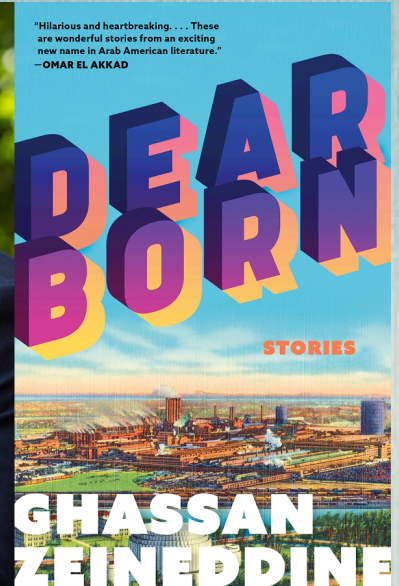


SHORT STORY NIGHT



The Actors of Dearborn Ghassan Zeineddine

Read this short story and join Neenah Public Library staff at Lion's Tail Brewing Monday, January 13th at 7:00 pm for a one-hour discussion featuring trivia, laughs, and other surprises.
21 and older.

The Actors of Dearborn

Before arriving at Uncle Sam's house on the corner of Gould and Coleman Streets, Youssef Bazzi had been canvassing the neighborhoods in East Dearborn, Michigan, for over a month, knocking on doors throughout the day and late into the night, despite the heat or rain. His new job as census taker afforded him flexible hours, and at this point in his life, he preferred to be outdoors. He was thirty-one, and although tall and slim, he had grown a small belly since he had started canvassing in early August. He blamed his extra weight on the neighborhoods.

East Dearborn was predominately Arab, and among the Lebanese population, the Bazzi family was one of the biggest. Youssef was born and raised in the area and knew most of the people on each block, at least by face. Whenever a resident, quite often a fellow Bazzi, saw Youssef standing on their porch with his ID badge dangling from a lanyard around his neck, a census-issued laptop in his hand, and his census-issued briefcase hanging from his shoulder, they quickly invited him inside, sat him down in the living room, and brought him a glass of soda or lemonade mixed

with orange blossom water, followed by a salty snack or perhaps a dessert and a cup of Turkish coffee. If it was around lunchtime or dinner, he was fed, and fed well. If Youssef had refused the food he would have offended his fellow Dearbornites.

After dusk, when the men and women sat on their porches or in their open garages to smoke a hookah, sip tea, and crack pumpkin seeds between their teeth amid the fireflies flickering in the air, Youssef was urged to take a seat and enjoy a puff from the hookah. The wind carried the scent of apple-flavored tobacco. Children ran across the lawns and rode their bicycles down the sidewalk in the streetlight filtering between the trees. Every so often, a car blaring Arabic pop music thundered past. The modest brick houses were built so close to one another that Youssef could simply cross a driveway and step onto the next person's property.

"I thought you were working for Ford," many folks told Youssef.

"I don't need Ford," he said, feeling emboldened. He had previously worked in the communications department at the Ford Motor Company, where he had languished for years in a cubicle until he was laid off in the latest round of cuts.

Youssef's new job was to verify addresses and update residents' information in preparation for the 2020 census, but he often went off script.

"Are you happy in life?" he'd ask. "Have you become what you've always wanted to be?"

"I didn't know the census was so personal," one resident said.

"I'm here to listen," Youssef said.

When Youssef came across his former high school classmates, they all greeted him as "Broadway Joe." Uncle Sam had given him this Americanized nickname back when Youssef was a teenager and dreamed of acting in Broadway plays. Youssef had starred in all the plays staged at Fordson High, sometimes even performing female roles. According to Mr. Emerson, his English teacher and

theater director, his most memorable performance was as Abigail Williams from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

"I don't understand this acting business," Youssef's father had told him after the opening night of *The Crucible*. Youssef's parents had sat in the first row, horrified at seeing their son dressed as a witch. "You're a man, Youssef. A man! Be like your brother."

At the time, Youssef's older brother was the starting full-back on the varsity football team and known as the "Lebanese Express" for his ability to plow through defensive linemen. But Youssef had no interest in sports and had never tried out for any of the teams. The head football coach could hardly believe that Youssef and his brother were related. "Guess there's only one express train in the family," the coach had said. All Youssef cared about was the stage, the spotlight hot on his skin, the wooden floorboards squeaking beneath his feet. The Arab boys in his class and in the neighborhood distanced themselves from him following his performance in *The Crucible*. They thought he was too girly.

Even now, Youssef missed wearing costumes and having the makeup artist highlight his face. But he had a new role, one that came with props and a revolving stage. He kept a makeup kit in his briefcase, and every now and then, before stepping out of his car, he powdered his cheeks and forehead and put on eyeliner.

That early afternoon in mid-September when Youssef arrived at the front door of Uncle Sam's house, leaves were starting to change color and fall. An American flag fluttered from a pole in the front yard. Banners sporting the logos of the Detroit Lions, the Detroit Tigers, the Detroit Red Wings, and the Detroit Pistons hung from the railing of the front porch, and there was even a banner for the Great Lakes Loons, a minor-league baseball team based in Midland, Michigan. After the attacks of 9/11, Uncle Sam had begun decorating his house with patriotic and athletic symbols even though he didn't care

for baseball or football. He only knew that Americans were obsessed with their sports teams. He'd also changed his name from Samir to Sam.

The house was a one-story, and as he stood outside it, Youssef realized that all the window blinds—or at least all the blinds he could see from the porch—were closed. When he knocked on the door, Uncle Sam opened it and stuck his head out while looking side to side. He quickly ushered Youssef in and bolted the door behind him. He wore a gray Detroit Lions sweatshirt and matching gray sweatpants. His curly silver hair sat atop his head like a stormy sea. A short, pudgy man, his eyes were red and swollen. He and Youssef's father had grown up together in Bint Jbeil, a village in southern Lebanon near the Israeli border, where as boys they'd been inseparable, riding around town on the back of a donkey, taking turns with the reins. They'd even immigrated to the US together after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, landing jobs at the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn. After several years of standing on the assembly line and having to yell over the sound of churning machines, Uncle Sam had used all his savings to purchase a gas station on Schaefer Road. His business had prospered, allowing him to buy a house and start a family.

However, when his patriotic fervor blossomed following 9/11 and he began calling his wife, Hanan, "Hannah" and his sons, Abdullah and Nasser, "Abraham" and "Nicholas," and bought them all a Detroit Lions wardrobe; when he suspected that their landline was being tapped and that white men in suits walking in their neighborhood were either FBI or Homeland Security agents; when he nearly lost his mind, chewed his nails until they bled, could hardly sleep anymore, and spent every waking hour terrified that the government would accuse him of supporting terrorist organizations and then revoke his family's American citizenship and send them all back to Lebanon—or worse, to

a black hole—his wife lost her hair from the stress he had put her under and asked for a separation. Uncle Sam ended up moving out and renting the house he now lived in. Since arriving in America close to forty years ago, he had always felt that the government had its eyes on him and his fellow Arabs. Back in the eighties he'd feared being mistaken for a hijacker. And then 9/11 had happened and his anxiety had skyrocketed.

Last night, Youssef had read on the City of Dearborn Facebook page that ICE had paid a visit to Uncle Sam's gas station. Two agents had burst through the door and demanded that Uncle Sam sign a document and hand over all his employees' paperwork. He refused, trembling behind the register. They yelled at him and threatened him with deportation. He didn't budge. He knew his rights. The agents left empty-handed.

Uncle Sam led Youssef into the dimly lit living room. Youssef sat on a couch in front of the fireplace, which had a wide-screen TV hoisted above it. A large family portrait hung from the wall. In the picture, Uncle Sam sat next to his wife with their sons on either side of them. They all wore matching Detroit Pistons jerseys.

Youssef opened his laptop.

"Your father told me about your new job," Uncle Sam said.

"It ends in October."

"Go ahead, ask me the question."

"Which question, Uncle?"

"You know which one, and you already know the answer."

"I'm here to confirm a few details for the census."

"Ask me the question!"

"Are you an American citizen?"

"Yes. And so are my wife and sons. Did you see them on your route?"

"Not yet," Youssef lied.

"If you do, can you tell my wife that I miss her? That I still love her. I hope she's watching her weight; she's got high cholesterol."

Youssef nodded. He had confirmed their information earlier in the week. It had been four years since Uncle Sam had moved out, and Hanan was now working as an office assistant at a local doctor's office. When Youssef had seen her, she'd looked happy, her black hair in a perm. She had been dressed in a tight-fitting yoga outfit when she answered the door. Abdullah and Nasser were both married and had long since moved out of the house.

Uncle Sam pulled out his smartphone and looked at the screen. His eyes widened. "Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim. Look what the president just tweeted." He got up from his chair and flashed the screen at Youssef.

We've got illegal immigrants in our country that have got to go! It's our duty as Americans to deport these rapist animals back to the hellholes they came from!

"Ignore his tweets, Uncle."

"But he's our president, and ICE is going to do what he tells them. They've been terrorizing us for over a year now."

"I heard about their visit to your gas station."

Uncle Sam bit his lower lip. "I think they were after Rocky. His tourist visa expired."

Rocky, Uncle Sam's nephew from Lebanon, had been living with him for the past three years. He worked at the gas station. Youssef had seen him a few times when he filled up his tank.

"Is he here?" Youssef asked.

"He's in his room, talking to his girlfriend from the internet." Uncle Sam shook his head. "I've never done anything illegal before. I was left with no choice."

Rocky, Uncle Sam's sister's youngest son, had arrived in 2016 at the age of seventeen, having flunked out of high school in Bint Jbeil. "Please try to save him, because Allah knows that my husband and I have tried our best and failed," Uncle Sam's sister had told him. At that point, Uncle Sam was living alone in his rented house. He had boxed up all his American flags and sports

banners in the basement, thinking there was no need to show-case his Americanness when he had lost his family. But when he began to cook for Rocky, buy him clothes, and support his daily needs, which included making protein shakes for his weight training, he brought out the boxes and redecorated his house. He changed his nephew's name from Mohammed to Rocky.

"An informant must be working for ICE," Uncle Sam said. "I bet Iyaad Baydoun over at the Shell Station told them about Rocky. He's my fiercest competitor. The fucking rat."

Youssef checked the time on his watch. He still had a few more houses to visit before he could head home.

"I haven't offered you anything to drink or eat," Uncle Sam said. "How rude of me."

Before Youssef could respond, Uncle Sam went to the kitchen and began opening and closing drawers.

"I'm just having a bad day, baby girl," Youssef heard someone say in accented English from down the hallway. It must have been Rocky, who was now twenty. "You know I'm so hard for you. I mean, how to say in English . . ."

Uncle Sam returned with a tray bearing a glass of Pepsi and a bowl of mixed nuts and placed it on the coffee table next to Youssef. He peeked between the blinds before sitting down. He peered intently at Youssef.

"Are you wearing makeup?"

"No," Youssef said, blushing.

"What do you plan to do once your job ends?"

Youssef hadn't thought that far ahead. He had enough savings to last a few months. He still lived at home with his parents and helped them pay the bills. In Dearborn, a single Arab man or woman left home only when they married. That's what Youssef's brother, the former Lebanese Express, had done. The one time that Youssef had attempted to live alone—when, after graduating from university, he took a Greyhound bus out to New York

City to make it as an actor on Broadway—he'd returned from the Big Apple demoralized and with his heart in pieces. It was then that he'd applied for the communications position at Ford.

Youssef sipped his Pepsi, not bothering to respond.

"Have you met anyone?" Uncle Sam asked.

Youssef shook his head. He had gone on dates, including those that his mother had fixed through her matchmaking network, but nothing had materialized.

"You're stuck in the clouds—storm clouds," one date had told him, "and I'm not about to pull you down."

Since returning from New York and spending all those years in a cubicle, Youssef felt like he was living someone else's life, one that had been programmed for him. At least now, as a census taker, he experienced more spontaneity.

"Rocky's girlfriend lives out in LA," Uncle Sam said. "He hasn't even met her in person, but he says they're in love. I could never meet someone online. Not that I'd ever want to. Maybe my wife will come back to me. I know my sons won't; they hate me." He checked his phone and covered his mouth. "Look," he said, showing Youssef the president's most recent tweet.

The child-eating illegals are robbing our homes and spreading drugs and diseases into our American neighborhoods! The other day I saw one drinking the blood of bats! Report them!

Uncle Sam pulled at his hair. There was a knock at the door.

"Rocky, they're here!" Uncle Sam said.

Rocky sprung out of his room. "The pizza?"

The knocking turned to pounding.

"ICE!"

Rocky ran down the stairs to the basement.

Youssef stood up, his heart in his throat. He felt like a criminal, the same feeling he had experienced as an eighth grader in the fall of 2001, when he had gone on a school field trip to a farming town two hours north of Dearborn, and at a rest stop,

a middle-aged white man with a crew cut had walked up to him, pointed at him, and said, "You're going to pay for what you did." The man started yelling at Youssef, his spittle landing on Youssef's face. "I was born here," Youssef wanted to say, but didn't dare speak. After this incident, Youssef no longer considered himself white, even though the census classified those of Middle Eastern descent as such.

Uncle Sam tiptoed to the door and looked through the peephole. "Praise be to Allah," he cried. He opened the door and paid a pizza deliveryman. Rocky had ordered three large pizzas.

YOUSSEF JOINED UNCLE SAM and Rocky at the dining room table. He took a slice of pizza. After the false scare, both uncle and nephew were too anxious to eat. Uncle Sam, Youssef learned, had barred Rocky from leaving the house after ICE had visited the gas station.

"I'm under house arrest, bro," Rocky told Youssef.

He had arrived in Dearborn as a scrawny teen. But Uncle Sam put him on a diet of Rambo and Rocky films. Together, the two of them would stay up into the early hours watching either Sylvester Stallone machine-gunning down enemies or knocking out boxers in a ring. Rocky (then Mohammed) began lifting weights at the local gym. He rewatched the Rambo and Rocky films, memorizing lines, improving his English. A year later, he had a major growth spurt. He now stood well over six feet tall, his muscles bulging in his Detroit Tigers sweatshirt. His neck had widened into a block. When he spoke English, he tried to sound like Stallone. "How you doin'?" he greeted people on the streets.

"ICE is out there," Uncle Sam said. "Do you want to be sent back to Bint Jbeil?"

"Send me to Hollywood."

Youssef looked up from his plate.

"Hollywood?" Uncle Sam said. "You want to meet your internet girlfriend?"

"Her name is Lorrie," Rocky said. "And she believes in me. Says I've got the looks and talent to make it as an action hero in Hollywood."

Rocky reached for his phone on the table, swiped his thumb against the screen, and handed it to Youssef. "Check out my YouTube channel," he said.

Youssef cleaned his greasy fingers with a napkin and pressed play. In the video, Rocky stood bare-chested in the backyard. A red bandanna held up his black hair. He wore blue jeans over cowboy boots. His skin was glistening. He pulled out a pack of Marlboros and lit up, squinting in the sunshine. The camera zoomed in on his chest to capture his flexing pectoral muscles.

"I rubbed my body down with olive oil for that shot," Rocky said. "Check out the next video."

Youssef pressed on another clip. In this one, Rocky, still bare-chested, sat on the floor against the door in his room, his head in his hands. He was sobbing, which sounded like cats mating.

"The tears are real," Rocky said. "I thought of how much I miss Mama while I cried. Lorrie says I've got acting range."

"Let me see those videos," Uncle Sam said.

Youssef passed him the phone.

"What do you think?" Rocky asked Youssef. "These are my first films."

"They're not exactly films," Youssef said.

"But they can be. I just need Hollywood to discover me."

Youssef envied Rocky's blissful naïveté. He had been filled with the same unadulterated ambition when he boarded that Greyhound bus headed for New York. On the day he took off, he woke before sunrise, left his parents a note on his bedroom desk explaining that he was pursuing a career on Broadway, and sneaked out the front door, carrying a duffel bag on his shoulder.

He'd known his parents would have held him back if he'd told them his plans in person. They had ceased attending his plays after his performance in *The Crucible*, and had pressured him into studying business at the university. As the bus crossed into Ohio, Youssef was both terrified and thrilled at what he had done, and hours and bus transfers later, when the Manhattan skyline appeared in the distance, he had begun to grasp the magnitude of his decision and felt bile rise to his throat.

"Delete these right now!" Uncle Sam told Rocky. "We can't give ICE any more information about you."

"But how else will a film agent discover me?"

"You idiot! How do you expect to work in Hollywood if you're not legal?"

Rocky snatched his phone from Uncle Sam's hand. "I'm smarter than you think. By the way, I want you to stop calling me Rocky. I've got a new name now. A Hollywood name." He looked at Uncle Sam and then at Youssef. "Moe Mallone."

"You can't act in Hollywood if you're not legal," Uncle Sam persisted.

"I've got a plan for that."

"So you intend to abandon me? As if I haven't done enough for you."

"You're like a father to me. You know that."

Uncle Sam looked at Youssef. "Please knock some sense into my nephew. Tell him about your experience in New York."

Youssef's face darkened. He pushed his pizza to the side.

"What happened in New York, bro?" Rocky asked.

"I was once an actor—a stage actor," Youssef said. In college, he continued, he had performed in the local community theater, since the university didn't have a theater department. The theater had bad plumbing, peeling walls, and a frayed stage curtain. The backstage was infested with rats. But it was there that Youssef had trained as a method actor.

"What the hell is that, bro?" Rocky asked.

"It's when you breathe and live a character every waking hour."

AT THE COMMUNITY THEATER, Youssef said, he realized he wouldn't be happy if he didn't become a professional actor, and so he'd tried his luck on Broadway. He rented a room in a four-bedroom apartment on 156th Street on the West Side. He could stretch his hand out his bedroom window and touch the brick wall of the neighboring apartment building with his fingertips. He shared one bathroom with three roommates, two of whom had their girlfriends over on the weekends. To pay his rent, he waited tables and worked as a part-time concierge at a condo building in Chelsea. He survived on baked beans and potatoes. In the afternoon, he auditioned for plays. It took him months to land a minor role in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which was staged way off Broadway—as in Trenton, New Jersey. Other roles came, sometimes in Manhattan, but never on Broadway. Youssef rarely had a day off and hardly knew a soul. He didn't bother calling home, as his parents had disowned him for abandoning them. New Yorkers were difficult to speak to, charging down the avenues and pushing their way into the subway. Winter seemed colder in New York than it did in Michigan, the icy winds burning his face. When he was feeling depressed, he took the subway to Times Square to converse with an Egyptian hot-dog vendor who parked his cart on Forty-Fourth Street and played cassettes of Umm Kulthum from a portable radio. Youssef missed living among Arabs and seeing store signs in Arabic. He began to understand why so many Dearbornites shied away from leaving their hometown.

In his second year in New York, Youssef told Rocky and Uncle Sam, he was evicted from his room. The restaurant he waited tables at closed down, and after he failed to pay his rent, his roommates replaced him with someone they found on Craigslist.

He spent the next month sleeping in the back room of a mosque on the Lower East Side. The imam took pity on him and said he could stay for the time being, as long as he paid for his lodging in prayers. Although Youssef wasn't religious, he prayed in the early morning with the imam and listened to his sermons on Friday afternoons. When his part-time job as concierge turned full-time, he moved out of the mosque and into the basement room of a dilapidated brownstone in Brooklyn. He continued to audition for roles but was offered very few. He wondered if his talent as an actor, if he really had any, was only good enough for the community theater. On his walks down the streets of Manhattan, the collar of his overcoat turned up, the skyscrapers had taunted him. "This ain't your city," they said, arching over him. The honking of cars and the wails of sirens pulled at his nerves.

Youssef kept waiting for a lucky break, but by the end of this third year in New York, his spirit was broken. He hated the city, and it couldn't care less about him. And so he returned to Dearborn. When his mother answered the door and saw him standing outside with the duffel bag on his shoulder, his face sagging with anguish, she opened her arms. "Welcome home," she said, inhaling his scent.

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YOUSSEF SCRUNCHEd UP HIS napkin. This was the first time he had shared his experience with anyone, though he had left out the part about his failed romantic relationship.

"Learn from Youssef, Rocky," Uncle Sam said. "The world outside of Dearborn is an ugly place. Besides, you can take over my gas station when I retire and you become legal."

"That's not what I want, Uncle."

Uncle and nephew turned silent. Youssef noticed how pale each looked. Uncle Sam reclined in his chair, barely able to keep his eyes open.

"You both should eat," Youssef said.

"I haven't been able to eat since the ICE visit," Uncle Sam said, yawning. He slung back his head and fell asleep.

"Follow me," Rocky whispered to Youssef, standing up from the table. Youssef followed him to his room. The walls were covered with Stallone posters.

"Can you teach me how to become a method actor?" Rocky asked.

"It takes years of practice."

"Give me a smash course."

"You mean a crash course?"

Rocky nodded.

There was no time to give Rocky an acting lesson, Youssef thought. He was already delayed. But he could easily make up for the houses he missed today the following morning, and besides, this census gig was only temporary. No need to take it too seriously. "Let's work on your technique first," he said. "In the videos you showed me, I can tell you're acting. You want to be natural. For example, you don't have to sob to show you're sad."

"Like this?" Rocky asked and frowned.

"You look angry. Like this," Youssef said, and pictured Halley, the woman who'd broken his heart in New York.

"Allah have mercy, you look miserable!"

Youssef removed his lanyard and placed it on Rocky's bed. He pulled out the ends of his shirt from his belt and rolled up his sleeves. "Wait, I need to get something."

He went to the living room and came back with his briefcase. He opened it and took out his makeup kit.

"Should I get the olive oil?" Rocky asked.

Youssef shook his head. "Sit down."

Rocky sat on the bed.

"Look up."

Rocky looked up and Youssef applied the eyeliner. He dabbed powder on Rocky's cheeks and then put makeup on his own face.

"Let's act," he said.

They acted improvised scenes in which Rocky was the hero and Youssef the villain.

"You're too stiff," Youssef said. "Use your body."

They tried another scene. Youssef's heart raced, reminding him of the thrill of being onstage. They acted until Uncle Sam came to the door, apparently awoken from his nap.

"Look," Uncle Sam said, showing them his phone. Youssef and Rocky read the president's tweet. *I just saw a Hispanic-looking man slaughtering a goat in the street! What's with these losers?! Poor goat!*

"America is crazier than I thought," Rocky said.

Just then a woman screamed out on the street. Uncle Sam dashed from the room, followed by Rocky. Youssef found them peeking between the blinds in the living room. He walked up to one of the windows and lowered a blind with his finger. A woman wearing a hijab was screaming in her front yard as an ICE agent led a handcuffed man toward a car parked at the curb. Other ICE agents stood on the sidewalk. They were all dressed in blue windbreakers.

"That's Fatima," Uncle Sam said. "The handcuffed man is her brother."

One of the agents turned in the direction of Uncle Sam's house. He wore aviator shades. His auburn hair was slicked back.

"Run!" Uncle Sam told Rocky.

Rocky fled to the basement, his steps pounding the stairs.

"Allah help us! Allah help us!" Fatima cried continuously.

"May Allah help us all," Uncle Sam said.

Youssef recited verses from the Qur'an that the imam in New York had taught him.

The agent with the shades said something to the rest of the group, who all turned to look at Uncle Sam's. He began to walk

toward the house. Uncle Sam pulled away from the blinds, went around to the front door, and looked through the peephole. Youssef stepped back from the blinds, barely able to breathe. He heard footsteps approaching.

"What's he doing?" Youssef asked Uncle Sam.

"He's staring at my banners," Uncle Sam whispered. "Another man is coming."

"Can you believe this?" Youssef heard one of the agents say to another. "The guy's got a banner for the Great Lakes Loons."

The men chuckled and walked away. Youssef peeked through the blinds again. The agents were getting back into their cars. Fatima stood alone in her front yard. As soon as the agents drove off, neighbors came out of their houses to console her.

YOUSSEF FOLLOWED UNCLE SAM down to the basement. Uncle Sam switched on the light and walked to a big wooden chest with a brass lock, stowed away in the corner.

"You can come out now, Rocky," Uncle Sam said.

Rocky opened the top and climbed out of the chest.

"I've got a plan to leave Dearborn," he said, his face red and sweaty.

"Take it easy. We'll think of—"

"You saw what they did to Fatima's brother! Listen to me, Uncle." He'd take a train out to LA, he said. He and Lorrie had decided to get married. She'd give him American citizenship.

"She knows a good immigration lawyer."

"But she's from the internet," Uncle Sam said.

"There's no other option, Uncle."

"What if ICE agents capture you on the train?"

"Then I'll take a bus."

"They've been boarding buses and checking passengers' IDs."

"Then drive me."

"I can't leave my business. Things don't run well without me."

"I'll buy a cheap secondhand car and drive there myself."

"You don't even have a license. This is all crazy talk!"

"I'll drive you," Youssef said. Uncle Sam and Rocky looked at him. "We can leave in the morning."

"What about your job?" Uncle Sam said.

"I'm only a census taker."

Uncle Sam looked up at Rocky, his lips trembling. "At least eat a slice of pizza before you leave."

IT WAS APPROACHING MIDNIGHT when Youssef and Rocky left Uncle Sam's house. Rocky carried two suitcases over to Youssef's Ford Focus, throwing them into the trunk. Youssef drove to his parents' house off Warren Avenue. His parents were asleep. He led Rocky down to the basement, which his father had converted into another living room with synthetic leather couches and a wide-screen TV hanging on the wall.

"We have to leave before my parents wake up," Youssef said.

Rocky nodded. Youssef left him in the basement and went upstairs to his room to pack a suitcase. Once done, he sat down at his desk and wrote a note to his parents.

An emergency came up and I had to drive a friend to LA. Won't be gone for long. Will call you later. Please don't be upset.

Youssef wondered if he had chosen the wrong coast to pursue his dream when he moved to New York. What if he was destined for film? He left the note on his desk and grabbed his suitcase and treaded softly back down the stairs to the basement. Rocky was sitting on the edge of the couch, picking at the cuticle on his thumb.

"I haven't left Dearborn since I arrived here," he said. "This city is a mini Lebanon; it's like a second home for me. LA is going to be different."

Youssef sat down next to him. He had felt the same anxiety when he left Dearborn years ago. "There are plenty of Arabs in LA. You'll make friends."

"I hope Lorrie will like me when she sees me."

"She must love you if you're engaged."

"We're not, bro. I lied to Uncle Sam. But Lorrie wants to see me."

"Have you told her you're headed out to LA?"

Rocky pulled out his phone. "I'm about to."

YOUSSEF GAVE ROCKY HIS privacy and returned upstairs. He made a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table. He wished that things had worked out between him and Halley. They had met during Youssef's third year in New York. Halley was the prompter for an adaptation of *The House of Mirth*, in which Youssef played the role of Jack Stepney. She'd sit at a small table behind the curtains at stage left, the script open before her. She had long chestnut hair and wore black-framed glasses. One night after rehearsal, she had invited Youssef out for cheesecake at Saul's, the nearby diner. Over cake and coffee, Youssef told her stories about Dearborn, mentioning how the city was considered the capital of Arab America.

"I'd like to visit one day," she said.

"Please do."

Saul's soon became their favorite haunt. After they stepped out the front door one night and faced each other on the sidewalk in the soft glow of the lamplight, Youssef bent down and kissed her, tasting strawberry on her breath. Halley invited him over to her studio, where she taught him how to make love. They spent most nights together after that, and in the mornings, Youssef bought them coffee and bagels from the neighborhood deli. On their days off they visited the cafés and bakeries in Greenwich

Village and took the subway uptown to Columbus Circle and sat on a bench in Central Park to feed the pigeons.

In falling in love with her, he fell in love with New York. He now walked the avenues as if they had been paved for him. "Hey there, big guy!" the skyscrapers greeted him. He'd soon be the lead actor of a Broadway play, he just knew it, and he and Halley would marry and have children and raise them in this very city.

After five months of dating, he proposed to Halley.

"You haven't even met my parents," she said.

That night on stage, Youssef forgot his lines for the very first time. When Halley whispered the words, he looked to his left, searching for her in the shadows.

"I love you," he said.

"That's not the line," Halley said.

After the show, the director berated Youssef and threatened to replace him. He didn't care. All he wanted was Halley. She said she was feeling tired and wasn't in the mood for Saul's. She gave the same response the following night. When the play came to an end, Halley had held Youssef's hand, squeezed it, and told him goodbye. A month later, he left the city for good.

Youssef returned to the basement to check on Rocky.

"Lorrie said that I can stay with her until I find my own place!" Rocky said. "I haven't told her about my legal status—I don't want to scare her off—but I think she really loves me."

"I'm so happy for you," Youssef said with an aching heart.

AT DAWN, YOUSSEF AND Rocky got into the Ford Focus.

"Let's eat some manakeesh before we leave," Rocky said.

Youssef drove to Rocky's favorite bakery in Dearborn. They ordered thyme pies and mint tea and sat down at a window table to eat their breakfast. The smell of baked bread hung in the air. On the suspended TV, an imam recited prayers in Arabic.

"At least it's warmer in LA," Rocky said.

"I hear Venice Beach is beautiful," Youssef said. He had packed enough clothes for a week. If he liked it out West, maybe he'd stay longer, try an audition or two. If Rami Malek, a fellow Arab American, could win an Academy Award for Best Actor, why couldn't he? Maybe he'd even meet someone in LA.

"I've never been on a road trip," Rocky said. "Can we visit the Grand Canyon?"

"Sure."

Although Youssef hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours, he was wide awake. Two men entered the bakery, dressed in matching blue windbreakers with ICE printed in block letters on the back. Youssef recognized the man with the auburn hair.

"Let me speak to your manager," the man with the auburn hair told the cashier.

"He at home. Sleeping, sir," the cashier said. Youssef knew him. He was a Syrian refugee named Mehdi. He had a thick black mustache.

The agent flashed his badge. "Let me see your ID."

"How come, sir? I do nothing illegal."

"What do we do?" Rocky whispered to Youssef.

"Act normal and eat your food. We'll make it to LA. I promise you that. You're going to be an action hero."

"I'm Moe Mallone," Rocky said, his voice breaking. Youssef held Rocky's hand.

The ICE agents turned toward them. The man with the auburn hair approached their table, looked at Rocky, and squinted.

"How you doin'?" Rocky said.