

THE QUARRY

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Gedo Youssef

There it stood, cap coated in a film of dust nobody dared remove. Aftershave. In an all-female household. It looked out of place on the bathroom mirror shelf, a broad glass container among the array of gaudy plastic tubes and makeup paraphernalia. It dominated the scene. It had to. This was all we had left of him. My grandfather, Youssef. My *Gedo*.

A year today. I raised my fingers to the cool blue refractions of light emanating from the tinted glass. I'd almost forgotten how it smelled. How *he* smelled.

He was the embodiment of fatherhood. This morning, I woke up certain I'd find him in the kitchen preparing breakfast, like he always used to do. I'd hover

nearby to listen to his unnervingly off-key singing as he bobbed his head about to his own tune—at utter peace—while he shuffled across the room and chopped tomatoes for the *ful medames*. Yes, he’d hum a slow hymn as he collected his ingredients. By the time the dish was ready for the final squeeze of lemon, he’d belt melodies fit for an uproarious village wedding.

Gedo was always up and dressed to the nines by six-thirty sharp, ready to bargain his way through all the greengrocer had to offer. He’d always return victorious, the entirety of God’s green earth in the plastic bags he hauled home. His modest red bike would barely be visible under the load. I imagined that’s how he looked driving through the dusty streets of Egypt decades ago, with his four kids hanging on for dear life, triumphant as their father defied the laws of physics.

‘Look what I got jus-for you today, Rifkah,’ he’d say to me in his rumbly croak. And he would beam, his forehead expanding and pushing back the fuzzy peppered coils he had for hair. ‘Mint! *It’s-e-fresh!*’

I’ve never seen anything quite like his smile. His teeth would readily greet the world, but were so crooked it seemed as though they were huddled for warmth. The grooves he had for dimples hardened into position, stretching out his face enough for pale nose-hair to ceremoniously peek through and observe a kind of queen’s wave.

Sometimes this would be accompanied by his classic wheeze-laugh that ended with an abrupt, high-pitched note and a barely noticeable nod. It was hard to not grin along—not when he had the vicious sense of humour he did. This often meant that his children-in-law fell on the wrong side of the conversation; Gedo Youssef thought the world of his kids, lacking the capacity to think highly of anyone who breathed in their proximity and dared to cross them.

Such conversations were prefaced with a very specific forerunner. Gedo would purse his lips and execute a meticulous side-eye glare before raising his eyebrows, rolling his dark eyes back to the front, and lowering his hairy brows with a theatrical sigh. No rite of passage was as sacred as being allowed to stay in the room after he decided to start any sentence with, ‘Frank-e-ly, I *just* can’t under-e-stand...’

It was a sentence I’d often heard the introduction of, but never had the imagination to finish. Or, at least, finish with accuracy. I grew up with a childish belief that no tensions could exist within the inviolable domain of the family. And, as was

inevitable, the cracks began to show. By that time, I was finally old enough to be a fly on the wall without stumbling into its unfathomable crevasses.

As it turns out, Gedo Youssef frankly *just* couldn't understand a range of things, from the tattoos on *that man* his 'baby Farah' married, to why his man-child of an "angel son Sherif" chose "*her*". "My princess" Laila's fiancé also came up a couple of times, though Gedo had to really dig for content there. He never had much to say against the guy, but still gave him the additional portion my dad never received; he walked out on Gedo's "diamond Amal" before I was old enough to walk, and it was during these conversations that I found out "*that so-and-so*" was not actually overseas for work.

I believed that to be Gedo Youssef's only flaw at the time. I believed that until his cancer. Gedo Youssef was not a fighter. He took the news from the doctor's lips and buckled into denial.

'Don-worry, *habibti*. Nothing-can take down an old-e-goat like me.'

And he'd be up and out of the house by five instead, fearing neither cold nor dark.

'Why you are worried, Rifkah? What do-you think I am? *Old?*' Then, he'd laugh his laugh and nod with an added glint of mania. 'Just one hour, *habibti*. I promise.'

He avoided sleep in all the ways he could, and this included his mandatory afternoon nap. I didn't know what to do with myself from the hours of three to five without the rumbling sound of his snoring rattling the windows. Homework just wasn't the same without the live ambience.

His energy died down too soon and, within a month, the rest he resisted became the silent sleep he dissolved into. Chemo did not hold back. It stifled a lot more than the cells waging war against his body; our entire sun dimmed, and it was Weet-Bix for breakfast.

Weet-Bix or nothing.

Our house crumbled into an uncomfortable quiet as he wilted further into his mattress, pain etched onto his face. It became clear that no amount of half-hearted, broken-Arabic singing, or stale, tasteless breakfasts could change

anything...the magic was one-way. I held my breath as I watched the light slip from his fatherly eyes. And I held my breath as he was carried away from me inside a wooden box, and into the darkness he left outside the church's doors.

We mourned for weeks on end, but soon the seasons changed. My tear-stained mother purged the house of junk we'll never use: the thick-framed glasses he used to proofread my essays, the striped pajamas he'd let me cry into, the worn-down bike he'd drive at the crack of dawn to get us fresh produce... and I held my breath.

And Laila wore white in that same church hall months after we'd all been there in black, and I held my breath. Her brother walked her down the aisle, both shedding a tear over their father when they arrived at the altar, and I held my breath.

And Farah grew a baby bump, and I held my breath.

And Sherif and his "*her*" bought a house, and I held my breath.

And my mother was no longer tear-stained, but radiant and young-looking again, and I held my breath.

And what does it mean that I've been holding my breath for so long, that I haven't had breakfast since the day Gedo stopped snoring? That I haven't been able to listen to a single song I understand the lyrics of?

I break the film of dust that has been collecting on the bottle I'd so adamantly defended against my mother's grip. I twist the cap open. His musky scent fills our small bathroom, and I can finally breathe again.