

Almost Thirty · *Joseph Geha*

MY FATHER, Rasheed Yakoub, never got used to the snow and the long winters of this country. In the middle of a January or February he would walk home from work at the restaurant and grumble and stamp the snow from his shoes on the back porch. It would be dark outside, though only suppertime. My mother always had his supper waiting, rolled grape leaves, or lamb meat ground with cracked wheat, or raw liver and onions. And in the winter when it snowed, he always told her to keep the food warm while he rested a little. Sitting next to the radio, he would grumble and devote long Arabic curses to the snow of this country, how it never stopped coming, how it stayed when it came, until my mother would tell him to hold his peace, or at least curse in English for the children's sake. My two sisters pulled the wet shoes from his feet and I scratched his head with my fingernails. My father had a large black moustache, but he was an old man and the hair on his head was white all the years I knew him.

On a Sunday in late April, when I was a little boy, wet snow began to fall as my mother got us ready for church. My father, who did not go to church, was still in bed when the rest of us sat down to breakfast. His room was next to the kitchen, and we could hear him get out of bed and pull up the windowshade. My sisters looked across the table at me, their dark eyes laughing. We were waiting for the string of curses to begin, for it was spring now and not the time for snow. There was silence, only the sound of spoons and forks. My father came into the kitchen, unshaven and looking glum. Lila, the youngest, began to giggle and I bit my lip for a long time. But my father said nothing about the snow.

By the time church was over the snow had stopped and the sun came out warm and melting. Leaving dinner to the females, my father and I walked through the slush to Walbridge Park. We looked at the yellow flowers, bowed almost double and dripping under the snow. I was holding his hand. "Do not feel bad, hold your peace," he said in Arabic, although I did not feel bad. "The time has come for spring." Then he spoke in English, something like "God damn it."

Among the family, among my countless aunts and uncles and cousins, it is still said that Rasheed Yakoub loved a good joke more than anything, if it was told well. And he would listen to it again and again, and

laugh each time, if it was told well. He had been a school teacher in the old country, but in America he ran a small restaurant with his brother, Uncle Najeeb. For many years Uncle Najeeb (while he was alive) and his wife and their son George lived upstairs from us in a duplex apartment. During these years when our two families shared the same roof, George and I grew up like brothers.

What I have to tell has to do with my father Rasheed, who hated snow and who loved, above all things, a good joke if it was told well. And more, this is about my cousin George who grew up several years behind me, like a little brother; George, the son of old parents, who was small for whatever age he was, and always a little fat, and a little clumsy too; who, because of this, was called *musq'een* behind his back, which means poor fellow; and who, as he stumbled toward his mid-twenties (and I myself neared, reached, and miraculously passed thirty) suffered from bad dreams and worried about his health, counting the beats of his heart and the breaths he took by the minute; who could not dance, neither the ballroom waltz nor the stamping, snake-dancing *debkee* of our own mother country, Lebanon. Especially this is about dancing and a family picnic in 1969 when George Yakoub threw down an egg salad sandwich and, letting his heart and lungs and feet do what they would, danced.

My father died of cancer in January of 1964, and I remember him best as he was the last time I told him the story of the rabbi and the priest—whitefaced against the hospital's white sheets, his voice loud with laughing, and the nurses rushing in to find out what was the matter. That happened when I was almost thirty.

Alone on a Friday night that same winter, I was only a little nearer to thirty, and thinking about that fact, and about my father's death, and other facts. The room I rented, with its single bed, its armchair and Halicrafter television, was one flight up from my Uncle Habeeb's grocery on Monroe Street. When I returned from the Navy in 1959, I had decided to begin college as a freshman. Uncle Habeeb gave me a part-time job in his store. He rented me the room some time later, a time when, after much fighting, much cursing from my father and tears from my mother, I saw that I had changed and could not live at home anymore.

In those days after my father's funeral, although I still attended classes, I could not read or study. I was doing nothing. It was Friday

night and I had been drinking a little and watching the late movie. I had been thinking about some things I knew were facts and I was smoking too many cigarettes. The movie ran on, a horror story, I think, from the early fifties, a bad one, so I called my cousin George at his home. He was living with his mother then, in 1964, when he was nineteen and I was twenty-six. His father, Uncle Najeeb, had died before George finished grade school. He had a heart attack at work and died in the back room of the restaurant. Like me, George was the son of old parents.

Aunt Shofi'a answered the phone, George's mother. My call had awakened her and her voice was far away with sleep. I told her I was sorry. "It is nothing, Haleem," she said in Arabic, "I was not sleeping." Aunt Shofi'a knew me, so she knew I must have been drinking to call at such an hour. "It is nothing," she said again. George was not home; he had gone, she said, to a play at the university. Then she asked me what time it was. I told her it was near midnight, and she said George should be at the restaurant by now, helping to close up. I thanked her. "Try to go back to sleep," I told her, and she laughed because she hadn't fooled me.

I sat by the phone a while, looking out the window on Monroe Street. Behind me the movie ran on to its end; I heard the sermonette then the National Anthem. Outside, traffic was thinning and Monroe Street was becoming quiet. Soon the street would be so quiet you could hear footsteps. I was almost out of cigarettes, so I turned off the television and walked down the back stairs to my car.

The restaurant still had a fairly good crowd, the weekend pie-and-coffee people who came in after the movies to read newspapers and stay a long time. George was clearing tables, serving coffee. He did not see me at first. I bought cigarettes from the machine and sat in a booth near the kitchen. George was very busy, hurrying up and down the two aisles of the restaurant, limping because he was tired. He had not bothered to change his white shirt from the play, or to take his tie off even. He had tucked a towel in his belt as an apron. You could not see the belt because of his stomach. His cheeks looked very full and the glasses slid down his face from the hurrying and the sweat. *Musq'een*, I thought. We called George this sometimes, but never to his face. It means poor fellow, and though we said it in only the kindest way, we had to say it since he was so clumsy, fat in his belly and rear, since he did not know how to comb his curly hair, and even the barber could do nothing but cut it off again

and again. He was *musq'een*, too, because he was the only one of our family to ever need glasses, and he limped when he was tired. ("Only a *div'da'a*, a frog, would get hurt in grade school football," I told him when he was twelve, and he dislocated his hip in the first scrimmage game.) *Musq'een*, I thought. George saw me, but he did not look too happy.

"Haleem," he said, and poured me coffee. "Stay a little—we'll stop serving in a minute."

I waited, and after a little George poured himself some coffee and sat down with me. His face was very serious, making it look even chubbier. "I did it again," he said. He clicked his tongue, *tch*, and looked down into the coffee cup.

"Did what, Jorgi?"

"*Tch*," he said again. I opened the new package of cigarettes and took one out.

Then he told me what he did. He told me the way a boy tells a priest his sins. After the play that night, which was a musical show, the performers had gone into the audience and asked the people to come up on stage and dance with them. A very pretty girl had asked George.

"She was very pretty," he said, "and she even touched my shoulder when she asked me." He paused, and I lit the cigarette. This was an old story with George.

"You said no?"

"Am I crazy, Haleem?" He was talking in Arabic now. "I looked down at my shoes and I told her no thank you."

He said *tch . . . tch* again and traced the rim of the coffee cup with his finger. I tried to make a joke.

"I'll bet Cary Grant would've got up and danced," I said to him.

"I wanted to, so why didn't I? Am I crazy, Haleem?"

"I'll bet President Johnson would've got up and danced."

He said *tch . . . tch*.

"I'll bet you Jiddo Braheem would've got up and danced."

This made him laugh, for Jiddo Braheem was a very old man and the way he limped and shook when he danced at family picnics made us laugh sometimes, even though he was the grandfather of all of us and we loved him.

George laughed and he said, "Yes, Jiddo Braheem would've got up and danced—but did I get up and dance?"

"I'll bet Uncle Yousef would've got up and danced."

"Yes," George laughed, "Uncle Yousef would've got up and danced—but did I get up and dance?"

"I'll bet Danny the dishwasher would've got up and danced," I said.

This happened in March of 1964, two months after my father died, when George was nineteen and I was twenty-six.

Jiddo Braheem Yakoub, called the Green Devil, was the first of our family to come to America. This was in the twenties when there was money, prohibition, and no jobs. Braheem was well past middle age then, but strong. He found work as a peddler and later drove a produce truck for a Greek named Sophanakoluros. By the autumn of 1929 Braheem had saved enough to send for his wife and children and his sister Saliba who had been to school and could speak English. They unpacked their things, Aunt Saliba told us many times, and every channel on the radio was talking about the stock market. "On the radio," she told us, "the crazy Americans were jumping out the windows," and she laughed at this. "God damn, God damn," she said, and she laughed.

The produce business failed, so Braheem and the Greek Sophanakoluros began driving their truck for a local bootlegging ring that was part of a larger, more serious operation out of Detroit. During this time Braheem made "a heap a' greenbacks" and got out of the business before the "dicks" ever caught on. Americans began calling him the Green Devil. He laughed at this name. "You betcha," he told them, "God damn, you betcha," and he crossed himself with three fingers lest his luck should change.

Braheem opened a restaurant with his money, serving American and Cantonese food because a Chinese cook was all Jiddo Braheem could find. (By 1967, the year he died, the business had expanded into a chain of three restaurants throughout the city, two Chinese and one steaks-and-chops, each operated by a different member of the family.) His cousin Elias arrived from the old country, Uncle E whose looks the old ones say I inherited, and Braheem started him in a grocery on Monroe Street. Uncle E's wife died in 1938 and he did not live long after her. His nephew Habeeb took over the store. In later years Habeeb would be the first of our family to marry an American, and Aunt Saliba would refuse to go to the wedding, saying that Habeeb had become crazy like the Americans.

When the United States entered the Second World War, Braheem sent two of his sons to the army, and in 1946 these two returned

unharméd, with no stories to tell and no medals to speak of, but unharméd, and ready to go to work.

The Mediterranean shipping lanes opened with the war's end, and my family arrived, and George's family. (The whole journey I was sick with typhus. I can remember clearly only one incident—my father holding me up to a porthole to see the dolphins jump. Because of the typhus our ship was delayed at Ellis Island for two weeks.) Others came then too, old Uncle Yousef who had studied for the priesthood and quit, and never married; the family musician Uncle Abd'Allah (like so many of the others, not really my uncle, but a cousin of one sort or another) who was Dominic and Mitri's father; Aunt Yemnah who married a Syrian from Damascus and moved to Cleveland with him. More came, some not related at all, but just the same cousins and uncles and aunts.

Uncle E and his wife died first. Then Jiddo Braheem's wife died of her old age. Aunt Yemnah died in Cleveland some years after that. The Greek Sophanakoluros died in a rest home in Florida without my ever meeting him. George's parents, Aunt Shofi'a and Uncle Najeed, had a baby boy when it was past their time, and the child died without ever seeing light and nearly took his mother with him. Uncle Najeed died when George was still in grade school. Habeeb's first son was killed in the early days of Viet Nam. Then in 1964, when I was almost thirty, my father died.

Throughout the funeral, throughout the mourning and the time of quiet that followed my father's death, George stayed by me and worried over me like a little brother. He brought me cigarettes and coffee, sat up with me in my room till all hours when neither of us had anything to say. I learned later that, *musq'een*, he even carried a capsule of smelling salts in his pocket. He sat next to me at the funeral breakfast, and when he left the table to get more cigarettes for me, Aunt Saliba blessed him behind his back. "*Musq'een*," she said to my mother, "Jorgi and Haleem, they are like brothers." It was the truth, but my mother only nodded over her coffee. Aunt Saliba had said this many times. She said it when George was little and I tried to teach him football, and again she said it when I was out of the Navy and George sat with me at the kitchen table, showing me how to fill out the forms for school. "Haleem and Jorgi, they are like brothers." She said this once at a family picnic in Walbridge Park, years ago, when George was not yet out of grade school and his father was dead only a little while. It was springtime. Uncle

Abd'Allah began picking and strumming the lute while his sons, Dominic and Mitri, beat time to the music on little Arab drums. They were making music for the *debkee*, which begins slow and becomes frantic and stamping. Jiddo Braheem was leading the dance. Slowly, he locked arms with Uncle Yousef, and the snake began there. With his free right hand, slowly at first, Braheem waved and spun the great red handkerchief he always carried. I wanted to join the dance before things got dizzy. "Jorgi!" I called to my cousin because I wanted him to join the dance too. On purpose he did not notice me. He stood by Aunt Saliba at a picnic table where the old ones were puffing on water pipes and playing cards. "Jorgi!" I called him again. He did not look up. Aunt Saliba was playing solitaire and, on purpose, George was watching the hand she had laid out for herself. So I pulled him by the arm. My father came from behind and gave me a slap. "Let your cousin be," he said. George ran back to Aunt Saliba and stood at her shoulder. She put down her cards. She looked up at my father and began to say something very softly. Her throat needed clearing.

"What's that?" my father asked before she had finished. He was watching the dance.

Aunt Saliba cleared her throat. I cleared my own throat to hear her. "Haleem and Jorgi, they are like brothers," she said.

My father did not look at her. He had one end of the black moustache in his mouth and he was watching the *debkee*. "I know, I know," he said to her in Arabic. Then he left us and broke into the *debkee* next to my mother and joined the dance.

"Haleem is like your brother," she said to George. She seemed to think of something. "God damn, God damn," she laughed and she cleared her throat. "Not like the crazy Americans."

George did not answer Aunt Saliba, and I joined the dance where my father opened it up to let me in.

George did not dance at that picnic, as he did not dance with the actress who touched his shoulder more than ten years later. So, "Jiddo Braheem would have got up and danced," I said to him that night in the restaurant, and we laughed.

We got drunk that night. George finished up and we drove to a tavern near the university. It was closing time, but the bartender let us in. I knew him from school. His name was Johnny O'Dwyer and I used to joke with him about being half Irish, half French, half English and half

German—like every American I ever met. Johnny drank with us while the waitresses wiped tabletops and carried empty mugs to the three sinks behind the bar. We drank together, and soon we were talking about crazy things.

"Everybody dreams in black-and-white," I said, when our talk had got around to dreams. "You only remember them in color when you wake up." I heard these things in a class at school.

"Then how do you figure this?" George said to me. "Last month I had this dream. You were driving my Chevy, and I was sitting next to you. We stopped for a red light. It was red. I can still see the color."

I did not know how to figure that, so I shrugged. Johnny did not look too happy with our talk. He was sliding a quarter from hand to hand on the bar.

"Just as you stopped for the light," George said, "the Chevy stalled. And all of a sudden your father was in the back seat. He sort of leaned up between us and he said 'It died on you.' He said it in Arabic."

George waited for me to say something, but I was drunk and I was lighting a cigarette, so I didn't say anything. I was thinking about my father.

"Then I woke up," George said. He looked at Johnny, and Johnny looked down at the bar. He put the quarter in his pocket.

"You Catholic?" he asked my cousin. His voice was serious.

"Yes," George said, "Melkite Rite."

"I'm a Methodist," Johnny said, and he was serious. "I don't have dreams." He took the quarter from his pocket and put it in a jukebox selector near the cash register. The music came on loud, louder because the place was empty. The last waitress signed her time card and Johnny put it in the cash drawer since it was the end of the pay-week. We watched her leave. Johnny stayed by the three sinks washing the empty mugs.

"Haleem," George was drunk now too, "how old were you the first time?"

I said nothing. On purpose he did not look at me.

"When you first got lucky—" he lowered his voice and said the rest in Arabic, "with a woman, I mean."

Musq'een, I did not want to smile at this.

"Sixteen? Eighteen?"

"Twenty-three," I said.

He thought about this. Twenty-three. Was I lying to him? That was only three years ago, and I was still in the Navy.

"Haleem," he said in Arabic, low so that Johnny would not hear, "how does one find a woman?"

I lit another cigarette. It would be wrong to make a joke of this.

"Jorgi," I said in Arabic, "such things will come with time." He waited. We were both drunk, and these were not the right words. But I could not say, The women will not have you because of the way you are, because you are *musq'een*.

"Jorgi," I said in English, "it happened to me the first time when I least expected it, when I wasn't even thinking about it." This was true.

"It bothers me," he said.

"Nothing like that will happen if you try too hard."

"It bothers me, Haleem."

"Then listen," I said, and he leaned in close, "if it's that bad then take twenty dollars and go buy it." I fell into Arabic. "There is no shame in that. Believe me, there is no shame."

George sat back against the bar. "I just might do that," he said, as if I had just told him to swallow a bottle of sleeping pills.

"We are all damn fools," my father used to say. In the middle of one night when I was a child, my father came from my mother's bedroom in his long-john underwear. He looked into the bathroom where I was sitting on the toilet. I'd had the cramps that evening and my mother gave me a laxative before bed. He looked at me a moment, and I looked back at him, helpless. "We are all damn fools," he said and went into his own room next to the kitchen and shut the door. To have a father when you are nearly thirty, this is my wish. I was a damn fool to give George such advice, and he was a damned fool himself to even think about such advice, much less try to take it.

It was no more than a week after I talked with George in the tavern that he tried to buy a woman. With forty-some dollars in his pocket he got in his Chevy and drove to a motel near town that, even today, has a shady reputation. But he did not go in. He sat in the car with his motor running for half the night and, I suppose, scared hell out of the poor ladies inside who must have thought he was the police.

But I did not know about any of this until several years later. I saw only a little of George at the time because I was very busy with the things in front of me, nearing thirty, smoking too much, visiting almost daily with my father in Calvary Cemetery.

It was in April, or late March, when George drove home from that

motel in the middle of the night. And I found out later that it was around this time that he began counting his breaths per minute, worrying about how his heart skipped before he fell asleep. At night he sometimes had dreams in which everything was a jumble and he was sick in his sleep. Once he fainted when he was having Sunday dinner and his mother called me. I drove him to the emergency ward. The doctors put George in a private room, they took tests and examined him for almost a week. When he was released, I came in his Chevy to drive him home. Doctors Bain and Warren, who took care of our family after Doctor Binatti died, gave George some pills to calm him down. They told him to stop listening to his heart's beats, that it would beat even if he didn't want it to. They told him not to worry about his breathing, that his breath would come and go, come and go again. One young doctor, an intern from Argentina who was standing by the door till the others had left, touched George's shoulder and told him that, every now and then, he ought to get himself a woman. George only nodded his head and followed me to the Chevy.

George went on, he went back to work in the restaurant, made up the classes he had missed at school. When he realized he was listening too closely to his heart, he took a pill; and he took another when he found himself counting his breaths per minute.

In May of that year, which was 1964, there was a party for Jiddo Braheem. The old ones got drunk and started singing. Soon they were crying about those who had died. And when one of them told about how Rasheed would laugh at a good joke, if it was told well, I left the room. I went into the kitchen to sit alone, for I was a little drunk too. George was there, and he had heard the weeping for Rasheed. He stood by the sink, fumbling with his bottle of pills.

I did not return to school the September after my father died and George went into the hospital. The university placement service found me a job with a discount firm in Pennsylvania. I emptied out my room above Uncle Habeeb's store and loaded the car. My mother stood on the front porch when I came to say goodbye, and she gave me her blessing as I pulled out of the driveway.

Through an occasional letter and, once in a while, a long distance call, I kept in touch with George and the rest of the family. But I did not return for a visit, not for Christmas, not even for the funeral of Jiddo Braheem the Green Devil, who died that winter in Mercy Hospital. I met an American girl, Sheila, and we were married before spring. My

family did not know until after the ceremony, and so no one came. Sheila and I lived together two years and were divorced just before I reached thirty. The family felt it was bad to marry an American, but they felt divorce was worse. My mother stopped writing, and George, busy with his senior year, wrote less and less often. Alone in the room I rented from a Polish lady, I reached thirty, and passed thirty. And one evening in late spring, on a day an unexpected storm had snowed across Ohio and Pennsylvania, I began drinking alone in my rented room. I toasted George's health and Jiddo Braheem's funny dance and the laughter of my father. I drank too much and almost took too many sleeping pills at once.

My Polish landlady found me. She called the rescue squad and she called my family in Ohio. At the hospital I got a telegram saying that Uncle Yousef, who feared airplanes, was on his way in a Greyhound. The afternoon I was released Uncle Yousef and I got drunk together and, for the last time, I wept for my father who had been dead for over five years. Uncle Yousef wept a little himself. Walking back to the hotel, he told a joke, and I told him the story of the rabbi and the priest. We both laughed because the story is a good one. *Ibn Rasheed*, he called me when he heard me laugh, the son of my father. The next day, while the snow began falling again, we boarded a bus together and came home.

We traveled in the snow and it was snowing when we arrived. George met us at the terminal. He looked a little leaner, his face showed its age more. He kissed me on the neck the way the older men do, and he laughed. There was a dinner waiting at Aunt Saliba's. The whole family was waiting. We packed my things in the trunk of the old Chevy. Uncle Yousef sat up front with George and I got in back. We passed Walbridge Park on the way. The snow was still falling and the yellow crocuses and daffodils of the park were bowed nearly double under the weight of it. "Look at that," Uncle Yousef said, nodding his head toward the flowers and the snow. "God damn it."

With time, less than a year's time after that drive home and the happy, noisy meal at Aunt Saliba's, George fell in love with an American girl, and she with him. This happened when he least expected it. It happened with time. George held his peace and, trying not to think of his heartbeats, the breaths he took, the laughter of our dead ones, he married the girl. With time I married again, another American girl. The family received our wives, but not easily. After all, they were Ameri-

cans. They could not make *ph'tire* or *tabouli*, and they both cringed at the sight of raw liver with onions. My wife tried to make *kibbee* once, but it turned to concrete in your stomach. So, to this day, George and I eat egg salad sandwiches at family picnics. "The *kibbee* is not important," we tell the others, and they shake their heads to see us eat the egg salad. Some of the old ones think George and I are somehow odd, a little funny. Crazy was the way Aunt Saliba put it one day in Walbridge Park. This was in April of 1969, only a short time after my wedding. My Uncle Abd'Allah began playing the lute and his sons beat time on the little Arab drums. Uncle Yusef took out his handkerchief and led the *debkee*, slow, as it should be led at first. Even the little children joined the dance, slow, holding their excitement for when things would become dizzy and stamping. I stood up and took my wife's hand. In front of the picnic table I showed her the basic steps, and she tried to follow them, watching my feet, stumbling, laughing. George and his wife watched us. Then George did a wonderful thing. He threw down his egg salad sandwich and he stood up, and his wife stood up with him. The four of us locked arms. I showed them the steps as best I could. Then, with our arms locked, we broke into the dance and joined it. The snake became a circle, things got dizzy, we were stamping. "Crazy Americans," Aunt Saliba said as we spun past her. "God damn. Crazy people."

What I have told has had to do with fathers and dancing, with death and little brothers. It has come from a time when I walked with wet shoes through the parks of Ohio or Pennsylvania and watched the snow fall down on flowers in the late spring; a time when, nearing thirty and, miraculously passing thirty, I found myself able to curse the late and unexpected snow, to curse it a short curse and then hold my peace. For I knew—learned almost in fear—that the time had come for flowers, that soon, this weekend or the next, people would come back to the parks to picnic, to play, to laugh at jokes and dance—especially dance. The yellow flowers, covered and dripping, would die; but I knew that for now winter was dead. I knew, whether I liked it or not, the time had come for flowers.