

Sarah Cypher

Abu Hani's Middle Eastern Foods and Gifts

Kelly took a bookkeeper/handyman job at his friend's deli. He showed up at Abu Hani's whitewashed corner shop in East Palo Alto three mornings a week. While Abu Hani prepped the food for the lunch crowd, Kelly squared the receipts and paid the bills. He made sure all the little lights in the deli's sign were working and stocked the anemic rack of trinkets—hamsa talismans, blue-eye pendants. Then, if Abu Hani was still busy, Kelly sat at the register and charmed customers with his radio-announcer voice. The job, to him, was the most dignified way to hide that his energy was draining fast through the sieve of his sixties.

One morning when he was entering receipts in the side office, he heard a customer talking to Abu Hani. Kelly hovered at the door—he couldn't place the accent, though its dense consonants were almost familiar. He poked his head around the corner. Over the top of the deli case, the guy looked like any of the old-country Arab geezers who came in for their weekly breakfast olives: that gull-wing hairline gelled back from the brow, hair so silver-bright it made a blurry reflection in the polished deli case. Abu Hani had stopped working and was leaning his bulk on his two hairy fists planted on the counter.

The man noticed Kelly standing there, and he swept up his parcels and exclaimed to Abu Hani, "But you are busy! I am keeping you from your day." In a last flurry of goodwill, he paid his bill and left.

"New guy?" Kelly asked.

Abu Hani said, "David just moved to the area. He is here from Israel." He drew out the name of the country the way Saeeda said it at home: *Issra-EEEL*.

Kelly filtered through a complicated reaction and finally landed on, "He seemed pretty comfortable."

Abu Hani had lost three homes to an expanding Israel: a house outside of Nazareth, then two apartments in Jerusalem, the second in Sheikh Jarrah. Saeeda had lost land and nearly her brother, too. Even though Kelly had lived in America for 58 of his 63 years, the lopsided matter of the old country sat in him like a fallen hill of dough. His friend's deli was home turf, a private embassy of parsley and olive oil under its official-looking red awning.

Abu Hani said, “He came in last night, too. We sat at my table and talked for three hours.”

“Christ, what a bore.”

“We talked about politics almost for the whole time.”

Kelly laughed. He couldn’t help it. “Okay, the guy’s got some nerve.”

Abu Hani was a head shorter than Kelly, but his big mitt of a hand could cover Kelly’s whole shoulder. It landed there, damp from the sink and smelling of sweat and bloody meat and caustic soap. In that brief, humid interval of contact, he gave his easy laugh and said, “You’re one of the good ones, Khalil.” It was his way of saying thank you, goodbye, nice job, nice to see you. Kelly cherished it, except when his friend said it this moment, as a soft dismissal. As if Abu Hani had ignored or not understood the conversation’s incredulous slant. One of the world’s longest wars had suddenly become someone else’s problem, and he shuffled back to stocking the cooler, saying to himself, “So good, meeting somebody who knows the same places.”

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Abu Hani’s Middle Eastern Foods and Gifts had only five tables. Four of them were wobbly aluminum four-tops lined up along the store’s broad front windows, each decorated with a vase of paper flowers made by Abu Hani’s granddaughter. The fifth dominated the space on the other side of the door, between the coolers and the cash register. It was a round wooden dinner table that comfortably seated six, and it was old enough for its grains to have collected equal amounts of varnish and grime. This was the owner’s family table, the one Abu Hani’s family used throughout the day, and where they often pieced through the newspaper. An understanding hovered over its chairs. Regular customers never sat there. They carried their food out or ate it on the sidewalk under the awning.

From his wooden throne, Abu Hani also met with new arrivals. He was the South Bay’s unofficial employment agency for would-be taxi drivers, nannies, laborers, and Arabic-speaking line cooks. He was also their check-cashing service, because when you couldn’t get a bank account of your own, you had people direct your pay to Abu Hani. Kelly’s under-the-table job was to take those checks to the bank, cash them through his employer’s business account, sort the cash into envelopes interest-free, and distribute it to its rightful owners. At first, the task stung his dignity—he’d spent thirty sterling years as a CPA—but his mother had been a widow who’d raised a set of boys who needed school supplies and haircuts and meat and clothes that, one way or another, had usually ended up

being free. He remembered now how the world was full of partial generousities, the nickel-and-penny shares that had to be scraped together and credited against the endless column of Bay Area debts.

In a few weeks, he limbered to the work: tracking names and needs, pestering Saeeda to clip diaper coupons, passing job leads to Abu Hani. At the turn of the year he started a second set of books, and a new stack of papers appeared: fake invoices, drawn up from the names and addresses on the workers' checks and made out for chickens, bulk almonds, catering. If the IRS or INS ever asked, it would look like Abu Hani's Middle Eastern Foods and Gifts was a feeding ground for scores of Palo Alto employers. Kelly's job was simply to protect his friend from the bureaucratic flocks that would otherwise, eventually, try to pick him clean.

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Abu Hani was in a good mood. Every Tuesday now, he sat at his table shouting trivia from the sports page and talking to his new compadre, David. They'd come to some agreements that first night: they weren't going to fix Jerusalem, they cared foremost about their families, and yes, generosity was the pinnacle of virtue. They shared a similar combination of envy and ridicule for Americans and their history. Whenever that first conversation snagged on a silence, one of them would joke, *But here we are in America, where no one knows what we're talking about.* The friendship was thrilling, like speaking to another prisoner through a crack in the wall, forgetting for a moment about the prison, the cell, the jailers.

If you were a customer in the store, you wouldn't think to be wary of David because he was a guest at the family table. There they were, two thick men in clothes a little too formal for the shabby neighborhood, sharing the sports page and movie reviews over a plate of labneh. When they talked, it was in English, but no one ever presumed to bother the two men while they were meeting over a newspaper because half the neighborhood's economy happened under that table. So, no one got too curious about the boss's new friend with the dramatic white hair.

By then, Kelly was a self-appointed manager of his boss's currency, social and real, because it was clear that Abu Hani didn't have a head for either. He learned that this guy, David-from-Israel, had his whole family in the U.S.—wife, middle-school-age sons, and a Jewish-Turkish housekeeper who was the only one who seemed to have the good sense to act a little awkward in a Palestinian deli. David never asked for anything outright, but he monopolized an hour of

the morning with talk of his treks in the nearby state parks. On Tuesdays, he came in as soon as the deli opened and purchased miniscule quantities of nuts and dates. After a few more visits, he brought his family.

In the first of exactly two weekend feasts, Kelly sensed a choreography. David's wife, sons, and housekeeper showed up at 2 P.M., the slack hour between lunch and the late-afternoon rush. They took an eternity to order and then spread the baskets of sandwiches and platters of stuffed grape leaves out over three of the four aluminum tables. Abu Hani waited on them hand and foot even though the deli only had counter service, and he refilled the hummus at no charge. David's family ate so much that Kelly imagined the seams of their coats and trousers groaning and keening like whale song, and still they asked for more. They had the appetite of locusts.

The next Saturday at 2 P.M., David held the door for his well-nourished brood. He wore a powder-blue golf jacket and white shoes. The sons had brought along two soccer-team friends, all in fresh jerseys, and they crowded up to the counter and craned their necks at the hanging blackboard of choices. Abu Hani began heaping a bowl with the Castelvetro olives the family liked—free, Kelly noted, even though they were the shop's most expensive.

"Out on the links today, my friend?" Abu Hani asked.

David smiled, trying to land on the remark's meaning. "My friend, we are all seeing a movie because the boys won their match!"

"*Mabrook! Mazel tov!* But I meant your jacket," Abu Hani said. "It is a good brand of golf clothes."

"Oh!" David laughed and smoothed his hand over the logo, over his heart. "I cannot hit a thing even if it sits still. I walk, though. I could have been a very strong caddy."

"We'll go out sometime. If old ladies can do it, guys like us can knock it out of the park." He smacked Kelly on the chest with the order pad. "You're an athletic guy. Show us how sometime?"

"I've got grandkids. I can think of better ways to burn two hundred bucks." In truth Kelly had tried it once, that time on leave from Travis Air Force Base: he'd gone around the holes making a sunburned, drunken buffoon of himself, then got booted from the course for trying to brawl with a foursome of Japanese businessmen. It was a game for snobs—for rich corporate types from Israel, for the type of man who had secretaries and nannies and wives working like little spiders at the edges of life, spinning out shimmering four-hour stretches of time for him to use at his leisure. To hell with guys like that.

But Abu Hani and David pressed right past Kelly's objection. Between them hummed a layer of careful cheer, an obsequious chumminess that made Kelly

embarrassed for his friend. Meanwhile, the housekeeper stood back from the boys, fiddling with the fringe of her shawl. David's wife was translating the entire menu for her in Hebrew.

And that was when the deli got busy. It was a Sunday service for the Feast of the Holy Ascension, and parishioners from St. Thomas's were staggering from the church after a third hour of readings, knees swollen and stomachs empty, having surrendered their souls to the priest as a final ransom price for their freedom. They were hungry and ill-tempered. The church was a mix of Greeks and immigrant Arabs, and those who didn't already have an elaborate meal waiting at home in a crockpot ended up under Abu Hani's spiffy red awning. They pushed in line behind David's family. A large-boned man who was even taller than Kelly hovered over the boys, glaring at them to make up their minds so the line could advance. Oblivious to the giant's glower, the boys changed their order. David's wife translated their choice to the housekeeper for her consideration. David and Abu Hani debated the merits of two public golf courses, neither of which they'd visited. Kelly cleared his throat, but Abu Hani was holding the order pad as though hypnotized by his goodwill for David's family.

The giant overheard the women murmuring in Hebrew. The full annoyance of his hunger settled over his face. The sprawling group of seven didn't belong here. And they were blocking the rest of the crowd. He swept his gaze over his shoulder, meaning *Are you hearing this?* And the look fell over the room like a drop of ink in water.

David caught the darkness first. His wife and the housekeeper felt it next and stopped talking.

"Gimme that," Kelly said, and made a swipe for Abu Hani's order pad.

Abu Hani rang them up in a hurry. The men of the church were Arabs, too, and even though they were Christians, Abu Hani's reputation among them mattered. He was an immigrant, like them, and he took pride in being dependable. He couldn't be kowtowing to a bunch of Israelis who could damn well afford to pay for their food like everyone else—his customers would think he was foolish, or worse, intimidated because their army had run him out of all his homes. He'd profited in America because he presented himself as strong, and someone who could bend rules—in the right direction. Kelly snapped the order sheets on the rail for the cooks, and then tonged a stack of bread into a basket and set it on the family's tray. Abu Hani could get himself out of his own mess. But the question still buzzed between the deli's softly greasy walls: *Who do these people think they are?*

"Dine in or to go?" Abu Hani asked David.

David jingled the change in his pocket, took in the pressure from the crowd behind him. "We will dine in."

“Excellent,” said Abu Hani. But his eyes roved over the already-filling tables, counting. A trickle of sweat beaded along his ear. The gist of the situation caught on among the customers, and the touchier ladies looked at those tables and opened their mouths in protest: the family, when it retreated from the counter with its swarm of boys and trailing housekeeper, would take the last chairs.

“There is this table, too,” Abu Hani declared, helpless, and swept his arm to the family table. “I could bring one more chair. Be my guest, please.”

To his credit, David said, “We couldn’t take your table. Look, you bring a few of those chairs over. Just one table for all of us. There, by the window with everybody else. We are happy. Let these women sit down.” He nodded over his shoulder to the church ladies with impeccable courtesy.

And so it was settled. Seven people crowded around a four-top, and the extra chairs came from the family table. Abu Hani let the ruffled women settle around that embattled wooden oval. Kelly worked the register, and he turned his charm on the giant.

“Grab what you want to drink,” Kelly said, “on me.”

The man said nothing but selected a can of iced tea. Kelly tossed a dollar from his pocket in the register and smiled again. The man’s face was a basalt scowl. But he lifted the tea in thanks and went outside to drink it in the awning’s triangular peninsula of shade. In ten minutes, the queue had dwindled and all of Abu Hani’s guests were gorging themselves. He patted Kelly’s back, sighing, “You’re one of the good ones, Khalil.”

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Kelly, to be fair, hadn’t had a problem in his entire life with Jews, American or Israeli or otherwise. His electrician father had come to America in the 1950s to escape a changing Lebanon, earned just enough money to bring over his wife and sons, and then died a month after they arrived, on Christmas. His mother had scrubbed bathrooms, cleaned excrement from nursing home walls, emptied most of the garbage cans in the Burrell School District, and had no men but the macho creeps who signed her paychecks. One morning, he lay in his eldest brother’s bunk, sweating and shivering through a flu, and he was embarrassed to realize that the wheedling voice in the front hallway belonged to his mother, to the woman who could summon Jesus from the tomb with a yell and a cast-iron pan, the same woman who now abased herself for an extra shift so she could pay for Kelly’s doctor appointment. It was Kelly’s fault. Her bosses were the worst men in the world, every last one, and he couldn’t do a thing about it. And what options had she had, with her ninth-grade

education? The system always robbed women like her, aged her two years for every birthday.

When his wife Saeeda told him, many years later, that she'd given up a six-hundred-year-old soap factory, a fortune in olive oil contracts, and over two hundred dunams of apple orchards to Israeli settlers who'd shot at her brother, he wanted to explode at someone for her. It possessed him. He grafted her history to his own and was loyal to a single view: *Her side has a stronger claim to the land*. He became, as though he always had been, more Palestinian than even that old fox himself, Yasser Arafat. He was incandescent with offense. He muttered a counterargument to everything he read in the news. Whenever the U.S. or Israeli government repeated the tired justification that *We have no peace partner among the Palestinians*, Kelly muttered at the TV, "Sure you don't, assholes. You shot them all in the Eighties." What a wonder. He let history eat at him like an ulcer, as if it settled a bad debt he'd forgotten all about till now.

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As the weeks went on, he imagined himself alone at the register and choosing to ignore David. Let this preposterous man take his business elsewhere. What did he think he was doing, strutting in here? But Kelly also knew his place in the hierarchy of the deli, and his part-time work with the books meant he had to be unobtrusive. Abu Hani seemed to be working something out for himself, being so generous with an outsider. Kelly tried reconciling the friendship like any other ledger: maybe David and Abu Hani both had something to true up, some ugly memory from their youths. Or they were just sick of the whole thing and wanted to separate themselves from the larger account. Disillusionment, unlike its bitter neighbor cynicism, was a limbo mostly blind to national flags. Or maybe, as it was for Kelly's own mother, America was a place where you erased the bad debts and started over. But whatever was feeding Abu Hani's enthusiasm, the deli's actual ledger was poorer for it. Kelly told himself to be patient, but he held forth in the privacy of his own home, over his breakfast.

"Why do you think he bothers coming back?" Kelly asked Saeeda.

"Who, the Jew again? So?" She was kneeling on a towel in their kitchen, scrubbing dried trails of canola oil and tomato sauce off the cupboard doors.

"He's got to know how it ruffles people's feathers."

She tossed her rag on the floor, refolded it, and started on the oven door. "Who 'people'? You."

Kelly's indignation crumpled a little. "*People*. Other customers. It would be like me showing up at a synagogue in a damn checkered keffiyeh."

“Did I cook those eggs for you to talk over them? Your breath is making them cold.”

“Did you understand what I just said?”

“Abu Hani runs a business. Business needs customers. His food is very good. Like those eggs.” She straightened on her knees, planted her foot, and heaved herself to standing with a great crackle of joints. “Khalas.”

He went back to eating his breakfast. Of course his wife would be practical. Sometimes he admired her deafness to everything else—how she could just shut off the news of home, shut down her feelings. She treated history like last year’s banquet, throwing out the bones, moving on.

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One day, Abu Hani was out with the truck, and Kelly was alone at the counter. He’d finished the books an hour ago and was writing out another order for the Castelvetro olives when the door jingled. David’s housekeeper.

He’d never considered what a strange figure she was. She was needy, knowing so little English. And there was also her ridiculous costume: a plain black dress, bunched with outdated pleats, and a scarf mottled with an abundance of pumpkin-colored flowers. Her one concession to America was a pair of brilliant white Reeboks.

David had told her story to Abu Hani once, over Turkish coffee, shaded in tones of wonder: said her cousin had retrieved her from a slum in Izmir in the 1970s, where she’d already given birth to a brood of children and was raising them alongside her own young siblings, and she’d abandoned them to go live on a kibbutz. There, she’d learned Hebrew, and David’s family had hired her. They depended on her so much to cook and clean and get the boys off to school that when they moved to Silicon Valley, they’d brought her along. Her name was Yildiz. She was good luck, David had whispered. Since Yildiz had come to live with them, he had gotten the promotion that brought them to California. His sons excelled in school and on the soccer team. His wife’s cancer had been cured. And just a month ago, crossing the street, David had found an envelope of fourteen hundred dollars. He’d spun around, but there was no one to give it to, no one who might have dropped it. “I sat in my car for two hours, so help me God,” he’d whispered across the table to Abu Hani. “No one came back for it. It is what we call the ‘Yildiz good luck,’ I am telling you.”

Kelly tried not to judge. Her chapped knuckles and practical shoes were as familiar as his own childhood; but if the story were true, she’d traded her children for her employer’s two sons. You had to be mentally ill, or else a reptile

at heart. His incomprehension stuck in his throat like a bone. He decided he knew for himself what kind of lucky Yildiz must be for David. This woman looked 25, at the oldest, not almost 50, and she had breasts like perfect Marie-Antoinette champagne glasses. And in spite of her strange clothing, something about her was beautiful. She was petite and straight-backed. The top of her head came to his breastbone, and her hips and legs were childlike. She wore her hair in a ponytail, a coarse red brush that blurred the edge of her silhouette in the doorway. He knew her stride as soon as she crossed the threshold. She was so short the deli case blocked his entire view of her, and she had to look up at him through the curve of its glass.

“Can I help you?” he said. Her eyes were strange. Set along the horizon of her high, flat cheekbones, they seemed to burn with the orange-red of a harvest moon.

She said something in Turkish and mimed speaking on a telephone. “From David?” she tried. He remembered Abu Hani had said something about phone orders. When she pointed over his shoulder, he saw that one of the cooks was filling a big paper bag with whole chickens and some phyllo dough straight from the stock freezer.

“Looks like somebody’s making something fancy-fancy tonight,” Kelly said, snatching the order ticket and noticing the numbers. “And boy, god, did he give you a discount.” He checked the numbers, but the affront was right there in Abu Hani’s careful penmanship: four whole chickens, a five-pound bag of shelled pistachios, and six pounds of phyllo, offered at the same wholesale price Kelly had just entered in the deli’s account books. Abu Hani was selling the meat at cost, not even factoring in labor and overhead. He had the business sense of an indulgent grandfather, wanting to earn his customers’ love as though it alone could replace the deli’s substantially dysfunctional dairy case and pay the electric bill. Kelly glanced at Yildiz, who was uncomprehending. Her black pleather wallet yawned open on the counter.

“Are you feeding an army?” Kelly asked. When she still didn’t answer, he adjusted his glasses further down on his nose and punched in the cost of the chicken and pastry dough. His voice was cheerful, as if speaking to a dog. “I suspect this so-called good luck of yours is really just your boss taking advantage of my boss.” He knew the retail prices as well as he knew his own birthday, but added an extra two dollars a pound. “No more handouts. God knows you’ve all stuffed yourselves at his expense this month.” Smiling, he rotated the window around for Yildiz to see. The aqua digits displayed a price that would have been exorbitant even at the upscale organic grocery on the other side of town. “Cash or check?”

Yildiz hauled out a checkbook bearing David's name and filled out a blank check with his wife's signature. As Kelly watched her copy the numbers from the register, careful with the shape of her characters, a giddy laxity stirred low in his belly. It was like lust, except meaner.

"And you, leaving your own brood to latch on to his chuck wagon. Yep, time to pay, you parasite." He said it mildly, as if telling her that the sun would be out by lunchtime.

She tugged the check free with a snap and presented it to him with a funny little Mona Lisa smile. "Thank you very much," she said in a blocky, rehearsed English, the only phrase he'd ever heard her utter. She lifted the bag with both arms, smiled only with those strange, orange eyes of hers, and left the deli. Her white-white shoes crossed the street and she turned the corner in a swish of black skirt.

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After a few days, David's absence became obvious. The days arrived in a string of bluebird afternoons, the sort that coaxed even the most occasional hikers out to the trails, and yet when the door jangled, and Abu Hani picked his head up from his misery of paperwork, the figure at the counter was never David. He tucked the phone under his jowl after his lunch breaks, listening to all its tedious messages, but what he heard there, or didn't hear, made him restless. After a week and a half, Abu Hani grew angry, and then sick with disappointment. He drifted around the deli, finding fault in the cook's work and scrubbing out the coolers and inspecting Kelly's work over his shoulder even though the invoices made an intimidating sheaf across the desk.

Nobody understood. The customers grew worried. The mothers and fathers who brought their checks to the deli felt real fear. Their patron's mood seemed like an ill omen: he kept his flock out of trouble, provided for them, and protected them. If something rattled the great Abu Hani, what might it do to them? Kelly picked up the gist of the trouble from what he overheard at the family table. The chickens had been Abu Hani's volley in a boisterous exchange of gifts, yes, but they'd also been the repayment of a debt. David's friend was a golf instructor, and David had treated them both to a private lesson and a very long lunch in the clubhouse. That's when Abu Hani had insisted on providing some token of thanks. David's bosses were making him host a dinner, and yes, sure, some good halal chickens, sold at cost, would be a blessing. Yet where did the gift-giving end? Would these two men run out of material objects and give away their firstborn sons? Their true names? Would David give Abu Hani his

three homes back, and Abu Hani would thank him by giving David all of Israel?

Kelly wiped a handkerchief over his forehead. Abu Hani's angst made him short-tempered, and in truth, his conscience was nettling him. He never should have spoken to Yildiz that way, even if he was only having a bit of fun. He was 99.9 percent sure she didn't understand a word of what he'd said to her, but that enigmatic smile on the way out, after her *Thank you very much*, frightened him. He was hot despite the air conditioner, and when he stood up, the armpits of his shirt had dark moons of sweat.

Days passed, and his boss had worked himself into a fit of distress. "Were the chickens spoiled?" Abu Hani barked at the kitchen help. "Did one of you asses trim your beards onto the meat?"

One of the boys muttered, "Maybe Ronnie put his ass hairs in there."

"Which one of you said that? Which one?" Abu Hani said. The taunt might as well have come from thin air—the four boys were serious-faced with prep, chopping, spearing meat onto the shawarma spit. Abu Hani's jowls turned a painful shade of persimmon. He threw up his hands and shouted, "Ronnie doesn't even work here anymore!" Deflated, he went back to the family table and snapped open the paper as if to find an answer in the MLB stats.

In the office, Kelly's hands were so cold that when he picked up the pencil he fumbled it into the crack between the metal teacher's desk and his just-reorganized file cabinet. As he bent over to retrieve it, he pressed his cheek against the chilly metal. If he weren't ashamed, he would have told Saeeda about the encounter. But he hadn't said a word about it to anyone. And the more his friend ranted, the more it dawned on him that his jealous fun had been monstrous. He'd called her an insect. He was in charge of thousands of dollars of off-the-books cash, but he'd chosen to rob a woman over some chickens? He sat up, pressed his hands over his eyes the way his mother used to do when she got anxious. He'd have to come clean.

"Hey. Musa," Kelly said, calling his friend by his given name. It was the name Abu Hani used only with his oldest American friends, back in the days before he'd had kids. It was probably the last time Kelly was ever going to use it. "I need to talk to you."

"Can it wait?" The persimmon flash had not gone wholly out of his face, and it looked unhealthy against his starched white collar. "Goddamned Giants. Thirty pitches by the top of the second . . ."

Kelly dragged out a chair at the family table and sat down. He'd sat there a hundred times, but the tabletop seemed higher now, as if his long-limbed body were shrinking down to the size of a child's. Abu Hani scowled into the paper. Kelly had it all lined up what he wanted to say: *I got jealous. I took it out on*

Yildiz. I thought she couldn't understand English and I made a bad joke. She probably took it the wrong way.

"I overcharged David for the groceries," he said.

Abu Hani's head rose and he fixed Kelly with a half-squint, as though Kelly's confession were not quite legible among the rows of numbers on the page. Kelly repeated himself, and the gruffness in his voice sounded weak, as though the words weren't coming from his own throat.

"I made a mistake. Or, I thought you made a mistake. On the ticket. The bill was quite high, but his housekeeper paid it." *I resented how much you gave a rich man for free, just to prove you were good. Even though the whole neighborhood loves you, his opinion mattered more.* Yet it sounded like an excuse, and excuses were for pansies.

"If the guy had a problem with the bill, he should have called." Kelly opened his wallet and dealt forty bucks onto the table. "It was an honest-to-god screw-up, so if he finally comes back, refund him out of this. Say it was my fault. We're even now?"

Abu Hani's gaze settled on the bills but he didn't take them. Kelly heard the question his friend wanted to ask—if Kelly had heard him fretting about David for days, why wait so long to mention the problem with the bill? But the answer sat right next to it, too, in David's silence: David was at fault for stomping off in a huff. He probably thought all Arabs were crooks.

"If he was a real friend, he shoulda called you right away," Kelly added. "The guy's either a jerk or dead."

"Oh my god," Abu Hani said. "You're right. He could be sick!" He pitched the money back to Kelly and stood up.

Two afternoons later, by the time Kelly had returned the twenties to his wallet and gone home to Saeeda and spent too many hours assembling IKEA furniture for their granddaughter's next visit, and shaved again and returned to his next shift at the deli, he had almost forgotten what had really happened. And by then, Abu Hani reported the good news: he had gotten up the nerve to call David's house and ask whether the man was ill. David was not at home. His wife assured him that the food had been delicious and in another streak of the Yildiz good luck, the dinner had earned David a place at the head of a multinational sales team. He'd been working nonstop for weeks. He'd be traveling for a month in Israel and Ireland. He'd mentioned golfing together after it all was over, or maybe a hike, would Abu Hani like that? Abu Hani passed a hand over his brow and said he was relieved, good luck, see them soon.

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A while later, Kelly took a stretch of days off. It was good to be away from the deli—its people and their constant stream of hunger and need were making him feel his age. He'd spent so much energy on protecting Abu Hani from his own generosity. Kelly knew he was just having an episode of old-fartery, but he wondered if he should quit.

Saeeda ordered him out of the house, telling him that the company of children would help. It wouldn't, it never did, but he obeyed and took his granddaughter to the Palace of Fine Arts. Promptly, she evaded him. He wove in and out of the pink stone pillars, calling her name into the fog.

The air dripped with quiet, rolling down from the Presidio, cool and heavy with the smell of eucalyptus, which he'd always thought was like the smell of money. To his left, a sound mingled with the whispering fountain in the pond, a dry rush of wings. His granddaughter stood in the center of a rising curtain of white-and-black fowl, and seated before her was a figure he thought was another young girl. As the last birds lifted off, he saw the white shoes and black pleats and the brushy red ponytail, and then the orange eyes met his over his granddaughter's shoulder. Yildiz's lips moved and the girl turned around—Kelly waved at her, and before he could come any closer, his granddaughter skipped away from the pond with two messy handfuls of seeds.

"Did she talk to you?" Kelly asked.

"No, we communicated in semaphore, using pig Latin." She was already marching to another shore of the pond, where more of the ducks paddled around waiting for food. Kelly glanced back. Yildiz had gotten to her feet, somehow looking even younger than she had five months ago. A thicker swirl of mist had blown in from the bay, but he saw her join two lanky boys who were David's sons, here with their school. Kelly thought about what to do, but he couldn't work out fast enough how to bring it up in front of the boys, and his shoes felt stuck to the path. Buy them lunch? Food wasn't forgiveness. It was the source of the trouble.

As the trio walked away, his granddaughter threw out her arms and opened her hands, and the seeds rained down on the shore. From every direction, birds in variations of black and white and gray materialized from the fog, descending on the feast like a thousand birds of prey. Beaks and feathers and cutting wings made a froth on the water, and from all directions they rushed toward land, stabbing at the ground.

They're just ducks, he had to tell himself. *A bunch of stupid, greedy coots*. He made his feet move, uprooting himself from a moment of incomprehensible fear.

David-from-Israel never returned to the deli. Though Abu Hani did not feel the same pitch of distress, he confessed to Kelly one day over lunch a sense that

something had gone wrong and he'd been unable to understand it soon enough to fix it. He shook his head and pushed back his plate, offering Kelly the rest of his chips.

Even though he was very hungry, Kelly said he had to get back to the books, and he kept his mouth shut.