God"). Though I admired the intricacy of the sailor's knot, the stevedore's knot, the killick hitch, the cat's paw, the sheepshank, and especially the lariat loop, the only plans I ever executed were those for an outdoor toilet. I assembled the toilet from twigs, as the handbook instructed. The only aspect that made the toilet functional was the hole in the ground. I didn't take a dump in it. I've never been much of an exhibitionist.

9.

Yousef had his fears. They weren't many in number, but there were a few. Later in life he would refer to them as *apprehensions*.

Yousef and his siblings were relegated to the basement. The basement was finished and the television was there. Yousef's bedroom was in the basement as well—a cubby space no bigger than the mattress he slept on, no door, only a sheet hanging from two nails in the lintel. Privacy was never a right.

They had an illegal cable box and with it came the movie channels. Yousef had an interest in horror movies. He watched them all and related the storylines—not as plots but as first-hand accounts—to the other kids at school. So when the class went as a class to the lavatory and the teacher allowed four boys and four girls to go in at a time, the group including Yousef would be anxious to test his claims. A boy would shut the lights leaving the windowless bathroom in complete darkness, push Yousef in front of the mirror, and start chanting *bloody mary bloody mary bloody mary*.

This was apprehension number one.

Apprehension number two was an anxiety about revving motorcycle engines. Nothing jarred Yousef from the Nintendo console more effectively than the stentorian sound of a motorcycle accelerating down the block. He'd shudder and draw his knees to his chest with such speed he got rug burn. The sound triggered thoughts of his bowels exploding internally. The gurgling sound of the engine was the sound of his innards swelling and bursting and splattering the walls of his belly. The viscera slid down like egg yolks, leaving an empty cavity, a void.

His mom said to think of it as a bucking bronco. The motorcycle didn't neigh though, it growled. Besides, he knew from television that motorcycles were referred to as hogs.

The third apprehension was the giant horse-sized rabbit on the carousel. No matter if it was the carousel at the carnival or the one on the boardwalk, there was always a mutated rabbit that nobody wanted to ride. This creature haunted Yousef.

10.

I was a normal adolescent male. Adolescent males are violent (it's an integral part of the maturation process). Every *bildungsroman* is a barbarian's tale. Break it down: *roman*, the

Romans were brutes, were they not? *Dung*, as in my youth is shitty and I'm bored to death. And *bil*—it's only an "e" away from *bile* and a substituted "k" away from *kill*, or *kil* (as in *kilderkin*, as in we become hedonist teenagers that drown ourselves in barrels of beer). Don't mock my etymological ramblings. Isn't *bildungsroman* a German word? What with German bellicosity and goose-stepping, need I say more? I knew a Dominican kid that slashed his stepbrother's stomach with a machete—the skin flapped back from the cut. And I've got a cousin that cracked a middle-aged drunk over the head with a boom box. The drunk was groping on my cousin's girlfriend. When the butt of the boom box made contact, the Biggie cassette popped out of the tape deck and the guy's orbital bone crushed inward like a styrofoam cup. See, violent stuff.

11.

It was Barry, Ralph, and me. It came to a head on Halloween, but we had been doing it for weeks. Ralph, since elementary school, wore his hair slicked back in a ponytail with the sides of his head shaved. The ponytail always looked wet and smooth. It looked like a log of shit, to be honest. Ralph's mom was divorced, seldom employed, and a bad mother (according to my mother). It was Ralph's idea to pry hood ornaments off cars with a screwdriver.

Barry and I were Ralph's accomplices. We were his lookouts. We even helped him find cars we hadn't vandalized yet, but Ralph usually knew beforehand which cars he wanted to hit. The number of cops on patrol on Halloween must have been ramped up, but we hadn't bothered to think of that. They caught us while we were working on a Mercedes. They crept up on us. Barry thought I was looking out, and I thought he was.

"What're we doing there, fellas?"

Nobody said anything. Ralph concealed the screwdriver in the front pocket of my hoodie.

“What’s in the pocket, son?”

“Nothing, officer.”

“Why don’t you let me have a look?”

I thought about telling him no, he couldn’t have a look, I would need to see a warrant first, and while you’re at it, give me your name and badge number too, bub. But instead I let him put his hand in my front pocket and feel around for the screwdriver. The back of his hand grazed my abdomen and I considered pressing charges for sexual assault, but didn’t.

They drove us down to the station and our parents had to pick us up. Barry’s parents showed up and then my parents showed up. Ralph was still sitting there when I left.

My parents didn’t speak to me on the car ride, but my father beat me with his slipper as soon as we were at the house. Punishment was administered: no Nintendo for a week. They forgot about it by the following afternoon—intentionally or not, I can’t say.

12.

Everything in Yousef’s tiny universe had to be codified. He was devoted to graph paper. No matter what the subject in school, graph paper was his medium. He kept data. How many cigarettes did his mother smoke in a week? A month? How rapidly did her pumice stone deteriorate? What were the precise times his father arrived home from work each day? With what frequency did the Emergency Broadcast System interrupt his television programs to send dissonant sine waves coursing through his body? He developed charts and used mechanical pencils for precision, though never a ruler. He preferred to practice maintaining a steady hand

and a firm wrist. His rows and columns were organized to a tee, but doodles sometimes turned the rows into Kilroys and the columns Corinthian. These measures allowed Yousef to keep tabs on his environment and the people that populated it. Everything in Yousef's tiny universe is recorded and accounted for.

13.

The first time I masturbated it was inadvertent. I jerked off into a basketball. I didn't know what it was to masturbate or ejaculate (from the pornography I had seen, I thought semen was milky piss). I was doing a lot of rubbing simply because it felt good, but at a certain point reflexes took over and my first mess was made.

Let me clarify: it was a miniature stuffed basketball. I won it at the Meadowlands Fair by throwing darts at a wall of modestly inflated balloons. I only managed to pop one, and so I was rewarded the miniature-sized stuffed basketball and not the official-sized rubber basketball. I tossed it around for several months until the cheap polyester material began to bust open at the seams.

I'd been humping my pillow for a few weeks. Someone at school suggested it. It felt good and gave me a feeling deep in my body, a feeling of welling-up. I can't recount the exact transition from pillow to basketball, but I assume it was due to an innate urge to penetrate. I needed something soft and penetrable. The basketball was a godsend. The manufacturers of artificial vaginas couldn't contend with the stuffed cotton guts of that basketball.

Everything happened under the covers. My eyes remained open the entire time, making sure the sheet that was my improvised bedroom door didn't ripple. I must've looked ridiculous—my erect penis sporting something like a spongy, red clown nose. I dribbled the

basketball up and down—all that cotton caressing me like the clouds in heaven. I convulsed, the contractions started, ended, and I was covered.

14.

My cousin Hamed had red hair and freckles. We teased him, telling him his mother had an affair with an Irishman. I didn't tease him about it too much because he was older than me by two years and his chest was bigger than mine. He also displayed to me his bellybutton, pointing to the line of taut skin at the top of it, explaining this line indicated you had strong abs.

It's hard to say who was more demented, him or me. I can't recall whose idea it was to hunt possums in the backyard with a spring-loaded gun. We had a family of possums living under the shed and Hamed's gun shot off suction-tipped rubber arrows. So I purloined a packet of milliner needles from my mother's sewing basket and stuck the needles into the tips of the rubber arrows nice and secure. Hamed also took the stitching awl from the basket—despite me telling him not to—claiming he needed it for protection. We hunted for an entire afternoon but got nothing.

We usually played basketball. We'd lower the hoop with the end of a rake handle so we could imitate Jordan dunks, desperately trying to match the Jumpman logo. My father reminded me never to hang on the rim, that it couldn't support a person's weight. And I reminded Hamed never to hang on the rim, that it couldn't support the weight of his huge red head. Hamed hung on the rim anyway and eventually it broke. The rim snapped off and the fiberglass backboard shattered all over the driveway. Hamed went home to his own hoop and I was left with nothing. I refused to accept this.

The following morning I hammered the rim to the trunk of a tree. It was a slapdash job, but eventually the rim stayed put (it took about fifty nails). Of course the tree wasn't in the paved driveway, it was in the middle of the backyard, and the ball didn't bounce for shit on the grass. I had to wait for my birthday to arrive before my parents bought me a new hoop. From then on, whenever my mom said she was going to invite Hamed over I told her not to. I didn't want to see his freckled face.

In college Hamed joined a fraternity and was given the sobriquet "Mahmud the Red" and I think it served him right.

15.

I can't put my finger on myself. When I do, I get aroused. But I have to attempt it. The job cannot be entrusted to anyone besides me. I have to examine my life without bias, since nobody else seems to. They're either eying me for pipe bombs (go to Colorado for that, or Oklahoma, or *Texas*—right, Dad?) or asking my opinion on what we so succinctly call "the conflict." I'd prefer not to be described in that context.

16.

My sister's name is Enes. The teachers in school pronounced it *Enis* so that it rhymed all too easily with *penis*. One morning at the bus stop a kid named Taiwan felt compelled to tease my sister. "Hey *Enis*, do you have a penis? *Enis*, do you have a penis? *Enis*, penis, *Enis*, penis, *Enis*, penis...." I punched him in the side of his head, aiming for his temple because that's where my mom always told me not to bump my head, and when I did, she would ask me if I blacked out. Taiwan (the irony of a kid with this name making fun of my sister's name amazes

me) fell to the sidewalk slabs and didn't move for several seconds. I assume he blacked out.

This was the first time I ever committed to hitting somebody in earnest.

17.

Yousef and his brother Ed played chicken on their bikes. They pedaled towards each other on the sidewalk—a narrow course more difficult to swerve off of than the wide street. Ed was older and had calves like tectonic plates. Yousef had big feet, too big for his pubescent body, and they couldn't keep from clunking against the bike chain and crank arm.

Ed never swerved, which was okay, because Yousef always did. This arrangement was axiomatic. Both brothers were aware of their respective roles. An exception to the arrangement only occurred once, on a day when Yousef was riding like a man possessed. His behavior was inexplicable to all parties involved. He failed to swerve and the brothers collided. It was like Romulus and Remus racing to suckle the she-wolf's teat and bumping heads.

Yousef busted open his nose. It bled down his chin, down his neck, down his flat chest. He picked himself up off the sidewalk, wiped the blood away with his shirt collar, and charged Ed. A Mexican man who was walking by grabbed Yousef by the shirt collar and the scruff of his neck.

“Whoa! Hold your horses, son. You need to be reined in.”

The man's face was arid and pockmarked like so many knots in a plank of finished wood. He had the same face as the Indian man who owned the Swizzle Stick, a liquor store near Yousef's bus stop. Each day after school Yousef went into the store and bought a handful of atomic fireballs and lemonheads. The Indian man's face was memorable because it was a rag of scar tissue from a robbery several years back. Maurice, Yousef's peewee football friend, had an

uncle. This uncle went to jail for throwing acid in the Indian man's face and taking the bills from the cash register. The Indian man didn't keep a gun behind the counter. Yousef believed he could taste traces of the Indian man's scarred skin in the candy, but it was probably only cinnamon.

The boys' father pulled into the driveway, arriving home from work. He saw Yousef's face, acknowledged the Mexican man as a Good Samaritan, and dragged both his sons into the house. He directed Yousef to the boy's mother. He led Ed upstairs. Yousef's father went to his slippers, picked up the left one, and smacked Ed's rear and thighs several times.

18.

Advice I received from my father prior to taking the HSPA, and reiterated prior to taking the SAT: "Always, always, always fill in the bubble next to *White* on standardized tests."

19.

My father (as I've already stated) owned two guns. The cash register was in the electronics store. He owned his own business, my father. The electronics store was located on Bloomfield Avenue in Bloomfield. He kept the gun behind the register in an open compartment of the counter. Whenever I rang up somebody's purchase at the register, or even when I passed by that section of the counter, there was a feeling in my gut that swiftly moved upward through my gullet. It was the gun. It was my knowledge of it being there, being stored, existing unbeknownst to anyone but our staff. It was available to grab without obstruction. If a robbery ever took place, I was fairly confident I could put the kibosh on it. My father always said, "If someone holds you up, give them all the money in the register. Give them the money in the safe

if they're smart enough to want that too. Do what they say. Don't get yourself killed. This isn't the movies and you aren't John Wayne." I couldn't recall any movies in which John Wayne played a cashier in an electronics store. And despite my father's advice—his command, really—I knew if somebody ever tried to rob the store while I was on duty, I wouldn't give them shit. I knew I'd be able to grab the gun, raise it to eyelevel, and fire it.

20.

When Yousef felt he was coolest at school: While wearing a beeper clipped to his front pocket, a beeper that wasn't activated.

When Yousef felt most vulnerable at school: Eating his mother's leftover lamb in the cafeteria and being told by a bully (dubbed Timothy McVeigh because of his crew cut and lanky frame) it was actually monkey brains.

21.

My parents flew me overseas the summer after my freshman year of high school. I expected Palestine to be hot, so I shaved my head before departing from Newark. I remember staring at myself in the mirror in the airport bathroom and deciding I wouldn't shave my head from there henceforth due to an obvious lump on the crown of my skull.

I spent the majority of my time on the rooftop of my uncle's whitewashed rectangle of a house. My cousins and I would shoot the shit about a variety of topics, none too interesting, but we did devote a fair amount of discussion time to accounts and testimonials of supernatural activities—ghosts, I mean. One of my cousins spoke of a nearby cave that was supposedly

haunted by a small village boy who was murdered. (I got this cave confused with the Well of Souls that my cousin told me we would see when we visited the Dome of the Rock.) We explored the cave but were met with limited results.

We played a lot of hide-and-seek and manhunt. I entertained my younger cousins by playing a damsel. I let them play the bandits, truss me up to a fencepost, and subject me to a line of silly questioning. I was the captive secured to the railroad tracks, gagged by a twisted black cloth and trussed to the timber ties, watching the locomotive grow bigger and its horn blare louder. My escape wouldn't occur until the nanosecond prior to the locomotive's sectioning me into uneven pieces. I'd roll to safety.

My family was from al-Jib, situated on the west side of the West Bank. The closest big city was Jerusalem. If you wanted any action, Jerusalem was where you needed to go. So we went. My cousin Feras and I hopped on a van one morning and headed north.

It wasn't long before our van was stopped at a checkpoint. Three Israeli soldiers with assault rifles circled the van, stuck their heads into the van windows, and spoke to the van driver. One of the soldiers scanned the passengers, settled on me, and motioned for me to follow him. I didn't move until Feras poked me between my ribs.

The soldier walked me to the rear of the van where we were joined by the other two soldiers. Taking turns—sometimes talking over one another—they began to question me. *Where am I going? Who am I with? Why am I going to Jerusalem? How old am I? Is that a tumor on my head? Is there a history of brain cancer in my family?*

They asked me these questions in Arabic, but I refused to answer them in my own language, so I feigned ignorance. Then they started talking to me in Hebrew, but I definitely wasn't going to speak that, even if I could. I told them I was born and raised and live in the

United States of America. "I'm...from...New...Jer...sey," I said, spacing out each syllable in the way my history teacher speaks to the school custodian.

They gave me a hard time because I didn't have my visa on me. I did have my US passport, though they seemed determined to ignore the value or legitimacy of it. The one soldier continued to examine my paperwork while another soldier became aggressive. He got in my face and began cursing me in Hebrew (these were the few words and phrases of the language I was familiar with). He was gripping his rifle as he reeled off these obscenities. He lifted the gun from his chest and indicated he was going to drub me with the butt of it. The third soldier restrained him. The first soldier folded my paperwork, smacked the rear door of the van and sent it on its way. My cousin was in the vehicle. I was not.

They detained me for another fifteen minutes, delivering the same line of questioning, hassling me about my visa, and trying to speak to me in Arabic. When I was free to go, I found myself alone on the highway. There was no civilization in sight. I walked back in the direction of my uncle's house, waiting for a taxi to pass. I took note of an abandoned car in a ditch just south of the checkpoint. The car was rendered porous by bullets and looked like a shoebox with breathing holes punched in it for some small animal to survive. I must have walked five miles before I caught a taxi.

I visited Jerusalem the following week and took a picture in front of the Dome of the Rock. Staring at the Sakhrah, I listened for the ghostly moan of a small village boy.

22.

Skills Yousef acquired while working at the fruit and vegetable stand on Market Street in Paterson during his sophomore year:

—Mold can be removed from oranges, peaches, nectarines, etc., with a standard wet rag.

—Rotten potatoes are unsalvageable. A crate of rotten potatoes smells like an Irish ghetto.

—Bunches of bananas with black peels can be peeled, mashed down, placed in a container, and sold as either “Banana Mash” or “Banana Mash,” whichever name you prefer.

—Masturbation can be accomplished without touch, that is, mentally. (Yousef never succeeded at this, though his coworker Rami claimed to have achieved it on a Thursday night while watching an infomercial selling a piece of exercise equipment.)

23.

I had an active interest in animals. I had a picture book with color photos and descriptions of each species, their environments, habits, and behaviors. I would draw sketches of the animals in a spiral notebook (it was the one exception to the graph paper decree). Despite my interest in animals, my parents never bought me a pet. I didn't know of any Arabic families that had pets. Not one. I was a deprived child. Yousef R.: Possum hunter, monkey brains eater, non-pet owner.

24.

I, or rather, *he* (Yousef)—let's maintain a particle of objectivity here—worked summers at his father's electronics store. It was across the street from a fried chicken shack, so at least Yousef got to eat fried chicken for lunch every day.

Yousef's father sold anything with a plug or batteries. This included (but was not limited to) boom-boxes, car stereos, cordless telephones, beepers, alarm systems for the home and car,

and he even kept a smoke machine and strobe light in stock for the occasional DJ customer. People would often come into the store wanting to sell second-hand or stolen items. “Not a pawnshop,” Yousef’s father would say, his accent obscuring the message. Sometimes Yousef’s father would make exceptions to his own rule, especially when the merchandise was brand new. Yousef’s father was an honest man, but he wasn’t stupid. Rent needed to be paid and there was that new Jewish electronics store that just opened three blocks down, and they had a canopy sign outside the store.

Typically Yousef’s father worked the floor with the hired help making deals where deals could be made. There wasn’t a price sticker on an item in the place. Yousef worked in the store, unpaid, from the age of eleven. Being paid wasn’t even a consideration. This arrangement was understood, so Yousef never requested his father pay him and his father never offered. Yousef was the son. His father was the storeowner. The end.

Yousef spent much of his time in the back office of the store, his feet propped on a cardboard box full of unpacked merchandise. His public school education equipped him with the skills to handle inventory. He also worked with his hands. He learned how to use a soldering iron and made repairs to every brand of beeper. He became somewhat of a whiz, dabbing melted metal onto those tiny motherboards to make little digital miracles happen. And Yousef also worked the floor when his father was shorthanded. He used the name Gus when conversing with customers. His father always complained of losing sales due to his accent, so he suggested to his US-born, New Jersey-accented son it may be wise to drop his Arabic name and adopt an American one while on the job. Yousef used “Gus” because he thought with his prominent, angular features he could pass for Greek. He felt girls were more likely to date a Greek kid than an Arabic one. Girls his age rarely came into the store, though. A shirtless bum came into the

store one winter's day and carved what looked like lightning bolts into his chest with a serrated kitchen knife. Yousef's father managed to push the man out onto the sidewalk and lock the door. Yousef called the police and was assigned to scrub the blood from the carpet.

When he wasn't doing inventory, or soldering, or selling under the guise of Gus, Yousef was in the storage room (the same room as the back office) on the computer. In the early 90s the computer was a Commodore 64. He inserted a big, thin floppy disk that looked like a square 45 rpm record and played *Jordan vs. Bird*. In the late 90s the computer was an IBM and he spent his time on the internet jerking off to Russian porn.

25.

A few succinct notes on the girlfriend I had in college:

When we first met outside a biotech class I introduced myself as Gus. This lasted only until the next class when I responded to Yousef as the professor took attendance.

We lost our virginity to one another. She tried to make the case I'd already been deflowered, a case which stemmed from a story I regretfully related to her one morning in her dormitory bed. It went like this: It was during high school and it seemed every Arab in the senior class had their turn with this girl who was affectionately referred to as "Jaws." The girl had one hell of an underbite. She also had huge breasts and an apparent affinity for Middle Easterners. I took her out in my mom's minivan and we parked at the edge of Sperling Park. The operation was all very surreptitious. (I was not looking to be seen with this girl.) We climbed into the backseat as so many teenagers do, removed our clothing, and planted our private parts right there on the upholstered seats, the same seats my mom piled her groceries. We barely kissed and barely touched, but I put the head of my penis inside her for about half-a-

second and then removed it. We got dressed and drove off. I wasn't proud of any part of the encounter and refused to accept that it qualified as losing my virginity (still do). Darlene said it did.

Darlene procured a copy of my high school yearbook from a fellow alum and read the caption under my photo. This caption included several items: an incorrect Sartre quote, a note on my International Studies Club membership and participation on the varsity basketball team, some cryptic initials and digits, and, in quotes, "The Iguana."

I confessed to Darlene "The Iguana" was a shameful nickname I worked steadfastly to abandon in college and would appreciate her cooperation in never mentioning that godforsaken name again. She would address me as "The Iguana" until our last phone conversation. I didn't understand why she felt it necessary to do so, especially considering I was equally irritated by the patterned holes in her legs from shaving, but did not feel compelled to pester her about that flaw of hers. Likewise, I didn't feel it was necessary to tell her when her breath stank like warm milk or embarrass her the time I noticed menstrual blood on the crotch of her sweatpants. Needless to say, my neck filled out my shirt collar years ago.

Then she got pregnant, or rather, *we* got pregnant (as is the fair way to phrase it). She wanted to terminate it and I didn't argue. I used my savings from the fruit and vegetable stand to pay for it. While sitting in the waiting room at the clinic, I thought of all those weekend mornings I woke up at five to carry crates and arrange apricots. I heard women crying and a mechanical sound I tried very hard to avoid identifying. My thoughts dwelled on a pro-life infomercial that always played late at night on Channel 11. Charlton Heston introduced the piece and it showed horrific images of aborted fetuses and actual procedure footage. This included a late-term procedure with a vacuum.

I only told one person about the ordeal—my best friend George. I wished I hadn't because George turned out to be a real expert on abortion, asking me about a dozen times: "Is she taking those pills that keep her uterus from falling out?"

I didn't know. I was in the dark about most of the procedure. She didn't want to tell and I didn't want to know.

She was sick for about two weeks. I was at her beck and call throughout her convalescence. I completed all her homework, her lab reports, and wrote her essays. She recovered, but our relationship did not. We broke up not long after. I'm told this isn't uncommon.

The pregnancy wasn't the sole reason for our breakup. Darlene wanted to meet my parents, but I never allowed it to happen. I wasn't interested in discovering how they would react to me bringing home a pasty-faced white girl from Sussex County. She was insulted by this. She accused me of being ashamed of her. I wasn't. In retrospect, my parents probably wouldn't have given a damn one way or the other.

26.

In the months after the event that dare not speak its name, Yousef's mother had to take off her *hijab* when she went to the supermarket. She couldn't bear the stares and the snickering in each aisle or the verbal abuse she received while collecting coupons from her purse at the cashier. It would be easier to just take it off—so she did. It was understandable. Yousef thought his mother looked strange when she went out not wearing her *hijab*. It was the same strangeness he perceived when his friends came over the house and she put on the *hijab*. Seeing her without it on outside the house produced the same sensation as seeing her with it on inside the house.

27.

My father's second gun—the one not in his electronics store—was between the mattress and the box spring of my parents' bed. I found it while snooping around one Saturday afternoon while my entire family was at a wedding. (I didn't attend because I had an AAU game I refused to miss. I also prefer to avoid the bedlam of being in a ballroom with every Arab in North Jersey.) I'm not sure what I was looking for—nothing special. Fiction had put the idea of snooping into my head—television sitcoms, I guess. I had the sense there was something to be found—a *Playboy*, a bottle of liquor, lingerie, a bank statement. I found my father's other gun, identical to the one located in his electronics store.

I sat on the edge of my parents' king-size bed turning the gun over in my hands. It wasn't that I'd never touched a gun before—I gripped the gun in the electronics store plenty of times—but here, in my parents' bedroom in an empty house, I was free to tinker with it and manipulate it in any imaginative way I saw fit. I spun the gun by the trigger guard. I held the gun by my waist. I aimed the gun at the dresser mirror. I held the gun with one hand, with two hands, I held the gun sideways. I eventually settled on holding it straight on like the neckerchiefed bandit in *The Great Train Robbery* who takes aim at the audience. I took aim at myself. I put the muzzle to my lips, sniffed the tendrils of smoke up my nostrils, and then blew the smoke away from me

I didn't know there was a bullet in the chamber. I should have known it, but for some reason, I didn't. So when I cocked the gun and it jammed, I knew I was in trouble. I banged the gun on the nightstand until it chipped the polyurethane finish. I began to panic. Leaving the jammed gun under my parents' mattress was not an option. What if my mom got into bed that

night or the next and the gun fired right through her nightgown? That would be matricide. What about when my father plopped down into bed after a hard day's work? After all, the gun was on his side of the bed. Patricide. I needed to amend my mistake. I also needed air. I put on my dad's slippers and rushed into the backyard.

I walked off the deck and stood next to the pool. I thought about firing the gun into the water, but the bullet would pierce the liner. My father freaked out if you went swimming with long toenails. Puncturing the pool liner would probably be worse than murdering his wife. I walked back to the deck and held the gun at my side, deciding what to do.

I thought about my family coming back from the wedding. I thought about them finding me on the back deck with the gun in my possession. I thought about consequences. I stared down at the gun at my side. I focused on my feet, on my father's slippers. I raised the gun above my head, tucked my chin to my chest, and fired.

I stood stock-still waiting for a reaction. There was none. I waited for neighbors to rush out to their backyards, or at least peer from their windows. The block was motionless. I waited for police sirens, for a dog to bark, for anything, but there wasn't a sound. I waved the gun in the air in front of me, holding it away from my body like a sparkler. I didn't want the smoke and smell of gunpowder to follow me into the house. I waited another minute for all that air—that evidence—to dissipate.

END