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Cemeteries

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Rajia Hassib is an Egyptian-American writer and an Instructor of English at Marshall University. Her first novel, In the Language of Miracles, was a New York Times Editors' Choice and received an honorable mention from the Arab American Book Award. Her second novel, A Pure Heart, was one of Literary Hub's Best Reviewed Books of the Week in August of 2019. She holds an MA in creative writing from Marshall University, and she has written for The New York Times Book Review, The New Yorker Online, and Literary Hub. She lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

The first house we bought in West Virginia was sandwiched between two cemeteries. The larger one stood behind our house and was hidden by a patch of trees, so we could see it only in the winter when the trees lost their leaves and the headstones emerged, rectangular specks visible between the bare branches. The smaller cemetery perched on top of a low hill across from our house, on the other side of the narrow, dead-end street. For years, an elderly couple would show up on Memorial Day and walk among the headstones, flowers in hand, the sole visitors to the old cemetery. We had seen the house only once before deciding to buy it, and, somehow, both my husband and I had missed that cemetery, discovering it only on the day we moved in, the same way we discovered that small linen closet in the upstairs hallway or the storage attic that was deeper than we had remembered. I lived in that house for five years and never once climbed the low hill to walk among the gravestones. I kept the blinds of both windows overlooking the cemetery closed.

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My mother used to smoke out on the deck of that house. One morning, she told me of a terrifying experience the night before: on the lawn, two red eyes glowed in the dark, looking straight at her. For panicked seconds, engulfed in the total silence of the West Virginia nights, she could think only of the two cemeteries. A few nights later, the creature reappeared, and she summoned me to see it. Standing about halfway down the empty lot next to our house was a small possum, frozen in place, glaring at us. My mother had never seen a possum before. She visited me once a year, at first taking the 30-hour trip from

Egypt to spend only a couple of short weeks with me and then, after she retired, staying for months at a time, caring for my young kids while I went back to school to earn a BA and then an MA in English. She never warmed up to that possum, though she loved seeing the deer that sometimes strolled across our yard and developed a fondness for a lone rabbit that often munched on the grass. Despite my repeated pleading, she never quit smoking. Knowing how much she disliked the view of those headstones, I bought two dozen young Carolina Jasmine vines and spent a day climbing up and down the steep hill across from my house, planting the young vines at the foot of the chain link fence that bordered the cemetery. Never a diligent gardener, I promptly forgot about them, remembering them only years later when, one spring, I looked up at the cemetery and saw a burst of yellow flowers covering the fence.

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Ancient Egyptians believed those buried in foreign lands would not be resurrected. It's a tongue-in-cheek attitude of citizens of the once greatest power on earth, a self-congratulatory belief in the superiority of their land down to its very soil. That was one of many reasons why they never willingly immigrated: that awareness that the land you choose to live in is also the land you will die in.

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When people visit cemeteries in Egypt, they often bring pastries called *shoreik*, also known as Pastries of Mercy. At the cemetery, visitors distribute those pastries, gifting them to the poor or other visitors, the act of sharing meant to bless the souls of the departed loved ones.

I know this because my mother told me about it. On the day she described the pastries to me, we stood facing each other in the kitchen of the house that stood between cemeteries, our elbows resting on opposite sides of the island. It must have been early one morning, for I remember holding a cup of coffee in my hands, the sun shining through the kitchen's bay window on my right as I leaned in and listened to her. I had never heard of this tradition before. Yet, I could see everything she described: the pastries, soft, sugar-coated pretzels shaped like three thick sticks that are pinched together at the ends; the wicker baskets that held the pastries wrapped in a clean cloth; the visitors handing them to the beggars who roamed the cemeteries, counting on the generosity of the bereaved.

Listening to her, I tasted the sweet pastry and fell in love with the name—Pastries of Mercy. Mercy that you can ingest, that melts in your mouth. Mercy that nourishes.

~

My mother was the only one who seemed aware of the cost of immigration, of what we lose. Never truly impressed by the various markers of my status as a successful immigrant—the houses, cars, college degrees—she prodded me to hang on to things I was letting go of too willingly. *Visit Egypt. Call your sister. Speak to your kids in Arabic, not English.* She must have recognized that a first-generation immigrant is also a first-generation expatriate. Maybe that was the reason she made sure I knew how people in Egypt mourn the dead and which pastries they bake in pursuit of solace. But I was reinventing my life, changing careers, writing my first novel, and basking in the multitude of blessings that this

country poured down on me. Of course, this abundance of beauty exploded in colors that blinded me to all I was losing.

~

I didn't find out that my mother had died until after she was buried. A seven-hour time difference, combined with the Islamic tradition of a swift interring, meant that I would never have made it to Egypt in time to attend her funeral, so my family decided that there was no logical reason to wake me up in the middle of the night to break the news.

I hadn't been in Egypt for years before her death, and I stayed away from Egypt for years afterward. When I finally flew back, I visited her grave in Alexandria. She is buried in the city's largest cemetery, situated in the middle of a residential neighborhood and surrounded by tall brick walls. On the outskirts of the cemetery, vendors sell various knickknacks, from scarves to clay pots to small booklets of prayer. My mother is interred next to her sister and their mother in a small, enclosed yard sitting in the shadow of an old tree. I had never visited a cemetery in Egypt before, so I hung behind my sister, watched her unlock the gate to the yard, and call a resident Quran reciter on his cell phone, summoning him. The man arrived promptly, the Egyptian substitute for a bouquet of flowers—the gift one brings when visiting the dead—and stood with us in the small yard, reciting verses from the Quran in a soft, melodic voice, choosing ones that described the peace and beauty of paradise, ending his recitation with a string of prayers for my mother. He knew my sister well; she visits my mother's grave often, mainly because she, like most Muslims, believes that my mother's soul

not only knows of her visits but awaits and welcomes them, boasting about them to other spirits around her.

When he finished his recitation, the man exchanged glances with my sister, doubtless wondering why I was sobbing three years after my mother's death and why he had never before met me.

"She lives in America," my sister volunteered, and the man nodded.

We tipped him generously—my sister because she is generous to a fault, I because I felt guilty; I had failed to be there for my mother when she was sick and had failed to visit her grave until then. I waited until he left and then sat down on my knees and spoke to my mom. I hoped that my sister was right and that my mom was listening.

My sister waited until I was done, and then we left, locking the gate behind us. I did not see a single person eating or distributing *shoreik*.

~

In my first novel, *In the Language of Miracles*, Nagla, who lost her son to suicide, visits his grave with her mother. The cemetery I describe is in a fictional town in New Jersey, open and grassy with curving walkways, not surrounded by tall walls that hide the dead from the living. Still, the pair brings a basket of *shoreik*, which the Egyptian grandmother insists on baking before they visit the young man's grave. At the cemetery, the grandmother, unaware of the American concept of personal space, shares the pastries with a bereaved young woman. The scene blurs Egypt

and the U.S., brings them together, and hopes the encounter works.

I describe the pastries in the novel just as my mother described them to me, down to the soft and chewy texture of the dough, the baking smell that permeates the kitchen, and the sweetness that dissolves in Nagla's mouth. In my novel, the mother and daughter share memories of visiting cemeteries in Egypt together, of baking these pastries together, and distributing them together. When Nagla takes a bite of one of the pastries, she is flooded with nostalgia.

I never shared a similar experience with my mother, but I used to share my writing with her back when I was a teenager writing in Arabic. I showed her the first short story I ever wrote, and she promptly took it to an author she knew and asked him to give me some feedback. I still remember how grateful I felt to her for finding the story worthy of such trouble, how proud I was when the author confirmed that the story had some merit. A few weeks ago, a full decade after my mother's death, my sister found a book that that same writer had inscribed for me, calling me a "future author." Apparently, my mother saved that book as well as everything I wrote when I still lived in Egypt, all the scraps and notebooks I left behind, everything relating to my obsession with writing, including my first publication, a column about the ancient Egyptian temple of Abu Simbel that I submitted to a children's magazine when I was twelve and that the magazine, to my utter pride, published in bold typeface.

But something changed when I switched to writing in English. Once, during one of her visits, I printed out three of my short stories and gave them to her, eager to hear her opinion, eager to let her know that the months she spent caring for my kids while I studied writing were paying off. The next day, she gave me back the stories with no comment. Perhaps that was why I never shared any of my novel's drafts with her. I feared that she would read the novel and respond, again, in silence. Always a compulsive reviser, I just kept working on the novel, hoping to bring it as close as possible to something she would read and find words to describe, preferably ones that oozed pride and approval. I was sure she would read it, eventually; I just wasn't in any rush to share it with her.

She died in August of 2013, just as I was finishing up the last major revision before I started looking for an agent, two years before I held the first copies of the published novel in my hands.

I like to think that she would have liked the chapter about *shoreik*. I know she would have liked the idea of me becoming a published author. After all, she was the first person to take my writing seriously. When I think of my mother in relation to my writing, I don't think of her silent reaction to the short stories I wrote in a language she understood but that, to her, was still foreign. Instead, I remember how she used to hold my hand when I was a child and walk with me the few blocks from our apartment in Alexandria to the newsstand that sold Mickey Mouse comics (in Arabic, issued every Thursday) and the chapter books that she introduced me to and that I

devoured. The newsstand stood on an avenue separated from the Mediterranean Sea by a few blocks of tall apartment buildings. Every time we crossed one of the roads separating the blocks, the sea air blew against us, humid and infused with a scent of iodine that, in my mind, is still synonymous with the smell of home. I knew the way to the newsstand well, both because she always took me there and because it was on the way to the cultural center where she used to work, a building that overlooked, on one side, ancient Roman catacombs.

I remember my mother, decades later, standing across from me in the kitchen of that house in West Virginia, describing the Pastries of Mercy. She wore her hair short, and whenever she paused after speaking, she tilted her head to the left so that her straight, fine, salt-and-pepper hair touched her shoulder. I remember her smiling.

~

My kids like to hear the story of our immigration: how my husband and I landed in JFK in the fall of 1998 with one suitcase each, how we went from staying with his cousin in her Brooklyn apartment to living in a five-bedroom house in Charleston, West Virginia, up on a hill that overlooks not a cemetery, but a forest bursting with trees whose perpetually changing leaves remind me of resurrection. We embody the whimsical American Dream on the rare occasion when it delivers: my husband, a doctor; I, a writer. I write this essay in a room of my own, looking out onto a deck the size of the apartment I grew up in. I write without fear, fully basking in this country's greatest gift: freedom. At moments, such blessings overwhelm me, and it feels

blasphemous to mourn the things I gave up: a language, a culture, a sense of belonging to a land that does not continuously question my right to live and die on its soil. A lifetime close to my parents. But great blessings often come at great cost. I have come to accept the various losses that I could never have imagined at twenty-three: that I have become the Egyptian in the U.S. and the American in Egypt and will always stay that way, defined by my immigration; that, after a quarter of a century living in the U.S., I still walk around perpetually anticipating embarrassment, suspecting that I will accidentally reveal my otherness or that someone will point it out; that I wouldn't know how to find my parents' graves without my sister's guidance; that I have to tell my story to my kids in English, not Arabic; that, when I die, my American kids will probably never believe that the dead boast of their visitors.

The American in me shrugs it all off. I tell myself it's worth it. I pretend that I will live forever.