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Category: Short Story

American Dreams

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Part One: Living

I wake to the sounds of chatter and clattering plates. Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I roll from my thin mattress onto the floor and yawn. Immediately the smells of cumin, onions, and fava beans alert me to the presence of food. *Mmmm, breakfast.* After stretching some more, I step barefoot over the sleeping form of my youngest sister, Zayna, and brush aside the small curtain that separates the two rooms of our house.

“Aisha, come help me cook.”

I walk to the tiled counter by the rusty sink and hand my older sister, Leena, the bowl of beans. She takes them and scrapes her plate of chopped onions into the mix. Behind me, my mama talks with my grandmother as my twin sister, Raja, reaches through a crack in the window to feel the temperature of the air.

“Hot, hot, and more hot, as usual.” Raja hops down from her perch on top of a broken chair. She pushes her messy hair out of her eyes and sighs.

“Syrian summers suck,” adds Leena as she turns towards the ancient stovetop, long black hair swirling behind her. I watch her as she sets the uncooked *ful nabad* on top and turns the squeaky knob.

“No kidding,” I say before I’m cut off by a shriek from the bedroom.

“Amir! Get off! If you do that again I’ll leave you out for the dogs!”

I turn to Leena, who rolls her eyes and continues watching the pot of *ful*. A moment later, Zayna storms through the curtain and flops onto the chair. Amir, my six-year-old brother, tramps in with a mischievously happy expression on his face and proceeds to give Zayna a big, innocent hug.

“Get off me, Amir!”

“Children, calm down. There’s no need to fight.” Naturally, the words come from Mama. She talks in that cold, detached voice when she’s tired or stressed. No wonder she’s stressed right now. My baba, my father, is across the ocean in America while we’re still trying to survive in ISIS-controlled Syria. He’s dreaming American dreams, and so are we.

“Mama, the *ful* is ready.” Leena brushes a strand of silky hair away from her face and sets the bowl on a mat on the dirty floor. Mama walks over with several spoons in hand and kneels down in front of the bowl. Leena sits down next to her and Amir jumps into her lap with a giggle. Raja, Zayna, and I all flop down next to Leena and our grandmother, our *Teta*, stiffly crouches her way down next to us.

Soon, we’re shoveling spoonfuls of beans and broth into our hungry mouths. *Yum.* We eat and eat, and I can see the disappointment on my siblings’ faces when there’s nothing left in the bowl. The *ful* always disappears much too soon.

“Mama, is there anything else to eat? I’m still hungry.” Zayna sighs at the empty bowl before Mama gulps down her last mouthful and speaks.

“Zayna, you know we don’t have anything else right now. You ate all the *mamounyeh* left from yesterday’s breakfast.”

“*Uuugh.* I wish food was unlimited.”

Raja lifts her head. “Good luck with that.”

Mama taps her long fingernails absentmindedly on the side of the bowl before speaking. “Well... we may have better luck soon. Earlier this morning the neighbors brought in a letter from Baba saying that he’s got everything set up in America. In a week he’ll be back so we can *finally leave the house.*”

The idea that I can’t makes me spit. I hate being cooped up just because I’m female. They won’t let us

go outside without a male guardian, even to get food or water. Raja and I have to take turns sneaking out to the well. I hate imagining what it would be like if we were caught. And Mama won't let us take any other chances, so we have to rely on our neighbors to bring us breakfast and dinner. But food costs so much, so I have to be grateful for them. And I am, even though the only reason they're doing this is because my baba saved their lives years ago, when the fighting intensified. But now, hopefully it will all change. I just can't wait to see my baba again.

Part Two: Leaving

"Baba, are we there yet?"

"Be patient, Amir. We're getting closer."

I pull my *abaya* tighter around my frame and sink into the back seat of the car as we roll past the group of armed men, who can't seem to take their eyes off us. Our neighbors lent us this car, and it has no air conditioning. We women are being cooked under our black *abayas*. I glare at Amir with envy. I dreamt that, in America, we wouldn't have to wear *abayas*. I hope it turns out to be true. I can't stand being forced to wear these things, especially when I don't even believe. But don't tell anyone; they'll *literally* kill me. I feel the pull of the men's glaring eyes. They stare at us with frowning faces and I try my hardest not to stare back. It's just not fair. I glance at Raja's frowning face, the only part of her not covered in thick shapeless fabric, and immediately know she's thinking the same thing. Amir is maddeningly oblivious to the situation and begins to hum a made-up tune. Apparently it's a very loud tune. I ignore him and focus on my feet.

Before I know it, we're waiting in furnace-air to board the plane, which looks a little too old to be safe. Not that *anything* is safe near a war zone. I turn away from the plane and towards the rest of my family. Baba and Amir look almost like they could fly compared to us, once again turned into solar ovens by our *abayas*. By the way Zayna squirms I can tell she's on the verge of one of her fiery outbursts, so I discreetly nudge her before striking up a quiet and random conversation to take her mind off it. I hope the men behind us don't notice my words.

Boarding the plane was uneventful, and now Raja, Leena, and I are crammed into two airplane seats as we begin to take off. I've never been in a plane before, let alone one blasting off into the sky like the falcon that used to live outside our home, flying by our window every so often. I already miss that beautiful bird. I press my face against the window and watch as the cracked runway races backwards. Raja squeezes my hand. She's as nervous as I am. Meanwhile, Leena turns backwards to ask Baba a question. I think she's trying to pretend that she's not scared. *Just like an older sister*. I turn back to the window. My breath fogs the glass and my stomach plummets as we lift into the sky. My legs seem to drop off while the rest of me is pushed back into my seat. Just before we reach the clouds, I see a billowing mass of brown dust rise into the air from the city below.

Part Three: Landing

I step out into the airport and there are too many sounds and colors to take in. People of all different shapes, sizes, and colors. People who look like me. People who look like no one I've ever seen before. Leena's eyes begin to sparkle. She rips off her *abaya* to reveal American jeans and a T-shirt.

Where on Earth did she get that?

"We're free!"

Then she switches to the only English phrase I've heard. The one that Leena has been obsessed with for weeks. "Welcome to America!"

I turn away as Mama berates Leena for acting so "crazy." I see Leena hurriedly wrap her *hijab* around her head before I zone out and listen to all the chattering coming from families around us. I don't hear any Arabic, which is surprising even though it shouldn't be. Everyone else speaks in sharp, clipped words. Probably English. Then another sound almost apologetically finds my ear. I look over to see my grandmother crying.

"Teta, why are you crying?" I suck in my breath. I've never seen my Teta cry. She shakes her head and manages to lift her arm, which makes a shaky circling motion. But Teta doesn't say anything. Instead, Mama approaches me.

"Don't you see?" She pauses to sigh. "Just leave Teta alone for a moment, Aisha."

"But..." I don't finish my sentence. I sit down in the nearest chair and barely notice the soft, smooth feel of it against my palms before Leena flops down next to me.

"You know why Teta is crying?"

"Laa. No."

"She's free for the first time in her life. And... and we just left a war zone. You saw the explosion as we

took off. If we were still in our house that could've been what finally killed us.”

I let the words sink in. Then I rip off my *abaya*.

The lady at the counter smiles at all of us. A stranger has never smiled at me before. *Weird*. She hands us the bagels, then Mama steps forward to take them with strange money in hand. Never have I seen a woman step forward to take the food, let alone pay for it. *My world has officially inverted*.

Zayna pulls on Mama's arm, who turns to me and speaks in Arabic.

“Aisha, go take Zayna to the bathroom.”

What...?!

“But Mama, we can't go anywhere without a male guardian... shouldn't Baba come with us?”

Please don't be a dream. Please be real. Please be a real American dream.

Leena turns to me. “This is *America*. We're not under the control of ISIS or some other nonsensical rights-restricting power-hungry... freaking terrorist group. Don't you love the word 'freaking'? It's just so American!”

Who is this American teenager and what has she done with my sister?

So I take Zayna to the nearest bathroom. Walking with only Zayna, I feel light... loose... I think the word is *free*. I pull off my *hijab* and toss my long thick hair. I imagine it blowing behind me like in that commercial I saw once as I take Zayna's hand. I never believed in Islam, no matter how hard Mama and Baba tried to make me. And now I'm in a country where that's okay. I love Syria, but I think I already love America too. Syria isn't *all* war and corruption and restrictions, I can't help my exhilaration at finally getting away from it. Maybe when the fighting stops I'll go back. But not soon. I feel too free. An American girl would probably laugh at me feeling so free and self-important walking to an *airport bathroom*. But I'm not an American girl. I'm a Syrian girl who dreams American dreams.