

STORIES of SYDNEY

15 WRITERS
15 STORIES

A SEIZURE
SWEATSHOP
COLLABORATION



Contents

Ceydny	1
Sanaz Fotouhi	
The Primary Years	18
George Toseski	
Swings and Roundabouts	35
Sunil Badami	
Bankstown Hospital Vitriol	60
Samantha Hogg	
The Duke of Beaufort.	66
Nick Marland	
The Curtain Between.	87
Maryam Azam	
Chrysoula	101
Susie Ahmad	
Burying Pablo	114
Stephen Pham	
Fellow Travellers	124
Sophia Barnes	

More Handsome than a Monkey 141

Peter Polites

Let Me Look at Your Face 161

Tamar Chnorhokian

The 25th Paragon of Filial Piety 169

Amanda Yeo

Aqua 189

PM Newton

Five Arrivals 210

Luke Carman

Two Wheels 229

Benny Davis

About the Contributors 241

Editor's Notes. 246

Ceydny

Sanaz Fotouhi

Sydney, he told me his name was Sydney the first time I met him.

‘Thanks for your help, Sydney,’ I said as he unloaded the grocery bags from the trolley into the back of my car.

‘Nice to meet you,’ he said, ‘but you know this . . . not part of my job. My job, only to . . .’ he made a gesture to remember a word, ‘how you say, pull, push, trolley only. This . . . not my job.’

‘Well . . . thank you,’ I said again. Was he expecting a tip? I riffled in my bag for a five dollar note. Was five dollars enough? Would I offend him? Just as I was shuffling, he continued, ‘But you nice lady. I like help you.’ I pulled out my hand from my bag.

‘Thank you.’ He waved goodbye as he put the last of the bags in the back of the car, and began to push the lopsided trolley across the dark, uneven parking lot.

As I watched him leave, I was surprised at his kindness. I wondered where he was from with his olive skin, his large brown eyes and his hair tied back in a ponytail.

He could have easily been Iranian. But there were no Iranians around this area, especially not in jobs like this. Sydney was young, no more than twenty-five, but his hair was streaked with grey highlights as if he had aged too soon. Since he only spoke a few English words, it was hard to pick up on an identifiable accent. At any rate, no one had ever helped me in this way, in what I considered to be the worst Woolworths in all of Sydney: the Campsie Woolworths.

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I often thought about it when I wanted to avoid it. Why didn't they renovate the carpark? Why did they fine you if you didn't display the stupid free ticket? Why did they have to hide the condoms behind the counter, so that every time you wanted one, you had to deal with the blushing sixteen-year-old?

After nearly four years of having the Campsie Woolworths as my closest supermarket, I had come to the conclusion that it, like Campsie itself, was a forgotten entity. Somewhere between Canterbury – the wannabe trendy Inner West suburb that came after Dulwich Hill but didn't quite make it – and where the real West began in Lakemba, Campsie was a mishmash of shops and people, of those who couldn't really make it either way, and were stuck and forgotten.

Kind of like us. I hated living near Campsie. We were the only Iranians in the area. When we told anyone we lived there, they looked at us, like, why? Why are you not in Auburn or Hornsby? What are you doing here,

among this mix of people who have nothing to do with you? I had no response to that. As with those who had come here with the hope of transiting, we had stuck because we had settled in. We hadn't made it East enough, West enough or North enough for that matter, and, for now, this was the closest shopping centre.

I tried to avoid the Campsie Woolworths, not only for the embarrassment of telling some kid behind the counter what kind of condom I wanted, and not because of the horrid and limited selection of what we in Australia call 'health foods', but also because it had the worst parking possible for a supermarket. The undercover car-park had an uneven ramp and floor, broken and dented fences, was dark and dank and always smelling like someone had just peed next to your car while you were busy smelling strawberries upstairs.

That day, however, I didn't have the time to drive to Leichhardt or Roselands. There would be fifteen people for dinner at my house in five hours, to celebrate my book contract, and it was already two in the afternoon.

As I was attempting to ease my cartful of bags down the slippery slope of the ramp, Sydney had to come to my rescue.

I can just imagine myself as Sydney had seen me first. A petite woman, hair half-undone, in an oversized jumper. Thongs too big to keep her steady and a trolley almost falling over with bags rushing down the ramp without any control. He just managed to catch the trolley before it crashed into the fence. If he had not been there, I would probably have flipped the trolley on top of myself.

Not only had he almost saved my life, but he also helped me put the bags in the car.

And yet, there I was, after he had left, thinking I hadn't even thanked him properly. He was already gone before I could say anything.

I forgot about Sydney until next time I went to Campsie to borrow books from the library. Although I had wanted to avoid the Woolworths carpark, after driving around the block it seemed like the only convenient place to stop. I ended up borrowing more books than anticipated, and was balancing them on top of each other walking down the parking slope when some Chinese kid suddenly ran from behind. I lost my balance and the books flew off to the piss-covered floor. Now I had to doubly sanitise the covers. The child and his mother passed me as if nothing had happened, and as I glared at them, despite them ignoring me, I huddled to pick up the books when I saw Sydney running across the carpark.

'Hello. It is you. The nice lady. You not park here any more.'

'Why?' I said, as I tried to rebalance the books.

'Because you, this parking, danger together, every time.' And he grinned.

I turned bright red at his comment. His grin almost turned into a laugh as he noticed. 'Don't worry.'

'I am sorry,' I said as I held three books on top of each other.

'Come. I help you.' He walked towards my car carrying six books. 'You, read. Many books?'

'Yes. I am researching,' I said as I opened the door to

the car. As he placed the books inside, I noticed now that he had a name-tag over his fluorescent jacket. His name was spelt 'Ceydny'.

'You know, they spelt your name wrong.'

'What you mean?'

'Your name.'

'Yes, my name Sydney.'

'Yes, I know,' I said, tapping the name-tag on his chest, 'but this spelling is wrong.'

'This,' he frowned as he looked down at the badge to make sure we were talking about the same thing, 'No . . .'

Just then my phone rang and I held up my hand to Sydney to excuse myself. It was my father calling from Tehran. He always called at odd hours. I answered the phone and spoke briefly to him in Persian. When I told him I was in the carpark, he quickly said goodbye. Like all his calls, pragmatic and to the point; just making sure we were well.

When I hung up, I saw Sydney still standing there, smiling, with glistening eyes.

'You are Iranian?' he said in Persian.

'Yes. You too?'

He breathed a sigh of relief. 'What are you doing here? There are not many Iranians in this area. You are the first I have seen.'

'Yes, I know. What are you doing here, then?' I asked.

'I am new.'

'How new?'

'Six weeks.'

'Wow. Really new.'

'Yes. Nice to meet another Iranian. I don't know anyone here yet.'

‘Nice to meet you too.’ I put out my hand and he shook it. ‘By the way I wanted to say they spelt your name wrong on your name badge.’

‘No they didn’t. This is how I like to spell it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because when I was a child . . .’ his phone rang as he began to tell me the story. He excused himself. ‘Yes, boss. Yes . . . Sure. Yes. Okay.’ He turned to me. ‘I have to go. Sorry, my boss is waiting for me upstairs.’

‘What’s your real name, then?’ I was curious.

‘I lost it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I dropped it in the ocean.’

I didn’t get what he meant, and just said, ‘Oh, okay.’

‘Sorry I have to run – the boss will get mad if I am late and I can’t explain myself to him in English,’ and with that he made his way up the ramp. Just as he was about to disappear, he turned around, paused, looked back at me and smiled.

I pondered on what he meant; he lost his name in the water. Was he a poet? Was he telling me riddles?

The next time I was in Campsie was Sunday when I did my big shop for the week. I thought carefully about where else I could park, but I still ended up in the same dingy undercover parking lot.

Shopping there always tired me. Zigzagging through the narrow lanes blocked by boxes that were continuously being unpacked by foreign workers of various backgrounds who couldn’t speak English and would take you to the aisle to show you tomato soup when you asked where the tiramisu mixes were, did my head in.

I always ended up frustrated and with low blood sugar because of the energy exerted in navigating the chaos of the supermarket. I was buying a cup of coffee after the shopping ordeal when I saw Sydney again. He was sitting on a ledge near the back of the carpark, playing with his phone, probably on his break. I ordered an extra cappuccino and headed his way.

‘Hello,’ I interrupted his phone fiddling and offered him the coffee.

‘Oh hello,’ he said surprised. ‘Really? For me? Thank you. I have not yet had any coffee here. Very expensive,’ he said in English.

‘You’re welcome.’ I sat down next to him.

I wondered what it would be like if one of my colleagues from the university passed by. Seeing me next to this relatively handsome man, dressed in a neon jersey with a name-tag that was spelt wrong, and sipping coffee. What would my husband say if he were to pass by? I had not yet told him about my encounter with Sydney.

But then again, no one really knew me in Campsie. My professors, and now colleagues, from UNSW thought this place so far away that they made fun of me for living in the outback. ‘Anything beyond the Anzac Bridge is the outback,’ one of them had told me jokingly. They considered it a day trip and an outing to go out West. So, for now, I could just sit here and chat with Sydney.

‘You are on your break?’

‘Yes. Forty-minute lunch break.’ He sipped his coffee. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Almost fifteen years. Too long.’

‘Yes . . . it is . . .’

I noticed the name-tag again on his shirt. ‘So your name, it is spelt wrong.’

‘No, it is not. That’s how I like to spell it.’

‘Why do you spell it like that?’

He looked at me, then looked beyond me. ‘When I was little, and when we used to watch Skippy on TV . . . do you remember Skippy?’

‘Yes, I do . . . the little kangaroo . . .’

‘I always dreamed of coming to Australia. When I began to learn English in school, in year four or five, I learned that in Australia, too, people speak English. Until then I thought America and England only spoke English. One day, I saw a picture of the Opera House in a magazine, and underneath it in Farsi, it was written Ceydny. I daydreamed of learning English and one day coming to this city. To begin my practice, I spelt out the city name in Farsi, Ceydny. That’s what I wrote. I still have the magazine somewhere in my bedroom in Tehran . . .’

‘But now you know that it is not how it is spelt.’

‘But,’ he continued as if he had not heard me, ‘it was not until I got to this country, that I realised that this is not how it is spelt. It took me twenty years to realise this truth and other truths . . .’

‘You know that now, why do you keep it?’

‘I keep it because it is a reminder of twenty years of misunderstanding and imagination.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When my mother saw my attempt at writing in English in the magazine, she was ecstatic. She didn’t

correct me though. She didn't know any better. Instead, she was happy that I had begun practising English. She encouraged me. Then I told her one day I want to go there, and then she said, who knows maybe I would. I have seen Sydney on TV, she told me, it looks amazing. Maybe one day we will all go there for a visit, she told me. Then, in this dream, I spend all my life savings, nearly lost my life on a boat full of people over water for thirty-five hours, to get here . . . dreaming that when I got here, I would see Sydney. That I would wake up every day and see the Opera House, and go swimming at the beach, and see kangaroos everywhere jumping next to the car.' He paused. 'But when I got here, it was not what I got. After I dropped all my documents in the water, I lost my citizenship to my own country, and didn't get one here. Instead, I ended up in a camp somewhere, and when I got out, here I am. In this place . . .' He waved his arms around. 'In this uniform . . .'

There was a long pause.

'So, I decided to name myself Ceydny because that's how I see this city. It is not the perfect Sydney with the right spelling. It is not the city of my dreams. It is the place where I have to construct myself, and that's how I see it. Sydney with an S with its perfection is not my city. Ceydny, the way I write it, is the city I live in.'

'But this place is no different to other places in Sydney,' I said, not believing my own comment, trying to convince myself more than him.

'No it is not. It may not be for you. On the outside it all looks the same. The same good-quality shops you have here, the same opportunities. You have a choice.'

I had not thought about it like that. To me, I felt like I was thrown in Campsie and stuck there.

He went on, 'I work here because I have no other choice. I work for a man who calls me names if I am five minutes late. I work fifteen hours a day to be able to pay rent and eat two-minute noodles. In Iran, I always thought I had that choice too, like you do now.'

'Why did you leave that then?'

'Because I protested.' He paused again looking beyond me. Suddenly he got up. 'I better get back to work before the boss gets angry at me again. Thanks for the coffee.'

I sat there, wondering if I had offended him. Had I not been supportive? Had I not responded well? I got up and headed towards the carpark. I wondered why we were still living in this area if we had a choice. Did we have a choice, or had we justified the lack of options because of the convenience of having comfortably settled in? I still could not say so, but I knew that I had found a friend, my first Iranian friend in Campsie.

That night I told one of my other Iranian friends, who lived in Hornsby, about my encounter with Ceydny. She was aghast. 'What if he robbed you?' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'Would you talk to anyone who is Iranian in Iran? Would you talk to anyone who is Iranian in Hornsby? Seriously, don't be so naïve and befriend just anyone. If I saw you sitting talking to someone like that I would think twice about my friendship with you.'

'I am still not sure I get you,' I told her.

'Let's put it this way. You haven't lived in Iran for so long that you don't understand. These people . . . they

are not of your class. You, your kind, your people, would never talk to them in Iran, in Tehran,' she went on.

I was offended. 'What do you mean my people? I go back to Iran every year. I speak to people on the street. I know my own people and I know someone who needs help. Someone who has been so desperate that they have had to get on a boat to get here.'

'Exactly my point.'

'I am not sure what you mean still . . . Listen, I don't want to talk about this. I thought you would be more understanding.'

'Oh, I am. I am also objective and not a romantic from a privileged background. I had to work hard to get here.'

'So have I. And I am not from a privileged background.' I hated it when people told me this because it was not true. She was really annoying me with her attitude and her lecture so I made an excuse and hung up.

Then I thought about it and I realised that what she said was partially true. It was only because I lived in Campsie, where no one expected anything of me that I had actually chosen to freely speak to Ceydny. If I had lived in Hornsby, Castle Hill or some other suburb where all the other Iranians rubbed their noses in everyone's business and knew everything about everyone around them, I would have thought twice. I would have even thought twice about the way I went out to the supermarket because in those suburbs, even when you just go to Woolworths, you are bound to bump into someone who knows you and you are bound to hear comments like 'Are you feeling okay?' 'Are you homesick?' or 'Are you expecting?' if you looked paler than usual. But

then again, I could only go out looking like this because the Campsie Woolworths deserved it. For a second, I was actually glad I lived in Campsie because here it seemed like I did have a choice.

The next day, I went back to Woolworths at the same time, not to shop but to look for Ceydny. I bought another cup of coffee and went searching for him. I found him on his break. I went up to him and said hello and he extended his hand. I gave him the coffee. He asked me why, I said because I felt like it. He didn't refuse. We sat in silence.

'Please excuse me for yesterday,' he said. 'I don't have good memories.'

'I thought I had offended you in some way.'

'No. Not at all. I am glad to see a familiar face. Tell me, what do you do? And how did you end up here?' he asked, sipping his coffee.

I told him I had been here fifteen years, and that I was a university lecturer in the arts. I skipped that my father was a banker and that I had lived in eight different countries when growing up, that I spoke five languages, and ended up here in Australia when I married the love of my life. Somehow it just seemed appropriate not to get too personal too soon. I also skipped the part about how much I hated Campsie.

He told me he loved the arts too. He grew up in a family where his dad was a high school teacher in Persian literature. He was the eldest of seven children. He was studying to be a computer engineer at the university, but when he protested in a literature class, he was suspended with less than one semester to go towards graduation

with excellent grades. And that was the end of any kind of hope for a career until he was approached to work for the university, to gather information from other students and their activities. When he refused, he and his family were threatened. By then his father was severely ill with a heart problem and he was the sole breadwinner for the family. So, he had to take the job which paid him, he said with great emphasis, nearly one million tomans, the equivalent of \$250 a month. But when he found out that someone he had informed on had been put in prison and tortured to death, he wanted to get out. They didn't let him. His name was put on a list, and he was continually abused. His ailing father and his extended family had to put together all they had to pay the \$10,000 for the people smugglers. And now here he was.

I couldn't believe my ears. I had been to Tehran almost every year for the last ten years. Last year I had bought a pair of boots for the equivalent of \$250 and I thought I had bought a bargain. Every time we had gone out to eat with my own family, the five of us, we easily paid the equivalent of \$100 but we lived in Shahrak-e Gharb which was not in the high end of the city.

When Ceydny's break was over, and after his boss had a go at him for being late, I left, pondering my own situation. During my years outside of Iran, I had met many different kinds of people but I had never really engaged in this kind of deep conversation about the raw realities of life there. Tehran had always been romanticised for me, the same way that perhaps, Sydney had been romanticised for Ceydny.

The next time I went to Campsie, it was the morning after a party with close friends in our house where I had tried to convince everyone without success about the benefits of buying organic. I could not convince anyone that it was okay to pay six dollars for one-and-a-half litres of milk when you could pay three dollars for two litres of other brands, or that organic grass-fed beef really did taste different to grain-fed non-organic meat. They told me it was in my imagination and the argument had ended with the idea that I do these things because I could afford to. If I couldn't, I would not, my friend said to me; because I came from what she believed was a privileged background and even used the Farsi expression, 'my breath comes from a comfortable warm place'. I did not agree, and was again offended. It was a lifestyle choice. No one was convinced and my husband, recognising the situation, changed the topic to avoid a heated argument.

I went to Woolworths to buy garbage bags. After much contemplation, I picked a package that said 'environmentally friendly', 'made from recycled materials' and '100% biodegradable'. I bumped into Ceydny in the noodle section, looking confused. He had already picked out a packet of ten two-minute noodles, a large Homebrand orange juice and a Homebrand white loaf of bread. He was stuck deciding what to buy next. He had not yet really figured out things in the supermarket. Then he told me he had a limited budget. Every month, the Red Cross would give him \$200 worth of vouchers to buy groceries from Woolworths, and they would be divided into \$50 cards that he had to claim

every week. Of the \$50 that week, he had already spent \$25 and it was only Wednesday but he wanted to buy things for the rest of week. I told him the choices he had made were already very good. Maybe some protein, some tuna. So, he picked out some tuna cans and a dozen caged eggs. In total he paid \$24.90, which worked out perfectly. I then paid for some items and my garbage bags, which, to my surprise, cost \$4.50. I realised I had not even looked at the price when Ceydny pointed almost in shock, asking me if I wanted to get them. I bought them anyway but felt uneasy afterwards as we walked out towards the parking lot.

Ceydny's shift was over and he was heading home. He lived in a shared unit with a couple of other guys around the corner. He told me he did not like to go home because his flatmates always called their families with their mobiles and spoke to them. He had not yet contacted his family. His parents and family did not even know if he had made it here.

'Why not?' I asked in complete shock.

'What do I tell them? That I am okay, and you can suffer to pay back my debt? At least let them think I died so that they don't think I am living a grand life here while they are working hard to pay for me.'

'That is not right. Your poor mother and father,' I almost shouted at him, imagining him to be my own sibling and disappearing without telling me if he was alive or dead after nearly two months.

'I can't. I feel so guilty for leaving them the way I did.'

'You had no choice, remember?'

'Yes I did. I could have stayed like everyone else.'

‘Listen,’ I had an idea, ‘if you don’t want to call them, I am going to Iran in three weeks. I can take news that you are okay. Maybe you could make a video or send a few pictures.’

He thought about it, then he told me that he would consider it. Then he asked for my number. After his emotional spillage, I could find no excuse not to give it to him.

‘Let me think about it, I’ll call.’

‘Sure,’ I said. And with that we parted.

Ceydny called me the next day. He didn’t have enough credit on his phone so he asked me to call him back. He spoke for two hours. He told me he had decided that it was a good idea that I go and see his mother. He told me his parents lived in the suburb of Bagher Shahr, in the south of Tehran. I had not heard of Bagher Shahr. He tried to give me directions. The southernmost suburb I had heard of was Javadieh, which was once the poorest suburb in Tehran I knew of.

‘If you know Javadieh, go further south. There used to be nothing there twenty years ago, wasteland which is now turning to factories.’ Then he jokingly asked, ‘Where in Tehran are you from?’

When I said Shahrak-e Gharb, he gave a funny laugh. ‘You are an upper-class girl. Careful not to be kidnapped when you go to visit my mum. Don’t wear your expensive shoes or they might get stolen at the door of the unit!’ I was offended but didn’t express it. He continued, ‘Anyway uptown girl,’ he said teasingly, ‘when you go to Tehran, you can go to my mother, knock on our door and say Ceydny is safe and sound.’

‘But what is your real name?’ I asked.

‘Just make sure you don’t tell her that Sydney is spelt with an S. I don’t want to spoil her dreams,’ and with that he hung up.

Chrysoula

Susie Ahmad

‘I can’t wait. When am I going to see you as a bride?’
Chrysoula asks. I greet her at the reception desk. She points a pork roll at me while she concentrates on my eyebrows. The smell is like the stench of Cook’s River. I’ve only seen Chrysoula, my waxing lady, four times over the last five months. She was recommended by my neighbour, Ali, I mean, Allie.

‘Don’t call me Ali,’ Allie says.

‘What’s the big deal?’ I say. He sighed and his cheeks became all blowfish-y. We were sitting on top of his red-brick fence.

‘I don’t want people to know I’m Lebanese or Muslim.’ He talks faster when he’s annoyed. ‘They automatically think I have sisters who I bash.’ He slowed down and started to breathe normally again.

‘Then call yourself Al. Allie sounds like a girl.’

‘Al! That sounds too Aussie.’ He looked annoyed.

Allie visits Chrysoula once a fortnight to have his legs, arms, chest, back and eyebrows waxed.

'She's the best, man.' He ran his cracked fingers over his legs. 'Doesn't leave a single hair on you.' He grabbed my hand and placed it on his left thigh and he ran it down the rest of his leg. I panicked a bit, anyone that didn't know us would think we were re-enacting a *Bold and Beautiful* scene. I looked to my right. *Neighbours* has Mrs Mangel, we have Em Marwan who pretends to be picking parsley from her front garden but we all know she's peeking through people's windows. He was right though, his legs were smooth. I tried to pull down my skirt, even though it wasn't long enough to cover my legs, it did cover the cellulite on my hairy thighs. I quickly lifted my legs and crossed them on the brick fence instead. I was ashamed; his legs were better kept than mine.

Chrysoula chats to me like she's known me for the last thirty-one years. 'So, when are you getting married, *koukla?*'

'Settle down,' is what I would like to say, but then that's *exactly* what people *want* me to do, because I'm such a wild Lebo who travels to New York and wears vintage clothing and prefers a burrito to a falafel.

Chrysoula puts down her pork roll from Lucky's Chinese Baker. She shows me a little frosted glass tray, on the tray are beaded elastic bracelets in different colours with a sideways cross. 'I'm selling these for church.' She holds one out to me.

'That's, uh, that's nice of you.'

She leads me into her waxing room, holding onto the bracelet. I get onto the wax bed and sit down. It's covered with a lime-green towel.

‘Did you want to buy one, darling?’ She holds it out again.

‘It’s err, pretty, but . . .’

‘You can have a look at the others when you leave.’ She places it in her pocket.

‘So when are you getting married?’ She turns on the wax melting pot.

‘I need to find a man first.’ It rolls off my tongue. Great, now it’s not only my uncle who’s been married four times and has seven kids or my second-cousin’s wife who stopped practising medicine to get married who pull me aside and tell me, ‘You can’t live like this.’

I find it hard to pay attention to what my dropout cousin’s wife says, her eyebrows are thick, but well groomed. I wonder who does them. She lightly double taps my cheek as if I was a four-year-old who took a Lebanese sweet from a visitor’s plate without asking when guests were over.

I have another cousin – I’m Lebanese, I have many – who walks like he’s on *Jersey Shore*, all protruding tiny chest, he once said to me, ‘I’m going to call you Mary, to remind you that you need to get *mary’ed*.’

I felt like saying back to him, ‘I could *mary* my cousin *too*, if I wanted.’ Instead I keep my mouth shut, *jerk*.

‘What’s wrong with men, are they blind?’ Chrysoula yells out. My tinnitus gets louder. Instead of hearing crickets in the distance I now hear screeching cicadas.

Chrysoula’s voice echoes in the salon. She looks over her glasses. I am glad the *habibs* from McDonald’s down the road didn’t hear. I’m glad they’re blind too.

My grandmother used to say in Arabic, ‘What’s wrong

with all these boys, their eyes must be on their bums.’ I used to blush.

‘I don’t know, Teyta.’ I wasn’t interested in getting married back then, the last time she said this I was twenty.

‘I want to see you get married before I die.’ She died in 1997. I found out while I was at work. The words of my Teyta always pop up in my head when I’m asked, ‘When will you marry?’ I now think of men walking around with bum-faces.

I spent my last moment with Teyta sitting on the edge of her bed. There were other family members in the room. My mum was against the wooden closet, her green eyes matched her pale skin. My mother smiled weakly when her eyes met Teyta’s, like they were both reminiscing. My grandmother taught her to smoke at sixteen when she got engaged to my dad. Teyta and my granddad forced her to wear hot pants, only for my other grandmother to burn them when she got home. My Aunty Rayan sat on the floor beside her, holding Teyta’s left hand and kissing it, engraving the scent of her skin into her memory bank, her tears flowing quietly. My younger cousins, Safa, who was thirteen and Wael, twelve, stood in the doorway, their heads bowed. I could hear my dad and my Uncle Assad praying in the other room. Teyta’s hair was white. I remember when it was black with silver threads. Her head lay on a stiff pillow. I wanted to plump up her pillow, but she liked it sturdy, and preferred her water ice cold. She used to always say to my dad, ‘Make sure you bring me iced water when you visit me at the cemetery.’ She looked ninety

years old, but she was only sixty-four. I swallowed the extra large tear-lumps that crept up in my throat, I didn't want her to see me cry. She pointed to the white bowl of cherries on her bed, '*Killi Teyta, eat,*' – which means, 'eat, oh granddaughter, eat.' I loved her hands. They were plagued with arthritis, inelastic and stiff and crooked like twigs. Her hands were always fine, even when they weren't, to roll over a hundred vine leaves stuffed with rice and meat and feed her eight children and thirty-five grandchildren. Even while she was dying she was still trying to make us eat. I don't remember her fingers and joints ever being straight. In my head, I had imagined her fingers playing on a grand piano for hours and hours and when she stopped, her fingers froze perched above the piano keys and they stayed frozen and perched, even when rolling vine leaves. I ate a cherry and stroked her hand. They were soft and warm, I did not want to let go. The small cherry was hard to swallow. I wish I had married for my Teyta. She would've loved my husband if only because his eyes would be on his face.

'Lilly, *yalla*, I want to go le-le-le at your wedding.' Chrysoula is Greek, and, in the five times I've seen her, I've heard about her weekly coffee conversations with her best friend Nawal, who is Lebanese. Chrysoula is the godmother of Nawal's five-year-old daughter. A lime-green picture frame of Chrysoula and her goddaughter sits behind the reception desk, she shows it to me every time I come in. The picture frame is next to her unfinished pork roll. She never speaks of her own children. I don't ask if she has any either.

‘Find me a man,’ I say. If she does, I think I would invite her to my wedding and she can go le-le-le-le all night long with Lionel Richie.

‘Don’t worry, I will. Let me see . . .’ Chrysoula takes her glasses off, and looks out into the tiny window, so do I. It overlooks Canterbury Road. The salon is on top of her husband’s pet food shop. You can see down into Bargain Warehouse. I was told this is the prostitution section of Canterbury Road. I guess if there was a ‘right section’ this would be the perfect area, close to the McDonald’s drive-through, and far enough from Lakemba Mosque. The hookers stand around the corner from Fantastic Furniture. I don’t really expect her to find me a man on Canterbury Road.

‘You know, Muslim women are not allowed to drive,’ she says. I wonder if her last holiday was in Saudi Arabia. She’s still looking out onto the road. I wish she would concentrate on shaping my eyebrows instead. I shrug my shoulders and try not to worry about this conversation. She has no idea.

‘Sit still for me,’ she says quickly. I don’t move, she comes in closer. Her breath smells like pork.

‘Which area do you live in again, *agapi mou?*’ She rubs her fingers over my eyebrows.

‘Belmore.’

‘Ahh yes lots of Greeks there, I should find you a Greek boy.’ I would rather a Greek from Earlwood. Greeks in Earlwood are taller, speak better English, don’t wear G-Star jeans and go to Newtown Church.

She continues while I stand and look out the window. ‘Do you care what nationality he is?’ She’s

looking out the window too now. *Damn it woman!* I think, *Concentrate on my eyebrows.*

Not many men have walked past and no prostitutes, but I do see Dima get out of her black Toyota Corolla.

Chrysoula grabs a fine comb and combs my eyebrows. This actually feels nice, like an eyebrow massage.

Dima works for an accountant in this building. She's wearing her standard uniform, skinny jeans, hot pink, extremely high peep-toe heels – although her big toe is so fat it doesn't peep out. It's the only fat thing on her. She wears a tight long-sleeve top. She has the flattest belly on Canterbury Road but *my* tummy feels like a sponge. You'd think she only eats lettuce sandwiches. She holds a Halal KFC paper bag and wears a hijab. The KFC is a five-minute walk from the far end of McDonald's but Dima refuses to walk anywhere. I know her from TAFE; we did the same course, Information Technology Cert 2. She never left the PowerPoint class without a cigarette in her hand for when we had a break. She would always ask me questions to prove that I was only Muslim by name. 'Do you drink alcohol?' Her eyes would narrow in on mine.

'Errr?' I felt judged, like she was preparing saliva in her mouth, twirling it around, ready to spit it at me. 'Because *real* Muslims don't drink.' Yeah right, they're supposed to wear tight skinny jeans and tight tops instead. She waited for my answer and moved her body in closer, like I was about to whisper a juicy secret. I wish I had *toum*, garlic breath. She smirked and took a puff of her cigarette. 'You're Alawi, aren't you?' I got annoyed and ignored her question. I would have loved to slap her across her full

caked-on face all the way to Afghanistan. No amount of CoverGirl foundation could cover her acne.

'You look great in those Supré tights – complements your hijab,' I said. Wearing the hijab is about modesty. Hair is apparently what makes a woman beautiful and what drives men wild. That in turn leads men to impure thoughts. A woman in a black burqa walked past. I smiled at Dima. 'You plan on wearing that?' She didn't answer my question.

Dima is your typical 'Look at me, I'm a real Muslim because I wear a hijab' girl from Bankstown. 'I'm Sunni, what are you?' she asked me the first time we met. I hate this question. 'I'm a *happy* Muslim,' is how I will answer it from now on. Growing up, I didn't know the difference between Shia, Sunni or Alawite. All I knew was 'don't eat pig meat,' and I never did.

Dima *knew* I was Alawite because of this green piece of string I used to wear around my wrist. It's become a statement piece among the Alawite community of Sydney. The string comes from the Middle East. It's been blessed by religious elders in Syria. It's similar to the Kabbalah red string that celebrities like Madonna wear. I don't wear mine any more. Some Alawites even hang them off their rear-view mirrors but I won't anymore either. I'm worried my car will be vandalised by the Wahhabis.

Many Alawites live in Marrickville. Muslims like Dima think we're '*ghallat*', which means 'wrong'. We don't wear the hijab and we don't have fancy mosques that take up the whole street. Some of us like to drink champagne at weddings and take Johnny Walker for a

belly dance. We may have paintings of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus hanging on our walls. I remember opening up presents that sat under the Christmas tree at home, because it was fun. I think Dima is in training to become one of the seventy-two virgins.

Using her two index fingers Chrysoula smooths my stray eyebrows down. *Agapi mou*, do you care what nationality he is?' she asks. I watch Dima disappear as she enters the building and I look back at Chrysoula.

'Um, no,' I answer her. I sit back on the bed.

I can start to smell the wax in her melting pot that sits against the opposite wall of the window. It smells sweet, and I reckon it would taste like coconut.

'Okay good, good, so long as he's Christian.' She pushes me down on the bed and her F-cup breasts swing like church bells in my face. I quickly close my eyes. 'They won't let you eat bacon too.' I hear her take a big breath, like that would be a deal breaker for her. 'Christian, not Muslim, Lebanese men are not nice.' I open my eyes and think of my *not-so-nice* Dad and brothers and uncles. Her nose and mouth are close to her eyes. She points her finger at me, moving it from side to side. 'These Lebos can marry fifty women if they wanted.' She does the sign of the cross on her chest. 'Even if he has nice muscles,' she says. I start to feel a cool pencil running across my eyebrow, Chrysoula outlines where she needs to wax.

I wonder if she has these kinds of conversations with Allie. I wonder if she tells him to stay away from Muslim women because they can't drive. I wonder when I can close my eyes for real, so she can start waxing and plucking.

‘A lot of Muslims here, Lakemba, Punchbowl, you know?’ Her gold cross sits just above her breast crease. If I were Christian I would wear a little diamond cross necklace, I find them so pretty and dainty.

I would have to agree with Chrysoula’s views on Muslims a little on the basis of location only. *If* I had to fall madly in love with a Muslim man, I would rather a Muslim man from Marrickville and onwards. Muslim men there firstly know how to catch a bus, the 423 all the way into the city. They don’t wear Adidas pants, with one side rolled up, walking like they have their mum’s slipper shoved up their arse – I’m guessing she would’ve thrown it at them when their backs were turned. Muslim men in Marrickville don’t grow their beards long enough to shampoo and condition. I was once talking to this Lebanese girl that I knew through a friend. She was Muslim, but it’s not important what kind of Muslim she was. She grew up in Greenacre. At nineteen she fell in love with a Bankstown drug dealer known as *Skittles* – maybe because he liked the kids of Bankstown to experience the rainbow. Skittles had a brother named *Snowy* – his teeth were very white for a criminal. He promised to show her the world, and to take her to places like Bondi for dinner. She married him and had three kids. ‘The world he showed me was Bankstown,’ she laughed, which made her dimples more pronounced. ‘Don’t ever get married.’ She sounded serious. I wanted to tell her, that the man I marry, I’ll be *showing him* the world. She looked at her oldest son, who was six, and said to me, ‘I can’t wait until he’s old enough to defend me.’

‘You’d make a beautiful bride,’ Chrysoula says. While

I lay down she sweeps my fringe off my face. 'Have your hair pulled back and a sweetheart dress.' Chrysoula spits into the air three times. It's what good Greeks do not to give you the evil eye. I feel some spit land on my forehead, I try to wipe it off, but she's still hovering over me. She has a typical Effie accent from the 90s TV show *Acropolis Now* – but she's minus the mini skirt and the chewing gum. Her hair sits like a brown deflated balloon. I often wonder what she'd look like if her hair were blow-dried. At this point I just want to leave. I'd rather go to the Chinese salons who don't bother making conversation with you. It's almost like they're operating a beauty salon sweatshop; get you in and out. Instead, I stare at her hair. As she starts to glide warm wax just on top of my eyebrow I get excited; we're finally getting somewhere.

'Oh my god, there is this million-dollar house being built in my street,' she says. She places a cotton strip on top of the wax.

'The guy that is building is rich, he's Lebanese, he's in finance.' She rubs her finger over the strip back and forth a few times. 'He'll love you. He loves women with red lips, like you.'

I smile with my eyes closed. I wish I hadn't worn red lipstick and blush.

'He's very handsome too, and don't worry . . .' She grabs the end of the cotton strip and quickly pulls it off.

'Ouch!'

She ignores my reaction and pulls out her mobile phone, which has been sitting invisibly between her boobs. She starts dialling.

'Who you calling?' I yell out. I open one eye.

‘Costa.’ Costa is her husband. They got married ten years ago. Going up the stairs to the salon smells like the food we feed our cat. Sometimes Chrysoula smells like it too, but you get used to it after ten minutes, or when she turns on the melting pot.

She puts her index finger over her mouth to shoosh me.

‘Why?’ I sit up on the bed.

‘To find out if he’s Christian or Muslim, shhhh.’ She still has the phone against her ear.

I feel very awkward at this point. I stare at the sign hanging on the wall. ‘Please have your phones on silent.’

‘Ahh yes, yes, okay, good, good,’ she says to Costa over the phone. She hangs up.

‘Ahh *khalili mou*, he’s not Muslim, his name is George.’ She shakes her deflated balloon-hair head – this time much more sternly to reassure me that he’s not Muslim. The thought of popping that head comes to mind. She laughs.

‘Pigs eat their own shit,’ I want to yell out. I want to make her feel dirty because she loves bacon so much. Or, I should pretend that my phone just vibrated and say, ‘*Salam alaikum*, Mohammed,’ and whisper to her, it’s my brother. Or change my name to Fatima Abdullah Rahman for my next appointment.

—

My cousin Elham flew out to Syria this week to find a fiancée. ‘Lils, come with me, we’ll find a hot husband together.’ When she smiles, her eyes disappear.

‘Err and the bombs?’ I said, my eyes bulging.

'Nah, it looks worse on TV.' She was convinced.

'El, have you been watching the news?'

'Nah. I'm gonna miss *Home and Away* though.' She stopped smiling.

I stopped talking. I realised that I value my internal organs and my head attached to my neck more than her. And this is the same person who thinks she was an accidental Muslim baby and should've been born Christian because she has 'ham' in her name.

The bell on the salon door tinkles.

'Must be my next client,' Chrysoula says excitedly. 'Hassan, he's so beautiful.' I feel the cool tweezers on my eyebrows.

'Hassan?' I say, I open one eye, and notice she's smiling.

'Yes, *khalili mou*, he's my favourite customer.' I feel the constant plucking now. 'He has a little bipolar too.' I open my eyes. She taps my forehead. 'Close your eyes.' She quips. 'He's so funny.' She blows on the finished eyebrow. She works quicker now. I should be happy about that, but I wonder what they talk about. 'All done.' She hands me the mirror as I get up.

'Is, is Hassan Muslim?' I ask, trying to make it sound casual.

'Yes, yes he is, but he's the good kind of Muslim.'

'Good . . . kind of . . . Muslim?' I have one eye looking into the mirror and one eye on her. Without missing a beat she says, 'Yes, yes, he's a bipolar gay.'

First published by Seizure and SWEATSHOP in 2014 by:

Xoum Publishing
PO Box Q324, QVB Post Office,
NSW 1230, Australia

www.seizureonline.com
www.sweatshop.ws
www.xoum.com.au

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ISBN 978-1-921134-26-5 (print)
ISBN 978-1-921134-27-2 (digital)

Cataloguing-in-publication data is available from the
National Library of Australia

Internal design and typesetting © Xoum Publishing 2014
Cover design by David Henley

*Stories of Sydney was made possible through the generous support of
The University of Western Sydney Writing and Society Research Centre*