

## Who Shot Johnny?

FROM THE NEW REPUBLIC

from Best American Essays--1997

GIVEN MY LEVEL of political awareness, it was inevitable that I would come to view the everyday events of my life through the prism of politics and the national discourse. I read *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, *National Review*, *Black Enterprise*, and *Essence* and wrote a weekly column for the Harvard Law School *Record* during my three years just ended there. I do this because I know that those of us who are not well-fed white guys in suits must not yield the debate to them, however well-intentioned or well-informed they may be. Accordingly, I am unrepentant and vocal about having gained admittance to Harvard through affirmative action; I am a feminist, stoic about my marriage chances as a well-educated, thirty-six-year-old black woman who won't pretend to need help taking care of herself. My strength flags, though, in the face of the latest role assigned to my family in the national drama. On July 27, 1995, my sixteen-year-old nephew was shot and paralyzed.

Talking with friends in front of his house, Johnny saw a car he thought he recognized. He waved boisterously — his trademark — throwing both arms in the air in a full-bodied, hip-hop Y. When he got no response, he and his friends sauntered down the walk to join a group loitering in front of an apartment building. The car followed. The driver got out, brandished a revolver, and fired into the air. Everyone scattered. Then he took aim and shot my running nephew in the back.

Johnny never lost consciousness. He lay in the road, trying to understand what had happened to him, why he couldn't get up.

Emotionlessly, he told the story again and again on demand, remaining apologetically firm against all demands to divulge the missing details that would make sense of the shooting but obviously cast him in a bad light. Being black, male, and shot, he must apparently be involved with gangs or drugs. Probably both. Witnesses corroborate his version of events.

Nearly six months have passed since that phone call in the night and my nightmarish headlong drive from Boston to Charlotte. After twenty hours behind the wheel, I arrived haggard enough to reduce my mother to fresh tears and to find my nephew reassuring well-wishers with an eerie sang-froid.

I take the day shift in his hospital room; his mother and grandmother, a clerk and cafeteria worker, respectively, alternate nights there on a cot. They don their uniforms the next day, gaunt after hours spent listening to Johnny moan in his sleep. How often must his subconscious replay those events and curse its host for saying hello without permission, for being carefree and young while a would-be murderer hefted the weight of his uselessness and failure like Jacob Marley's chains? How often must he watch himself lying stubbornly immobile on the pavement of his nightmares while the sound of running feet syncopate his attacker's taunts?

I spend these days beating him at gin rummy and Scrabble, holding a basin while he coughs up phlegm and crying in the corridor while he catheterizes himself. There are children here much worse off than he. I should be grateful. The doctors can't, or won't, say whether he'll walk again.

I am at once repulsed and fascinated by the bullet, which remains lodged in his spine (having done all the damage it can do, the doctors say). The wound is undramatic — small, neat, and perfectly centered — an impossibly pink pit surrounded by an otherwise undisturbed expanse of mahogany. Johnny has asked me several times to describe it but politely declines to look in the mirror I hold for him.

Here on the pediatric rehab ward, Johnny speaks little, never cries, never complains, works diligently to become independent. He does whatever he is told; if two hours remain until the next pain pill, he waits quietly. Eyes bloodshot, hands gripping the bed rails. During the week of his intravenous feeding, when he was tormented by the primal need to masticate, he never asked for

food. He just listened while we counted down the days for him and planned his favorite meals. Now required to dress himself unassisted, he does so without demur, rolling himself back and forth valiantly on the bed and shivering afterward, exhausted. He “ma’am”s and “sir”s everyone politely. Before his “accident,” a simple request to take out the trash could provoke a firestorm of teenage attitude. We, the women who have raised him, have changed as well; we’ve finally come to appreciate those boxer-baring, oversized pants we used to hate — it would be much more difficult to fit properly sized pants over his diaper.

He spends a lot of time tethered to rap music still loud enough to break my concentration as I read my many magazines. I hear him try to soundlessly mouth the obligatory “mothafuckers” overlaying the funereal dirge of the music tracks. I do not normally tolerate disrespectful music in my or my mother’s presence, but if it distracts him now . . .

“Johnny,” I ask later, “do you still like gangster rap?” During the long pause I hear him think loudly, I’m paralyzed, Auntie, not stupid. “I mostly just listen to hip-hop,” he says evasively into his *Sports Illustrated*.

Miserable though it is, time passes quickly here. We always seem to be jerking awake in our chairs just in time for the next pill, his every-other-night bowel program, the doctor’s rounds. Harvard feels a galaxy away — the world revolves around Family Members Living with Spinal Cord Injury class, Johnny’s urine output, and strategizing with my sister to find affordable, accessible housing. There is always another long-distance uncle in need of an update, another church member wanting to pray with us, or Johnny’s little brother in need of some attention.

We Dickerson women are so constant a presence the ward nurses and cleaning staff call us by name and join us for cafeteria meals and cigarette breaks. At Johnny’s birthday pizza party, they crack jokes and make fun of each other’s husbands (there are no men here). I pass slices around and try not to think, Seventeen with a bullet.

Oddly, we feel little curiosity or specific anger toward the man who shot him. We have to remind ourselves to check in with the police. Even so, it feels pro forma, like sending in those \$2 rebate

forms that come with new pantyhose: you know your request will fall into a deep, dark hole somewhere, but still, it’s your duty to try. We push for an arrest because we owe it to Johnny and to ourselves as citizens. We don’t think about it otherwise — our low expectations are too ingrained. A Harvard aunt notwithstanding, for people like Johnny, Marvin Gaye was right that only three things are sure: taxes, death, and trouble. At least it wasn’t the second.

We rarely wonder about or discuss the brother who shot him because we already know everything about him. When the call came, my first thought was the same one I’d had when I’d heard about Rosa Parks’s beating: a brother did it. A non-job-having, middle-of-the-day malt-liquor-drinking, crotch-clutching, loud-talking brother with many neglected children born of many forgotten women. He lives in his mother’s basement with furniture rented at an astronomical interest rate, the exact amount of which he does not know. He has a car phone, an \$80 monthly cable bill, and every possible phone feature but no savings. He steals Social Security numbers from unsuspecting relatives and assumes their identities to acquire large TV sets for which he will never pay. On the slim chance that he is brought to justice, he will have a colorful criminal history and no coherent explanation to offer for his act. His family will raucously defend him and cry cover-up. Some liberal lawyer just like me will help him plea-bargain his way to yet another short stay in a prison pesthouse that will serve only to add another layer to the brother’s sociopathology and formless, mindless nihilism. We know him. We’ve known and feared him all our lives.

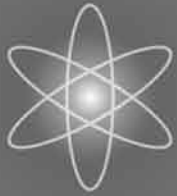
As a teenager, he called, “Hey, baby, gimme somma that boodie!” at us from car windows. Indignant at our lack of response, he followed up with, “Fuck you, then, ‘ho!” He called me a “white-boy-lovin’ nigger bitch oreo” for being in the gifted program and loving it. At twenty-seven, he got my seventeen-year-old sister pregnant with Johnny and lost interest without ever informing her that he was married. He snatched my widowed mother’s purse as she waited in predawn darkness for the bus to work and then broke into our house while she soldered on an assembly line. He chased all the small entrepreneurs from our neighborhood with his violent thievery and put bars on our windows. He kept us from sitting

on our own front porch after dark and laid the foundation for our periodic bouts of self-hating anger and racial embarrassment. He made our neighborhood a ghetto. He is the poster fool behind the maddening community knowledge that there are still some black mothers who raise their daughters but merely love their sons. He and his cancerous carbon copies eclipse the vast majority of us who are not sociopaths and render us invisible. He is the Siamese twin who has died but cannot be separated from his living, vibrant sibling; which of us must attract more notice? We despise and disown this anomalous loser, but for many he *is* black America. We know him, we know that he is outside the fold, and we know that he will only get worse. What we didn't know is that, because of him, my little sister would one day be the latest hysterical black mother wailing over a fallen child on TV.

Alone, lying in the road bleeding and paralyzed but hideously conscious, Johnny had lain helpless as he watched his would-be murderer come to stand over him and offer this prophecy: "Betch'ou won't be doin' nomo' wavin', mothafucker."

Fuck you, asshole. He's fine from the waist up. You just can't do anything right, can you?

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# Dancing for the Bomb

Iraj Isaac Rahmim

As best as I remember, the super 8 silent video camera was a present for my fourteenth birthday. It involved a certain amount of pleading and door-banging and huffing and goose-stepping around the living room and usual good old-fashioned blackmail—but not too much, as my parents, in conflict with one another and, unbeknownst to their children, near divorce, were easy prey. Now, over thirty years later, the number 800 sticks in my mind—as in 800 Iranian *tomans*, equal to about \$120 at the time, a large sum (about five months of our live-in maid’s salary). Or was it 8,000 tomans, \$1,200? Eight thousand sounds more realistic for a foreign-made video camera in the prerevolutionary Iran of the mid-1970s. The super 8 was a Sony, black and sleek, with geared, battery-operated buttons for zoom and focus,

*Illustration by Liz Priddy, based on a photo by Gavin Mills*

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the clicky turning of which sounded like happiness. Its hard case was padded with soft, spongy foam. Its manual, colorful and bright and glossy, was in multiple languages in parallel columns—a small modern Rosetta Stone in Tehran, the city in which I was born to a middle-class Jewish family and that I had come to think of as the land of my childhood exile.

Iran of the 1970s was a conflicted place. A land of dusty poverty unseen by the middle-class beneficiary of the oil riches, of 2,500-year-old glory and European cars, of women who traced their dresses from the latest French *Burda* patterns and their chador-clad maids who prayed three times daily, of a modern, Soviet-designed nuclear power plant under construction and donkeys that carried berries and milk from the village. And also this: a seeming flood of goods, large and small, from other countries—products we assumed by virtue of their origins to be of higher quality.

The thing about my new super 8 video camera was that its film came in a rectangular cartridge that snapped smartly into place, as opposed to regular 8-mm, where the end of the old-fashioned negative roll had to be fed carefully into the appropriate slot. (Though I had never used a regular 8-mm camera, this advantage was very important to me, and I repeated it to friends and family whenever I showed off the camera.) The cartridges were three minutes long each, and in color, and I made a point of always having one or two to spare.

And here is the mystical part, what captured my imagination the most: The price of every cartridge included development—in Germany. After shooting a cartridge, we placed it in a padded envelope, yellow outside, reflective aluminum inside, preaddressed, in large, strong, Latin script, to the Kodak center in Germany, taking care to write our return address in clear block letters, and gave it, along with a good tip, to our mailman and waited. And in two to three weeks it arrived: a nondescript cardboard box with our handwritten address cut out and taped to the front and a roll of film inside. We would gather in my bedroom, where I kept a small two-wheel projector—also a present, I think—facing a white bedsheet fashioned into a screen covering the green-and-white-patterned wallpaper. I mounted the new roll with showy expertise, closed the drapes, turned off the lights and began the show. There we sat: my mother and sister, our maid and I, sometimes friends, sometimes Goli—an orphan girl who had been taken in by my grandparents when she was six or seven—and my father on rare occasions, and watched the sights pass by one after the other, accompanied by the rattle of the projector and the smell of heated lens and plastic film.

A birthday party with about ten seconds of me playing the piano.

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That the film needed to be flown all the way to Germany for processing did not seem at all improbable or even unusual. Despite all nationalistic protestations and claims of historical greatness, it was commonly accepted that Iranians could not excel at anything technically complex or sophisticated. *How can an Iranian do \_\_\_\_\_?* was a common refrain. . . .

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A stop in the mountains on the way to a Caspian Sea vacation.

A beachfront foot race between my mother and two of her colleagues, all of them laughing, my mother winning—it was even funnier, knowing how truly nonathletic she was.

A drive in Kermanshah, the mountainous city of my maternal grandparents in western Iran, not far from the Iraqi border. So many years later, watching the film, it takes some work to convince myself that I recognize this boulevard or that shop.

I remember the aftermath of my piano “scene.” I was unhappy that my mother, who had the camera, had not shot me playing the entire piece, which, I imagine—since the film is silent—must have been a favorite or one I played with satisfying skill. I also remember the one time, many years later, in the 1990s, now in the U.S., our new land of exile, that I showed these rolls to my mother. *How little of you is in there*, she said to me with anguish of the loss and the lost time. *Why did we not take the camera from your hand more often?*

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*How can an Iranian do \_\_\_\_\_?* was a common refrain, though, for me, it came with my mother's provincial accent and pitch, an accent that had remained prominent despite decades of living in Tehran and her position as a professor of medicine and practicing pathologist. The refrain sounds much worse in Persian—*Irooni key meetooneh khalabaan besheh?* for example—“When can an Iranian be a pilot?” which includes its own implicit answer: “Never, because we are careless, inept, backward, unprofessional.”

Having lived away from Iran for over three decades, I still carry these oppressively rhythmic verses in my head, rhythms that whip through my mind on the frequent occasions when I fear failure in yet another endeavor where, as is my habit, I have aggressively made promises and stretched my skills beyond limits. I slump into a couch or walk from room to room, staring at walls blankly, beating at myself.

How can an Iranian be an astronaut?

How can an Iranian build long-span bridges?

How can an Iranian be a pilot? How can he run a nuclear power plant, or a chemical plant, or aseptically vaccinate millions of children, or run a business to modern—Western—standards?

In our insecurity, we peruse newspapers, watch talk shows, page through the web. We get excited—astonished and also proud at any achievement, any recognition of our achievement by *the West*.

Did you see the latest Mars Rover news conference? Did you see that the head of the project, the spokesman, is an Irooni? We get smug with pride.

The founder of eBay is Irooni, we say.

And half of Silicon Valley is Irooni.

And half of Iranians in America have PhDs.

And half the dentists in Houston are Irooni. And Agassi, the tennis genius. And Bijan of the fashion and perfume fame. And Charivari. And Taghi the clothier to the rich . . . Did you know they are all Irooni?

The provenance of some of this information is questionable, and many of these claims are, at best, exaggerations—e-mail circulars in some cases—but it sounds good and we repeat, repeat, repeat, until it is the truth.

Sometimes we get frustrated and philosophical: “Look at all this talent; if only it could be used in Iran for the good of the people.” Not that any of us, after so many decades, would go back, save for short trips to visit with family left over and to lament the new, unrecognizable street names.

We play the name-recognition game like all those who feel embattled or are on the downswing of history. This is where my Iranian and Jewish halves merge most often: in insecurity.

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Arrogant self-regard and insecurity being the two faces of the same coin, there is a long litany of all we Iranians are *best* at. All Iranians agree that we are the most hospitable nation, that we have the richest and longest history, that we invented liberty and tolerance, that our rice is the most perfect, that we have the most beautiful eyes and longest eyelashes, that our mountains are the most dramatic, our jungles the greenest, our desert dwellers the sturdiest. We “know” that we are the most polite people in the entire globe and also the smartest and craftiest; our music has the sweetest melodies and our singers the warmest voices. (My late uncle Parviz, not long after immigrating to the U.S.: “I know why American music is so loud with guitars and drums and crazy sounds. To hide the terrible voices of their singers.”)

And yet, turning on a hairpin, millions of us will, on a bad day, tell you about how Iranians are all thieves and liars, how the used-car dealers are the least honest, how our builders will steal materials until your house is weak as a cardboard box and restaurants in Tehran use donkey meat in kebabs.

We joke about ourselves, self-deprecating, beating our audience to the punch. As in the Omid Djalili joke.

“What do you call an honest Iranian businessman?”

“As if!”

(*Did you know, we also whisper, the famous comic Omid Djalili is Iranian?*)

We *know* our doctors perform unnecessary operations to charge to Medicare—*Did you hear that the doctor who fertilized the California Octomom is Irooni? Such shame, we shake our heads, making us all look bad in front of Amrikayeeha.*

We also know that our formal politeness (called *ta’aruf*) is duplicity masked (*ceremonial dishonesty* is the phrase used by the journalist Christopher de Bellaigue in his book about Iran), and he who appears the most pious is a drunk and an embezzler, and he who appears well-read a fake, working ourselves quickly, almost in a frenzy, all the way back to the convenient and familiar comfort of “*How can an Irooni . . . ?*”

At fourteen, shortly after the gift of the camera, I had my first long stay in the West, mostly in a small fishing town by the English Channel called Christchurch. A fashion of the time was to have small groups of precollege teens—mostly boys—spend a chaperoned summer or two in the West to improve their language skills, often living with surrogate families. The newspapers carried ads with the names of exotic locations in France and England and Italy, nourishing our dreams of escape and those of our parents too.

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I still carry photographs taken during that trip, amateurishly posed. An example: I am in a London car museum, my hair '70s wavy and mad, my jeans too tight and bell-bottomed, my teen mustache only a suggestion. I sit on my haunches in front of a dark blue racing auto, contorting my torso as if to convey that I am inside the car, its driver, that I belong, that I am in control rather than beside it, kept off by a wraparound velvet rope.

Andre Aciman, in his wonderful essay "The Last Time I Saw Paris," writes about growing up in Alexandria, Egypt, believing deeply that he was truly a Parisian. In retrospect, I felt similarly dislocated, especially after returning from my Christchurch summer. Back in Tehran, I did not reset my wristwatch for weeks, dragging on the illusion of life in Europe. In the simple way that the inexperienced mind extrapolates, I decided that if England was great—and it was—then America, farther west, twice as far, would be at least twice as great.

The America of my teen dream years was a fantasyland of reflective glass buildings stretched high against crisp blue skies and men in Stetsons steering long white Cadillacs. My America also had within it Captain Kirk's teleporter and Lee Majors's bionic limbs, not to mention UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle, and the *Twilight Zone*, whose invisible mystery, it appeared, existed only in a land well advanced beyond the modest boundaries of our daily lives in Tehran. A small newspaper notice on a "University of Witchcraft" in Washington, DC made a particularly deep imprint on my mind. What an amazing country, I thought. So advanced, otherworldly, really, was my fantasy America that I could not imagine Americans dying in car accidents. In fact, another article somewhere about how many Americans commute to work on airplanes had inspired me to imagine takeoffs and landings on rooftops, *Jetsons*-like.

This wide-eyed vision of the West was not mine alone but was shared by many more; such ideas aroused wonder but also deep insecurity, not to mention paranoia. The popular twentieth-century Iranian satiric novel *My Dear Uncle Napoleon* is about a traditional family's patriarch who believes the all-powerful British empire is bent upon his personal destruction. Not that this paranoia is outside the mainstream of Iranian thought. Until the very end of his long life, my grandfather Abdullah, who was born in 1900, would say when something inexplicable happened—a sudden rise in prices of staple goods or scarcity of some commodity, for example—"It is the work of the English." He indulged all our objections with a knowing smile.

Even my mother could display this attitude. Not long after I came to the U.S. to study, in 1978, she traveled to San Diego for a visit. Seeing the high,

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multilayered, cloverleaf crossing of two interstate highways, she looked in amazement and shook her head in sadness. “Of course *they themselves* don’t let us have anything. They don’t let us build anything like this.”

*They themselves*, the ubiquitous unspecified Persian reference to the other. *They themselves* with power. *They themselves* who cannot see us catch up. *They themselves* who will, through means beyond our understanding, simply not let us progress. *They themselves*. The West, the British, Americans.

The West has not helped matters over the decades. Consider the CIA-orchestrated, 1953 coup d’état. It is so deeply ingrained in the psyche of Iranians that nearly sixty years later it is impossible to have a political conversation of any sort without the event raising its ugly head. It seems, in fact, an unspoken article of faith that we all *must* talk about it or something is amiss. Azar Nafisi’s great memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, has been criticized for not bringing up 1953. A couple of years ago, in Davos, the Iranian foreign minister swatted away gentle proddings by the French foreign minister about Iran’s nuclear activities, using the 1953 gambit. Those against the Islamic Republic blame the 1979 Revolution on the U.S. (“Look at what they did in 1953. Of course the Shah began to stand up to them, and they themselves just got rid of him.”) And, so, all problems can be defined as instigated by *they themselves*. Reality made simple, made digestible. *We ourselves*, rendered blameless.

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The inability to become an industrial power despite great resources. *They themselves.*

The economic decline. *They themselves.*

The fake elections and uncounted ballots. *They themselves.*

Assigning the blame to *they themselves* provides a way to channel the anger and shame of the years of loss and defeat. It's not our fault, it's theirs: outsiders. Foreigners who run things, who form cabals, who deliberate in dark underground, secure rooms, thousands of miles away, powerful men. What can the poor, powerless Moslem nation do?

A favorite of mine: an animated video shown on Iranian state television (and now found on YouTube), produced by the Islamic Republic government, of a fictional meeting in the White House basement, attended by U.S. government officials of the time, such as Vice President Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz as well as other influentials, such as George Soros ("a Jewish industrialist," the announcer introduces him in an ominous tone), as they plot against Iran and Islam.

In 2005, I traveled back to Iran for the first time in twenty-seven years. During the intervening years, Iran had gone from a fledgling experiment in liberty and independence, postrevolution, to a full-throated theocracy with religious martyrs and a leader-from-God and a Department for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue and stonings and Modesty & Veil Festivals, all the while using foreign threats—real and invented; U.S. and Iraq and the "Zionist Entity"—to arouse the population, harnessing their nationalism and religious faith to its own ends.

So much had changed—culturally, physically, even the language—that to some extent I felt very much a visitor, if not a foreign tourist. Yet the insecurities vis-à-vis the West—and especially the U.S.—were still visible, as though the country had not tried to put a century of dependence behind it. In a way, it is charming that nearly everyone tries to put their best foot forward in front of the visitor. The local dry cleaner, a young engineer by training, ceremoniously presented a four-page glossy brochure ("VIP-Service," "Today's European Standard Dry Cleaning with Natural Ingredients") and said, "Don't think, sir, you from America, that we do a bad job; we use European machines and methods."

At the pizza and fast-food restaurant run by several young men, a semi-circle formed at my table, with the waiter carrying my pizza and diet Coke, followed by the manager, the cook, the cashier and a couple of their hanger-on friends. "Since you are from America," the manager said in a hushed

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tone, “you know what good pizza should taste like.” Only after I signaled my approval with noisy chewing and vigorous head movements and “*Bah bah*, how wonderful” did they sigh in relief and return to their stations.

The people I met seemed to be constantly making comparisons in their heads. A taxi driver complained about the new Iranian-montaged Peugeot and how, rolling out, it has nearly 150 defects on the average while foreign-made cars are perfect. I repeated to him what a Saudi friend once told me: “At least in Iran they montage cars.” The driver started to scream about how he has to return the car to the dealership for repairs every week or two.

“I have a wife, I have children,” he pleaded with me as if I could fix things. “Tell me, dear sir; *you* are educated and from America; *you* have seen the world: How can I make a living if the car is always in repair? And now, these same gentlemen”—meaning the Iranian government—“want to build nuclear reactors.”

Perhaps it is the contrarian in me, but while traveling in Iran, time and again I tried to bring home the message that all that is foreign is not uniquely good, that Western and Japanese manufacturers do produce subpar products, that American leaders are not omniscient and omnipotent.

Yet, flying Iran Air on that first trip, I noticed my own white knuckles, grabbing at the seat handles when hearing the pilot speak in perfect Persian over the intercom—and worse, as he followed his introduction with several obligatory verses from the Qur’an in perfect Arabic, long verses which went on seemingly for minutes, and I fancifully wondered whether he might be a religious scholar who was now stretched beyond the limits of *his* skills. I imagined him as a long-beard with a robe, sauntering down the dusty squares of the holy city of Qom, his slippers slapping at the bottoms of his cracked heels with every step, in one arm holding a Qur’an and in the other a flight-training manual.

For my return, I simply discarded the Iran Air ticket and bought a one-way on another airline.

The fatalistic sense of being inept and under siege by powers beyond our grasp or influence is not unique to Iranians. I see it often in my travels to teach engineering courses in various Middle Eastern countries. Time and again I hear about how America has to solve all the world’s problems, how Jews run all finance and the media, how it is the will of Allah that put oil under the feet of the Bedouins, and it is He who, Insha’Allah, Insha’Allah, will scribe the future, cure all illnesses or, if not, well, it is He who willed it all, Alhamdulillah. Thanks be to Him. Praise be upon his Messenger.

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I fight this. In the class, I tell my students, mostly engineers, about successful Middle Easterners—those who have come to America and made it. I talk up the native talent and intelligence. I joke about my own mild case of OCD, “like the Lebanese actor, Tony Shalhoub, you know him”—I pronounce the “h” in his last name hard, the Semitic way, as a friend once said—“you know him, right? *Monk*, on TV.”

They all know him and laugh. “From Lebanon, Lebanon,” I repeat. My opening gambit works. I am one of you; I have an illness (though a cute one); I make you laugh. I bring up the oil tycoon Michael Halbouty. A son of greengrocers who emigrated to the U.S. from Lebanon, I say, looking at their faces, holding up my hands as if demonstrating fruit-picking or calluses (which, like them, nanny-raised and maid-served, I do not have). I tell them about all the lives the heart surgeon Michael DeBackey has saved.

I am trying to impress them, to exhort them to work harder, but something nags at me: I also want to hurt them. On tough days, when they have taken longer-than-reasonable breaks, when they have walked out too many times in the middle of my lecture for a cigarette or a phone call, my tone shifts subtly. My story of Arab genius tilts slightly from the “DeBackey” leg to the “in America” one. Perhaps I mention Israel—offhandedly, of course. Perhaps I mention that in Israel, they have developed highly miniaturized video cameras, the size of pills. You take one, and it travels through your body and automatically takes pictures and diagnoses your illness and communicates with computers. They get uneasy at this, unaccustomed to hearing anything good about Israel.

I pick at the scab on their wound—my own wound, really—enjoying the obsessive toying.

I bash the same way we go at members of family or close friends, those we have a familiarity with, those for whom we have special anger because they resemble us, remind us of ourselves, our own weaknesses. I clothe berating as compliment. You, you who sit and sip coffee and smoke sheesha and compare government salaries for jobs you do not have to work at and clamor for the latest foreign-made gadget, look at what those who leave achieve. Do you not see what is wrong, or do you just want to go on blaming others?

On my worst days, I am consumed. I carry on fights in my head, arguing, attacking, yelling. This goes on as I automate through my daily activities: in the shower, working out on the treadmill, shopping. It invades my sleep, my dreams.

It occurs to me to ask: Why are *you* so angry? What has the world done to you but bear you and give you opportunities, one after the other, in the

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East and the West? And if these people drown themselves in lethargy and if they blame America and Israel, what of it? If they lie to themselves, if their leaders treat them as children, what is it to you?

Perhaps to be critical is reasonable. Perhaps one should argue, or help—but why anger? Something deeper is at work, and I feel its stirrings. Memories surface.

I see, in some men, the visage of my grandfather Abdullah, who worked for the British before World War II as a driver and a mechanic. His stories float through my mind, stories of the English “gentlemen” and the time this one paid attention to him, the time the other took his suggestion for a repair seriously or the time he was smart and sneaky and, in repayment for *not* being taken seriously, solved a problem and took a very large amount of money from them—teach them right.

My mother tells me of a cousin, a higher-up in the National Iranian Oil Company: “I once went to his office, and the title plate on his door was *this* long,” she motions, holding her hands far apart—and how he noted that his British colleagues farted at the urinal. “They just fart and fart as they stand, like that, and say, *Sorry, sorry.*”

The mind of the colonized occupies a society long after the colonists are gone. This oversensitivity to the actions of one’s *bettors*, even if they no longer are officially so, is beaten in through the centuries—like a dog watching every move of its master.

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And of course, in some ways, the table has turned. In Gulf Arab countries, now it is the Arabs who saunter, uncaring, not noticing the legion of little Pakistanis and Indians and Filipinos who jump as bundles of nerves. I ring for ice in my Dubai hotel, and there is a little Bangladeshi guy at my door, practically shaking. I ask my Sri Lankan driver about his family, and he is all excited as he goes on and on. I hear my family's voice from his mouth, later telling others about this auspicious encounter with me on that special day. "An American gentleman. Yes, sir, a doctor. Suit, tie, expensive, expensive, everything. Liked me very much. Asking all about family children life everything everything. And big big tip. Ten dirhams. American, American."

My heart aches at this desire to be noticed, this excitement. Is this what my grandfather looked like, a swarthy young man in his loose garb, on the day a "British gentleman" brought a single-propeller plane to his hometown of Kermanshah for the first time, giving rides to the dusty, gathering crowd? Is this my grandmother, belittled and, worse, little in her own mind, long remembering a kind throwaway look by a Western woman as a singularly memorable validation? My heart aches at this as I straddle these two worlds, back and forth, back and forth, physically and in my mind.

In April 2006, there is a unique ceremony in the Iranian northeast city of Mashhad, not far from the mausoleum of Imam Reza, the eighth Shi'ite Imam. On a stage, with flowers and fanfare, there are fire-breathing speeches by high-level clerics and military commanders, and chants and waving fists and fatigue-clad Revolutionary Guards.

And then, President Ahmadinejad. "At this historic moment," he says, "with the blessings of God Almighty and the efforts made by our scientists, I declare here that the laboratory-scale nuclear fuel cycle has been completed and young scientists produced enriched uranium. . . . I formally declare that Iran has joined the club of nuclear countries," and the crowd breaks into chants of "Allah-o-akbar"—God is great.

There are, of course, cameras at the ceremony—media from Iran and other countries, click-clicking away, capturing scene after scene, but what sticks out the most, the picture that actually makes it to the front page of the *New York Times*, among other places, is of these male dancers, traditional, colorful, in loose-flowing garb of the provinces, dancing, floating really, their limbs apparently jointless, all curves, all sensuality. And they each hold in their hands these small vials, a powder inside—uranium yellowcake, they say—to be, postceremony, held at the Imam Reza shrine. The vials soar and descend with the dancers, up and down, in arcs small and

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large, rhythmically with the music. I see, in my mind, Iranians, millions of them, clapping, cheering, waving flags, shouting Allah-o-akbar, Allah-o-akbar, shopkeepers passing trays of sweets in celebration, cars in knots of traffic with their lights on, with horns honking, bodies half out of the passenger-side windows, swaying, arms gyrating.

In an interview, a woman in Tehran’s street tells the journalist Azadeh Moaveni that “of course, every home should have it,” meaning nuclear power. How would the world deal with Iran’s nuclear ambitions? I ask myself. So much pride is attached to this. So much insecurity left to be beaten back.

I see the daughter of my good Iranian friend, religious and black-veil-clad, also precocious and sciency—third-level national champion in some sort of a computer skill game at the age of fourteen—whom I had encouraged, during my stay in Tehran, to study engineering when she told me that it is a “men’s field.” “Uncle Iraj,” she tells me one day over the phone, not long after the yellowcake ceremony, “I was accepted to the university and am planning to major in nuclear engineering.”

I remember my own high school years before the Revolution, when seemingly half my class wanted to study nuclear physics, though we were not sure

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what it was or what it was good for—only that it was the cutting edge of progress—modernity.

And I think, there is no way for the West and the U.S. to stop this. There is not enough pressure that can be exerted—resolutions and sanctions and embargos—to reconfine this fantasy to its bottle. I am resigned. I imagine bombings, exchanges between Iran and Israel, fire and destruction and peels of skin hanging from burned bodies.

And still, somewhere deep, there is this voice, nagging, barely audible. I quiet myself and listen to my own inside, my own gut, till I hear it.

*How can an Irooni build a nuclear bomb?* it says.

And this comforts me.

And this shames me.