

One afternoon, late in the summer before my 7th grade year, I sat on a stool at the breakfast nook and attentively watched her make coffee. Fatima poured the beans into a ziplock and began crushing each one with a serving spoon. She wouldn't touch the machine-brewed coffee that she'd prepared that morning for my father.

Palming the spoon, she worked to a quiet rhythm that pulsed in her ample hips. A smile waited in the corners of her chapped lips. Fatima had been our housekeeper for five years—ever since my mother died—and for the first time, I wondered what it would be like to touch her olive-oil skin.

She sprinkled the fine powder of grounds over a steaming cup of water. I asked her if I could have a cup, too. Her long fingers passed under the faucet and she flicked a cool spray of water into our mugs, causing the grounds to fall to the bottom. After coming around the breakfast nook and taking a seat next to me, Fatima's drowsy green eyes found me—and she cast light across the walls.

"Coffee from the machine is shit," she said.

"Yes, this is much better," I said, although I'd never had coffee before in my life. The flavor reminded me of very dark chocolate. "How did you learn how to make it like this?"

She sipped. "Years of practice."

"Is this how they make it in Jordan?" I asked.

Fatima's husband lived in Jordan with the rest of her family. She'd come to the US for work, and sent most of her paycheck home every month. I knew this because my father told me. She never discussed her other life with me, but today I thought she might be willing to.

"It is how I make it," she said, gulping down the rest, dregs and all.

That evening, my father and Fatima got into a fight and I listened from behind the door. She was screaming at him in a language I didn't understand. A beautiful language, even though she was clearly upset. Drawers slid open and slammed shut.

"I love you. Even more than I loved my wife," my father said.

That made her holler even louder.

"Were you lying when you said you loved me?" he said.

The bedroom door opened with such force that it knocked me in the head.

Tears welled up in my eyes and Fatima took my face in her warm hands. "What were you doing there?" she said, kissing the bump on my forehead. Instantly the pain was removed.

My father appeared in the bedroom doorway with red rings around his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak but Fatima had already snatched her bags and was marching out of the house. We would later learn that she returned to Jordan soon after that night.

After my father left for work the next morning (without making coffee in the machine), I crushed some beans in a ziplock and sprinkled the half-crushed grounds into a mug of steaming water. The consistency was questionable. Aside from the crunchiness, it tasted like bitter dishwater. I was only a kid