

The Man Behind Him

"Perhaps I am a man of exceptional moods. I do not know how far my experience is common. At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me; I seem to watch it all from the outside, from somewhere inconceivably remote, out of time, out of space, out of the stress and tragedy of it all. This feeling was very strong upon me that night. Here was another side to my dream."

—H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*

When I was very young, I had a recurring out-of-body experience. I was six, or eight, or ten at most and I'd be riding in the car, looking out the window. I'd be watching the sky, pinpricked by a sort of stillness, and then suddenly, I'd be up there, looking down at myself.

The feeling was of floating, of treading water in a summer lake. At first, I wouldn't be too far off, as high as a streetlight maybe. But then, quickly, I'd get zoomed back as far as the tops of city buildings. I could still see my other self, framed in the car window, getting smaller and then, a *whoosh* that yanked backwards through my chest and when I opened my eyes, I was beyond: up in the sky, as far as the moon, looking back at Earth.

Still, a floating feeling.

From so far out, I couldn't see myself anymore. I'd been swallowed by the blue and green smudges of a planet the size of a kickball. This sense of smallness came into me like a breath. And just as it was about to turn, to breathe out of me,

I'd blink.

I married my husband three years ago. In fact, our anniversary was this week and in celebration, we went out to dinner in downtown Fairbanks, where we live. The restaurant was very simple—a salad bar, a ten-item menu, and wait-staff who wore aprons and called us both "hun." Jafar, my husband, winked at me and ordered the most expensive steak on the menu. When the dish came to our table, a piece of meat the size of a boulder, heads turned.

"Oh my goodness," I said softly. "As if we don't stand out already."

And we do stand out. Because Jafar is an alien.

In his novel *War of the Worlds*, H.G. Wells writes about an invasion of Martians who are "big" and "greyish" with "oily, brown skin." The book was published in 1897, before mustard gas and heat-ray guns, before UFOs and rocket-launched spaceships. And yet, they're all in there. People say that H.G. Wells predicted the future.

At the end of the novel, when the Martians have been defeated, the narrator returns home. He's relieved to find his wife there, safe and waiting for him. He should be happy, but he can't shake an "abiding sense of doubt and insecurity."

There's been quite a bit written on what Wells got right about the future. In my experience, though, it's the abiding doubt, that other side of the dream, that feels most true.

When we were first married, Jafar and I were lying in bed one morning when I noticed three vertical scars down the middle of his abdomen. The center one was cut from his solar plexus to his navel, and there were parallel ones on either side.

"What's this?" I asked, lifting my head off his chest, looking at him.

"I got sick," he said. When he was a toddler, he'd refused

to eat for days on end and a traditional healer had treated him by drawing a hot blade three times down his belly.

“Did it work?” I asked, skeptical, tracing the lines with the tip of a finger. I looked at the scars instead of his face.

“Well,” he said, lifting his head. “I’m still here.”

Think aliens. Think little green men, lemming-like in how they obey, clever sometimes, but harmless. Very predictable. Or think about the threatening kind, the big ones with spines that crawl up out of their necks and sickle fangs and violent, warped-out arms that whip you up if they catch you alone at night.

These are not Jafar.

We’re standing in line for coffee at a gourmet café in Boston. It’s cold outside and bleak. Layers of concrete under gravel-rotted snow. The café is an oasis with its butter-colored lighting, the gentle roar of the steamer. People huddle at small, round tables, warming their chins over their drinks and speaking in whispers.

“What do you want?” I ask Jafar, leaning into his chest with my shoulder. I’m aware that we’re being watched. For this reason, I slip my hand into his.

“A latte,” he says and squeezes my fingers. “Hey, look—I’m not alone.”

“Great,” I say, but I don’t turn to look. *I’m not alone* is code for *There’s someone else in here who looks like me*. And though we’ve been together a while, it still bothers me when he points this out. It seems to emphasize our difference.

“I’ll order,” I say. “Can you find us a table?”

He winks at me and breaks out of the line. I’ve paid and am waiting for our drinks by the time he returns.

“Did you get a table?”

“No.”

“Oh,” I say. “Well, I guess we can walk with the drinks.”

A barista slides our cardboard-sleeved cups across the

counter. Jafar pops the lid on his, tears open four packets of sugar, and pours them one-by-one into the cup. The granules make a crater in the foam.

“Ready?” I say and turn to go.

A woman is standing up from a table by the window. “Excuse me,” I say, approaching her. “Are you leaving?”

She looks at Jafar, who is just behind me, and looks at me. “Yes, go ahead,” she says, then pushes her purse in front of her as she weaves toward the door. I begin to remove my jacket, pull a chair out from the table.

“Fuck this,” Jafar says with almost no volume but all of his breath.

“What?” I say, turning toward him.

“Bullshit. She wasn’t leaving when I asked. Fucking *bitch*.”

“Jafar!” I say, but he’s already almost out the door. The din of the café goes on pause and people watch. I swallow what I might’ve said, grab my jacket, and hurry out the door.

“What’s going on?” I demand. The sidewalk is crowded, but people move quickly past us.

“She’ll give up her table for you but not me?”

“Did you ask?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe she wasn’t ready yet.”

Jafar spits something thick onto the sidewalk. He stares at the white, silicone top on his coffee cup, then chucks the whole thing at a nearby trashcan.

“Stop it,” I say. “You’re making assumptions too. Maybe she was waiting for someone that didn’t show up. Maybe her ride just got here.”

“I’ll meet you at home,” he says.

Alien, from the Latin, *alienus*, meaning “of or belonging to another.” It was first used to refer to extraterrestrials in 1953, when a UFO allegedly crashed into a Nevada desert. Before that, it referred to anything foreign or unfamiliar: person,

object, experience.

Jafar immigrated to the U.S. from South Africa in 2010. Technically, according to the Department of Homeland Security, he is a “Permanent Resident Alien” of the United States. Realistically, it’s not his legal status that makes him alien. It’s that he’s black.

When I was a kid, I went through these obsessive reading phases. I’d read everything I could find on a topic—mostly historical events, mostly tragedies. For six months straight, I read exclusively about the sinking of the *Titanic*. When I was twelve, it was the Holocaust. I read Anne Frank’s diary, a biography of Golda Meir, then a book called *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*. In this one, a nine-year-old Jewish girl flees Berlin with her family. She’s safe in Paris when the war starts, but she hears stories of death camps, of neighbors and cousins disappeared. She wants to do something, to help, but cannot figure out how.

I didn’t know that the *Pink Rabbit* book was the first in a trilogy. Otherwise, I think I’d have insisted on reading the others. The last one is titled *A Small Person Far Away*. In this book, the war has ended and the girl has grown. She’s married. She lives in England but gets an urgent call to return to Germany and to memories of the war. There’s no walking away from these things.

One night, just weeks after we’d met, Jafar and I went out for a drink at an eccentric, two-story jazz club in Cape Town, South Africa. It had carpeting on the stairs and a twisted, wrought-iron banister. We found a table under a small, finial-shaped window and sat across from each other in antique chairs. We were at the beginning of love then, bubbling over with it. There’s a lightness to that time, a sense of relief to be so close, so familiar with another person. We sipped our drinks and Jafar wanted to know what I dreamed of for my future. I told him I’m not good at thinking ahead,

and turned the question back at him. He wanted a family, he said, children with chestnut cheeks. He’d retire in a house with a sun porch and he’d bring me tea while I read my books.

I smiled, but I looked away. I find dreams like this intimidating, too specific to ever come true.

The room had been empty when we started talking, but now a man was sitting at a table across from us. He was staring at us. He was white.

“Motherfucker,” Jafar said and made as if to stand up.

“No, no,” I said. “It’s nothing,” and I reached for his arm. He sat back down.

“He’s just strange,” I said.

And then the man’s stares lingered longer. They got narrower with every sip of his beer. He wasn’t hunched or beer-bellied or unshaven or anything that I think of when I think of a rotten, bitter man.

“That asshole,” I said.

“Darling,” said Jafar.

“He can’t do that,” I said.

“Let it go.”

“We have to do something,” I said.

Jafar stood up. He dragged his chair across the floor, two feet to the left of where it had been, and sat back down. I could not see the man behind him.

As an eight-year-old up in the sky, I blinked, then gasped, and landed back into myself so hard that it broke me open. I shuddered, grabbed for my elbows across the seatbelt. I looked at my knees. I was so small.

I don’t know why I didn’t cry. I looked out the car window. There were people, as small as me, crossing the street. Adults and kids, everybody just as small. And I got it. Just as small and just as big. Just as many dreams. Just the same as me.

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One day last summer, Jafar stopped at a Laundromat on his way home and asked for a shower. We live just a hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle, and many homes here, like ours, go without plumbing because it's expensive to maintain through the extreme winters. So sometimes we shower at Laundromats.

Jafar walked in, his face dusty except where it was sweating. It was Saturday and he'd been helping a friend with some tree work. He asked for a shower and the woman behind the counter, her face made older by the flickering, fluorescent lights, looked up, fumbled some change, and said okay. But then the man behind her—a tall, younger man—turned from something more important he'd been doing, looked at Jafar, and said the showers were all broken.

Jafar left, and called me from the parking lot.

"Fucking racists," he hissed into the phone.

"Okay. Calm down," I said. "I'm coming." I'd dropped him off that morning, and was already on my way to pick him up.

When I pulled in, he was in front of a strip-mall casino, kicking the curb with his steel-toed boot. I pulled into the parking space behind him and didn't turn off the car. He came up to my window and made that outdated cranking motion with his fist. I pushed the button to roll the window down.

"Will you go in there?" he asked, his voice like fibers ripping.

"What?" I said.

"Will you go in there and ask for a shower?"

I held my breath. I tried to feel far away. I turned the key in the ignition toward me. The car sighed, shuddered, and rested. If they say their showers are broken, will I feel better or worse? A buzzer under the doormat did a mechanical jingle as I stepped across the threshold. The woman was still at the counter, doing something with her hands—doodling or counting quarters. The counter was an L-shape and the man was on the short arm of it, helping another customer. I looked back through the storefront windows to see if Jafar was watching.

Instead, I caught my own reflection: white-skinned, blue-eyed, petite. The hem of my sundress fluttered above my knees.

"Hi," I said to the woman, who looked up from fiddling her hands. "Do you have showers?"

"Yes," she said, and held her face there like she'd hooked her chin on a high shelf, was waiting for me to go on.

"Are there any available?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Five dollars."

I looked over at the man, waited. He looked past the customer he was helping, and smiled at me.

I turned back to the woman. "Okay, thank you," I said. "I might come back."

Jafar was waiting, expectation stiff in his neck and in his forearms. He was gripping and ungripping his fists, looking down at his boots, then up at me.

I was looking at him, then glancing back over my shoulder for the Laundromat people. Maybe they'd caught on. Maybe they had an explanation. Maybe I'm part of this, I thought, walking the no-man's land between that and him.

"So?" he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"*Fuck*," he said and kicked the curb really hard.

Fuck, I thought, because he was already walking with big, deliberate strides toward the entrance of the Laundromat. I had to jog to catch up to him and even then I took two steps for every one of his.

He whooshed through the double doors and I slipped in behind him. It was all fury and you could see on the face of that woman first a tight confusion, and then a wash of fear.

"Listen," Jafar said. "You can't do that! It's not right! Do you know what that means? Do you know how it makes me feel?"

I'm not sure anyone in the Laundromat was breathing at this point.

The man turned from his customer and got taller, as if

a string on his spine had been pulled from above. You could almost see Jafar's words, all capital letters and bold, as they funneled into the man's ears.

"YOU CAN'T DO THAT!" Jafar shouted. "IT'S DISCRIMINATION!" And then: "I'm a *person*."

Silence. Only the whirl of washing machines.

Then, spin cycle: "You don't understand!" the man yelled, flinging his arms in the air, his wrists loose so that his hands looked like pom-poms. "It's not that! You don't understand!"

And I wanted to say something, ask him to go on. I still wanted them to be right. I wanted there to be some explanation that had nothing to do with Jafar's accent, his skin color, how many times they might have cleaned the shower after he used it. I wanted to doubt. I wanted to stand there, my heart pumping a knot into my throat, and hear them say that the showers had been broken fifteen minutes ago, but were fixed now. And they hadn't told Jafar he could just wait because—

With the man with his arms in the air, leaning across the counter, maybe about to climb over it, Jafar turned and was walking out the door. I looked at the woman, who was watching her hands. An instinct in me almost apologized.

Alien, as in *alienate*: "To cause (a person) to feel isolated or estranged." For example, Jafar in the Laundromat

Or, alien as in *alienable*: "Capable of being transferred to the ownership of another." For example, me, in the Laundromat.

But I don't think it'll ever be a transfer, that I'll ever fully own what it must feel like to be so quickly and wholly misjudged.

Here is another side to the dream. Here is my abiding doubt.

"Why are you defending her?" he demanded after we got home from the café.

"I'm not!" I said. "All I'm saying is that you're making

assumptions too. Maybe it wasn't about you."

"Darling," he said. "I'm tired."

A few months ago, in a public toilet, Jafar was mistaken for a cleaner. "Oh sorry," said the young man, very polite. "I'll come back when you're done."

Less than a month after that, a clerk at a small corner store came out from behind the counter and followed him through all three aisles on a quiet, Sunday morning. When Jafar confronted her about it, she fumbled the words, but said there'd been a robbery.

Recently, he had to correct a co-worker who thought that African men had additional leg muscles, giving them an advantage in lifting, running, and working long days. The co-worker had said this not so nicely but Jafar, I'm told, corrected him with patience.

One reason that I don't like thinking about the future is that it is full of doubt. For example, maybe we'll have those dark-skinned children, eyes like autumn chestnuts. Maybe people will stare when I hold their hands. Maybe they'll be followed through corner stores on Sunday mornings. Maybe they'll understand that from far away, each of us is very, very small.

"It's not okay," I say to Jafar on the ride home from the Laundromat.

"Fuck them," he says. He turns on the radio.

"We should do something," I say, and turn the volume down. "I'm sure I could call someone—"

"No," he says. "Just let it go."

But I don't want to let it go. We can't just walk away. We have to do something.

But he did do something. Jafar did do something. I don't know. Maybe they still think of us. Maybe they feel regret. Maybe the woman lay in bed that night and wondered what had happened to the future she'd always dreamed of. Maybe

the man went home, lifted a skinny-limbed daughter up into his arms and, in a blink that would pass before he could swallow it, knew that his world was too small for her.