

N.I.M.B.Y. (Not in My Backyard)

You are walking across a jigsaw of stucco and concrete nestled between three jagged mountain ranges. You were born in this valley the same year that the foreign armies arrived with their promise of enduring freedom. Your father worked long hours so that you could learn the language of the occupiers and become useful to them. When you were seventeen you were employed as an interpreter, and your father was able to work less. Your parents were proud of you, and that helped quiet the nagging fear of reprisals by those who considered you a traitor. Each night your mother patted your cheeks, sat you down at the table, and fed you lamb and rice. She smiled while watching you eat, as if every bite you took was nourishing her.

You are walking through your city, passing the street where your parents were killed by a teenager with a device strapped to his torso. You were working when you heard the explosion and the sirens that quickly followed, and you pictured your mother at home, sitting at the kitchen table, spilling her tea from the shock of the blast. You knew she would be worried about you and so you texted her, telling her that you were safe. When she didn't reply, you started translating your anxious thoughts into your new language because you couldn't stand to hear them in your own. That evening you fashioned shrouds from floral bedsheets and buried your parents in the hard ground.

You are walking out of your city, past the market square. The sugarcane juice extractor rattles in seamless chorus with the distant gun fire. For a moment you wonder if you will miss the sounds of war. You feel in your pocket for the papers that your supervisor gave you before he left. Show these to the soldiers at the airport, he'd said, but the soldiers left so quickly and then there was nobody to show them to, and no more flights out.

You are stopped at the border with hundreds of other people. Hands wave papers in the air and shouted pleas ricochet around your head. You jostle until you reach a guard, and you push money into his hand. He counts it and nods. You cross the border for the first time in your life. You tell a man in a parked car that you need to get to the airport. He squints. He can tell where you are from. He asks for too much, knowing that if you have it, you will pay. You do have it, just. You pay. He smokes cigarettes the entire way and never offers you one.

It is past midnight, and you are crouching on asphalt, breathing hot dust and kerosene fumes. You are waiting to board. You mentally rehearse your moves as you watch a pilot examine the aircraft, spilling pools of torchlight onto its alloy skin. He pauses and returns to the wheel well, as if guided by an unseen informant. Satisfied, he leaves. This is your only chance. You tell your legs to move, imagine yourself invisible, and, feeling pulled like a marionette, you find yourself standing on top of an enormous tyre, grasping onto metal, pulling yourself up into the darkness. The back of your thin cotton shirt catches on a bolt and tears in two as you push yourself into a recess and wrap your arms around a thick metal tube. You do not care. Your exhilaration could lift yourself and the plane off the ground.

This is your first time flying, and you are surprised at how fast the plane accelerates down the runway and how the noise of the engine creates a throbbing sensation that permeates your skull. You do not notice the metal that you are holding onto heating up and branding your skin because you are staring in awe at the retreating ground, marvelling at the way that the lights look like stars, and how from a distance everything seems so peaceful. The wheels retract and you are cocooned in a chaos of cables and piping. At twenty-two thousand feet, the heat has dissipated, and you are the coldest you have ever felt. As you sip the thin air, the scream of the engine starts to fade away. You close your eyes.

You are dead, so you do not hear the landing gear door open or hear the piercing screech of sudden wind resistance. The violent rush of air dislodges your frozen body, and you begin your tumbling descent.

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You are lying on a banana lounge in your back yard. It is a perfect summer's day, and you are listening to the patter of the sprinkler baptising the lawn that is your pride and joy. Each languorous inhalation brings with it the olfactory delights of a suburban summer: sunscreen, greenery, tilled soil, laundered sheets drying on the line.

The radio news is wafting through an open window. A solemn voice interrupts your nirvana, reporting strife and throngs of refugees fleeing a faraway land. You indulge for a moment, conjuring amorphous images of veiled women holding wide-eyed children with dirty faces, and swarthy men pushing against barbed wire fences. You picture yourself welcoming them

to your garden, to this magnificent day, and laying out blankets for them to sit on and food for them to eat. You smile at your benevolence before shaking your head like an Etch A Sketch, releasing the suffering phantasms to be dissolved along with the radio waves in the tranquil air. You pull your hat down over your eyes and bathe in the impervious comfort that is your birthright.

You are almost asleep when you are startled by a rush of air and the shock of something slamming into the ground directly beside you. A young man's body lies face down in a narrow crater in your lawn. His torn shirt flaps across his back in the gentle summer breeze. You can't believe this. Your lawn is ruined.