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Through and Through

TOLEDO STORIES

Second Edition

JOSEPH GEHA



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In loving memory of my teacher,
Gregory Ziegelmaier
(1931–1969)

And in gratitude for the support
of the wonderful women in my life:
Megan, Katie, Gabi,
... and especially, Fern

Monkey Business

MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY! the marriage song begins. Its words, its slow, circular rhythms catch in the back of Zizi's mind as he waits for the streetcar—the bridegroom walks with sureness—and, absently, he begins to twist his wife's wedding ring around the knuckle of his little finger. *Make way*. Across the street the bums are waiting too, standing or leaning motionless beneath the green canvas awnings until the taverns open their doors for the evening. Zizi's eye follows the line of them, dirty feet in dirty shoes, as it stretches all the way to the Yankee Cafe on the corner.

And there, rounding the corner yet once more, comes the man in the sandwich sign, the bum they call Asfoori. He limps as he walks, one side of his face gripped by palsy into a blank and rigid smile. And he is filthy. Even from across the street Zizi can see where the sign (YAKOUB'S YANKEE CAFE AND GRILLE) is stained dark from bobbing up and down against his chin. Asfoori has circled the block a half-dozen times since Zizi began waiting for the streetcar. But this time a little boy is following him. It is Zizi's son, Jameel, limping and half-smiling in perfect imitation.

"You!" Zizi calls out. "Jimmy!"

The boy refuses to turn. He keeps his eyes fixed in a

flat, downward stare like the eyes of the man in the sandwich sign.

"Monkey!" Zizi shouts, but the two ignore him—the man because he is somewhat deaf, the boy because he is pretending to be—and they limp on past the line of bums, on to the opposite corner where they turn and disappear.

Zizi lets them go. What good would one more strapping do? The boy needs a mama; and now, across town this very minute, Zizi's bride-to-be is expecting him, waiting to receive the wedding ring of his dead wife.

Samira died in November, not quite five months ago, and Zizi realizes that his impatience to remarry is causing talk among the *ibn Arab*, whose families run most of the neighborhood's stores and taverns. Some are saying that Zizi's eagerness is nothing more than lust, and therefore improper. But not as improper, others are quick to add, as his choice of a new wife. Braheem Yakoub, Zizi's boss at the Yankee Cafe, has been against it from the first day he met the woman.

"Listen to me, Cousin," he told Zizi that day. "Every man pays for the love in bed—that's life—but the practical man doesn't pay too much."

And yet the love in bed has nothing to do with it. Even after all this time Zizi still does not miss it much. Frankly, it gave him nothing but trouble, especially at the start. It was the old country in the old days, and Zizi a son obedient to his father: the marriage had been arranged. On the wedding night Samira was expected to know nothing, like most brides in the old country. Zizi, for his part, simply thought that there was nothing much to know, presuming a kind of miraculous ease that is taken for granted in the stories boys overhear. But whatever it was was no miracle, and it certainly wasn't easy. Samira cried all that night and the next, and on the third night they didn't even try. Zizi dared not confess his failure; even so he quickly became the sub-

ject of village jokes. At last, a married cousin who was visiting from America—and who didn't think any of this was funny—took Zizi aside and explained everything, answered every question until both their faces were red: the how, the why, the when you do this or that. And he told him, too, to stop calling his penis by the baby name his mother had used and to call it instead his "Oldsmobile." That night Zizi showed his wife. And so much for the love in bed.

The streetcar is late. Zizi glances up at the sky, its single sheet of cloud lowering now with the promise of rain. It has rained every day this week, tonight will be no different. Even the air smells wet, and across the street the bums are huddling beneath the awnings like dirty children afraid of a bath. Zizi looks away from them, up to the top windows of the apartment building two streets beyond. A bedroom, a front room, a tiny kitchen, but when Samira was alive it had been a home. It had been a place where Zizi rediscovered what he'd had once before in his own father's house—the quiet, child-like confidence that here things would always be clean and, no matter what, he would be taken care of. It is this Zizi misses far more than the love in bed. Even now the memory of it remains, centered and epitomized in the one remembered image of a cup of coffee, Samira sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee.

And in his home she used to call him Nazir, his true name. What kind of a nickname is Zizi! A boyish diminutive, yet another reminder that he alone of the *ibn Arab* is not what they call "a practical man," the kind who earns his living in the employ of no other man; who has a home, a wife, children who obey his word; the kind of man who knows how to do things.

"... Watch me and I'll show you how. Watch. Watch," Braheem Yakoub keeps saying as he carves the meat from the bone. "Watch—" and his fingers dance so effortlessly as they mix spices with fat and filler, press-

ing it all into the funnel of the meat grinder. But Zizi cannot do it. Awed beneath the cold eye of a practical man, an impatient man nicknamed the Green Devil for his shrewdness in business, Zizi is always too slow or too clumsy, too easily confused. Usually, Braheem would have to take over the job himself ("Go on, move over"), sending Zizi off to do something simple, to bus dishes or wipe down the lunch counter.

He used to walk home after a day like that, and Samira would be there. She unlaced his shoes for him. She poured the coffee—always there was coffee—then she would sit with him at the kitchen table. Little Jameel was still in diapers when they came to America (in 1945, on the first ship to leave Beirut after the war), and the child used to sit like a puppy on the newspaper that covered the bare floor then, watching the two of them as they talked, his wet mouth working in silent imitation. Sometimes they laughed, and when they did, little Jameel would laugh too. . . .

And it is for Jameel, almost six years old now, that Zizi has decided to put Samira's ring on the finger of a strange woman. So that the boy will have a mama. *Make way*. He swats at the song as if it were a mosquito humming in his ear. The humming fades, then immediately sputters into the electric crackle of the approaching streetcar. As he steps out to wave it down, Zizi once again catches sight of Asfoori, with the half-smile and the sandwich sign, still limping his way around the block. And there, still following behind him, is Jameel.

"Jimmy!" Zizi shouts.

This time the boy looks, and Zizi gives him the warning gesture, thumb against the fingertips: Just you wait. Jameel promptly returns the gesture, then he, too, shouts something, but it is lost as the streetcar door hisses open.

("Monkey business," Braheem Yakoub calls it.

"Monkey see, monkey do—that's all it is. Don't worry, Cousin, he'll catch on.")

But sometimes the boy even acts like a monkey, jumping and scratching at his ribs, making monkey sounds that he calls "Ingleez" even though he can speak English better than any of them, without the slightest accent. No, it's more than simple childishness. Zizi had first noticed it just before Samira died, during those last weeks that she was in the hospital. Every morning and every afternoon he took an hour off work to visit her. Braheem Yakoub could have objected but he didn't. He understood. Even so, like a practical man, he hardly ever mentioned Samira. He talked business instead.

"Cousin, the day will come," he said one morning after Zizi and Jameel had returned from the hospital, "when the customers will order everything from machines, all of it wrapped up in waxed paper. They won't even see the waitress."

Zizi nodded. The doctors had told him not to expect miracles, and there were none. Samira was dying. He slipped the apron over his head and said nothing. Then after a minute Jameel spoke. Someday, he said, he would own a place like this. And when that day came he would sell everything in waxed paper—the burgers, the pie, even the chili. "God willing," Braheem Yakoub said, pleased. But the boy went on. He would marry an *Amerkani* woman, he said, and teach his children to speak only Ingleez, like the other monkeys. The pleasure immediately drained from Braheem's face, and he gave Zizi a quick glance.

Even at the funeral Jameel had acted strange, a boy of five standing tearless in front of his own mother's coffin, while Zizi himself had to be supported on either side by an uncle.

That was November. In February, after the commemoration ceremony, Zizi removed the black arm

band from his jacket, and that very night he spoke with Braheem Yakoub about finding another mama for the boy. Eventually, Braheem consulted Aunt Afie; such things were, after all, really her business. The letters she wrote to the old country were shrewdly worded, never mentioning marriage, and yet their message was clear: a widower in America, a man of good family, has ended his mourning.

*

Cousins talked to cousins, and they agreed on just the girl, the daughter of a man in Aunt Afie's old village overlooking the Syrian hills. In their letter of response they wrote that she was still young, not yet twenty-two. (So what if she was really closer to forty-two? In the mountains there were only church records, so who would know the difference?) The matter was quickly arranged, documents were signed on both sides of the ocean. The cousins, after payment to the father and the taking of their share, sent the old women to find the girl and inform her of the good news. They were told she would be somewhere in the nearby fields, sitting with a rifle, watching over her father's goats.

Uhdrah was staring hard at the brown hills when they came for her. Beyond those hills was Damascus where Holy Boulos was knocked from his horse and blinded by the light of Jesus. She did not hear them at first. She was talking with the saints, listening to their sad, premonitory voices when the old women came singing the marriage song.

Make way! Make way!
The bridegroom is tall,
He walks with sureness. . . .

They told her, laughing and singing, that she was to be married, that she was to be sent to live in America.

No! the voices said. But she found herself smiling in

her surprise. She let go of the voices and laughed to hear the news.

Nazir is his name.
His house is famous. . . .

No! But she said yes to her father and brothers, blushing like a young girl as she said it.

*

After getting off the streetcar, Zizi still has a long walk ahead of him to Aunt Afie's house. There, Uhdrah has been waiting since her arrival in America nearly a month ago, awaiting the ring that should have been hers that first week.

Zizi walks quickly along the darkening pavement, but within several blocks of the house, he stops short. There is a faint smell in the air, like incense. No, it couldn't carry this far, his mind must be playing tricks. He swats the thought away and continues walking. Then, thinking anyway: it's not just the incense, there's the rest of it too. Right at first he'd realized there was something odd about the woman. It wasn't that she was older than he expected her to be, nor that she was as heavy in the hips and breasts as a mother of many children. On the contrary, he found all this somewhat attractive. In a way it was even exciting—a grown woman, a stranger, crossing an ocean for no other man but him. What was odd, he discovered gradually that first week, were her ways and the strange stories she told.

"She's new here," Braheem Yakoub shrugged when Zizi mentioned the holy pictures that Uhdrah had hung in Aunt Afie's house, the rosaries and incense and little figures of Jesus and Mary. "Besides, she comes from the mountains. They're all that way in the mountains."

But Braheem was never around when Uhdrah told her stories about how she had seen and actually spoken with the Virgin, and about how, with the help of Saint

Maron, she had raised a dead goat to life. During those first days Braheem accused Zizi of making something out of nothing. "All right," Zizi said, "then see for yourself."

And Braheem did see. It was at the welcoming dinner in Uhdrah's honor. Salibah the butcher and Toufiq the mortician from Detroit—both of them cousins who would do anything for a joke—asked her about the stories. They kept their faces serious, as if truly interested, but the rest knew what was really going on. All except Uhdrah. She told them the stories, putting down her knife and fork so she could use her hands. She described the Virgin's voice which was like gentle water, and the little goat, so still, then trembling back to life. And she told a new story about how the voices of Holy Mikhail and Holy Raphael had directed her to a little pouch of Turkish gold buried in her father's field. The whole time Zizi's mouth hung open.

Then Toufiq, called Taffy up in Detroit, turned away and winked, and that was the signal. All around the table there were the snorts and chuckles of suppressed laughter. Even Jameel, whose face had been as serious as Taffy's, was snickering so that he had to spit back the milk he held in his mouth.

Uhdrah seemed oblivious to it all. She was looking at the light above the table, whispering to something up there as if in deep conversation. That made Zizi's spine tingle. Braheem Yakoub, too, was not laughing. He threw his fork into his plate then stared at Aunt Afifie. Aunt Afifie ducked her head a little and shrugged. . . .

Afterward, for nearly a month now, Braheem has been saying no, the practical man doesn't pay too much. Aunt Afifie says nothing at all. She doesn't have to because, finally, she is right. Each week Zizi pays Uhdrah a formal visit, each week Aunt Afifie gives him the fish eye, and her meaning is clear: a man like other men

doesn't waste time; a man like other men makes a home for his son.

And so now, like any other man, Zizi climbs the porch steps and presses the doorbell. The porch, the whole neighborhood, smells of incense. He presses the bell again.

"Awl ride! Awl ride!" It is Aunt Afifie's voice. "I yam coming!"

The old woman opens the door, and immediately her glance recedes into that look of bored disdain, the fish eye. Stepping aside, she takes Zizi's jacket and tells him to wait in the front room. Then, to show that there is nothing more to be said between them, she turns her back and goes into the kitchen.

Inside, the incense is stronger than he ever smelled it in church. Atop the mantel Uhdrah has placed a row of holy pictures rimmed in tooled leather frames from the old country: Saint Maron, patron of Lebanon; the Virgin of Fatima and of Lourdes; the Sacred Heart. And there is a new one that Zizi doesn't recognize. It is unframed, ragged on one edge as if taken from a book. A woman, near naked, but a saint—he can tell by the glow around her head—lies smiling on a pallet while gold coins fall toward her lap from a golden cloud.

Vigil candles flicker at each end of the mantel, like an altar. On the coffee table are tiny statuettes of the Holy Family, plaster things you win at parish fiestas. In the center, three cones of incense smolder on a silver dollar.

A door closes, and Uhdrah steps out of the hall bathroom, smoothing her hair with the palms of her hands. She who has crossed an ocean for his sake.

"Sit down, *Khawaja* Nazir." She uses the formal *Mister*. Zizi knows what this means: We are strangers until you give me the ring.

He does not sit down. "Uhdrah—" he begins, then

falters. Her eyes remain on him like the eyes of Jesus in the Sacred Heart picture, staring straight at you, waiting for the answer you have. Promising everything. He bows his head.

"Yes, *Khawaja*?"

His hand fumbles toward the ring in his pocket. Then, abruptly, he clasps his hands together and sits down.

"Do you have coffee?"

"Of course, *Khawaja*. If that is what you want."

After she is out of the room, Zizi sits perfectly still a while, listening to the cup-and-saucer sounds from the kitchen, the anxious, pigeonlike murmuring of the two women. It is April, past Easter, yet here next to an ash tray is the Christ Child in a manger. Thoughts come but he does not want to think them. He swats at them with his hand. "That is all," he says to drive them away. Then, taking Samira's ring out of his pocket, he places it on the table at the feet of the Christ Child.

Immediately Uhdrah sees it. She stops short in the hall, coffee sloshing onto the tray. She sets the tray down on the telephone table and hurries into the room, embracing Zizi before he can stand up. The ring is already on her finger. He did not see her put it on.

"My sweet one, Nazir," she is muttering in Familiar Arabic, "my eyes, my heart, Nazir!" She kisses him on both cheeks and on the forehead. "My baby, Nazir!" she says.

Samira, too, used to call him that. The coincidence thrills him, and he starts to smile. But, he reminds himself, this is for the boy's sake.

In the kitchen something clangs to the floor, bounces, and breaks. "Allah!" It is Aunt Affie, a shout and a laugh at the same time. "Al-LAH!" She is thanking God.

Uhdrah sits back against the sofa cushions and, as if

a dam has burst, begins talking rapidly of the arrangements to be made, the wedding dress, the church, food for the guests. Zizi continues to smile. He nods his head now and then to show that he is a polite man, interested in what is, after all, women's business. He can hear Aunt Affie singing in the kitchen. No, not singing, not words anyway; more like a humming chuckle. After a time the smile grows tight on his face.

Uhdrah has forgotten the coffee, beginning to cool by now. As she talks—flowers, witnesses, invitations, gifts—her fingers brush back and forth across Samira's ring. It is on her right hand, according to custom. On the wedding day she will wear it on her left.

Zizi does not want to smile anymore. He wonders if it's started to rain yet. Then he thinks of the streetcar schedule, but to look at his watch would be rude. Staring at the picture of the Sacred Heart, he makes a silent request, and just as he does the telephone rings in the hallway. By way of thanks, he lowers his eyes before the picture.

"Awl ride!" Aunt Affie shouts as the phone continues to ring. "I yam coming!"

Using this as an excuse to stand up and look at his watch, Zizi explains that it is getting late, it might rain any minute, and he dare not miss the last streetcar because if he does he'll have to call Braheem Yakoub—he forces a knowing chuckle—and Braheem won't enjoy having to drive all the way across town and back again.

Uhdrah glares at him, not even trying to mask her displeasure. And why should she anymore?—the ring is on her finger. Zizi is about to sit down again when Aunt Affie looks into the room.

"Nazir," she says, her face grim. "Braheem, he's onna telephone. Asfoori's dead."

Instantly, Uhdrah makes the sign of the cross and drops to her knees. Zizi cocks his head to show that he

does not understand. Asfoori is dead, too bad. Still, he was no relative, no reason to be making phone calls with the news. And Uhdrah, praying aloud on her knees, doesn't even know the man.

He takes the receiver, and Braheem tells him that Asfoori was walking the sandwich sign when, just a few minutes ago, he bent over to tie a shoelace, and simply died.

Zizi still doesn't understand. "After all, he's better off—right?"

"Right, Cousin. But that's not it. Your son was standing behind him when it happened. The boy saw it all."

Zizi stiffens and holds the receiver tight against his ear. "Is he scared bad?"

"No. But I don't think it's hit him yet. You better get here quick."

Uhdrah is still on her knees when he hangs up. "The man is only sleeping," she says, almost smiling. "Like Lazarus—"

"Quiet," Aunt Afie says.

"When I was little, a baby goat they gave me died. My father was going to carve it up, but I took it and carried it into the fields. I ran until I heard a voice say, 'Your little goat is not dead but only sleeping.'" Uhdrah's face lights up with the memory. "It was Saint Maron's voice. He told me to put my hands on the goat, like this." She strokes the air back and forth with her hands.

"Stop that," Aunt Afie says.

"And the little goat awoke from the dead." There is triumph in her voice. "Sometimes God gives the power."

"Hush, woman," Aunt Afie says as she helps Zizi with his jacket.

"To those who truly believe, sometimes He gives the power."

Poor monkeys. That is what they are like with their big ears and the faces they make. Just like monkeys he has seen in the zoo and in jungle movies. The way they use their back legs to walk. And he is a monkey, too.

"... I tell you, Cousin, customers want to believe. That's why a practical man can fool them. They want to believe what their mama told them about everything. If their mamas put dog shit on a plate and said it was good, they'll eat it up and lick the spoon! The businessman says 'Look, I am just like your mama.'"

"How?" his father had asked. . . .

Braheem Yakoub's ears do not stick out, but if you look at them and only at them, they stick out. His nose is not large, but if you stare at it, his face is all nose.

"How?" Watch the practical man. Do like he does. Don't ask how. Does the man slicing the liver know how he does it? Can he tell you? No. So don't ask, watch. Do like he does, Cousin, and then you'll know how."

"I still don't understand." His father still did not understand. . . .

They are just like monkeys if you look at them that way, making noises with their mouths, showing their teeth, using their hands to pick things up. Laughing sometimes and chattering, and sometimes looking sad. Scratching the sides of their faces when they are thinking, shaking their heads when they do not understand. Walking up and down the pavement, turning white when they are old. Making little noises when they are old. When they are dead, rolling over with their eyes shut. Lying very still, mouths open against pavement, against hospital pillows, poor monkeys. And he is a monkey, too.

The nickname Asfoori means "little bird." The *ibn Arab* called him that because he had spent several years in the state mental hospital, known to them as the *asfoori-yeh*

or "birdhouse." When he was released he was no good anymore for business, one side of his face frozen in that half-smile, all the English he had learned in America forgotten in the *asfoori-yeh*. He had no family, but he was *ibn Arab*, so Amos Salibah set up a cot next to the mops and buckets in the back room of his butcher shop. Asfoori did odd jobs, sweeping, walking the sandwich sign for Braheem Yakoub. They paid him in meals and lodging and spare change. It became his life, and now that he was dead, no one was terribly sad. He's better off, they say, and the arrangements that Taffy the mortician has made are for nothing more than a pauper's funeral.

Zizi, like the others, stands his turn taking coats and leading people to the casket. Asfoori was no relative, but they came nevertheless, out of simple charity, so that his death might not be completely ignored. "God give him rest," they say, and that is all. After the mops and buckets and sandwich sign, what else is there to say? "Bless His name," Zizi gives the standard response as he hands the raincoats and umbrellas to his son.

Jameel had been there, he saw how the old man turned the sandwich sign so he could bend down to tie a shoelace, how he didn't stop bending, instead made a quiet noise and rolled to the pavement with his mouth open. The boy saw, then he imitated even that. He, too, bent down, made a noise, and rolled sideways on his shoulder. (One of the bums, a war veteran, cried "Sniper!" and two or three others dropped to the ground.) When passersby ran to Jameel first, he abruptly opened his eyes and stood up and walked away.

Since that, Zizi has watched as Braheem instructed him to watch, but still there have been no tears and no bad dreams at night.

"Maybe," Zizi told Braheem, "it won't hit him until after the funeral."

"Maybe," Braheem said. "And maybe it already hit him."

Braheem never came near the casket ("He's dead, right? So where's the coffee?") and all evening he has been sitting in the adjoining room with several of the other older men. As at most funerals, Taffy would have cigars in there, coffee, and always a bottle to lace the coffee.

When Uhdrah arrives, followed briskly down the entrance way by Aunt Afifie, she begins weeping openly before she even reaches the room.

"*Ya Asfoori! Ya Asfoori!*" She launches into the funeral wail, but no one takes up the chant. Instead, the room buzzes as people turn to look and talk among themselves. Some are laughing outright: his real name was not Asfoori, and it sounds funny to wail: *O Little Bird!* Aunt Afifie grunts an embarrassed warning, and Uhdrah falls silent.

Taking their coats, Zizi leads the two women to the casket. Uhdrah kneels before it, but Aunt Afifie remains standing. The old woman makes a quick sign of the cross, glancing down only once as if to examine the quality of Taffy's work ("Awl ride," she whispers to Zizi), then she turns and walks quickly toward a chair far in the back.

Uhdrah has begun to pray, first only moving her lips, then making the breathy half-sounds of words. Whatever they are, they are not from the Prayers for the Dead. They are not even Arabic. She looks up after a while, listening although no one is talking now. The room has become quiet with watching her. For a full minute the only sounds are rain and the muffled voices of the men in the adjoining room.

"Uhdrah," Zizi whispers, but she ignores him. She separates her hands, like a priest giving benediction, then she places them on Asfoori's chest and begins to

stroke back and forth, muttering in that language no one in the room understands. Yet they know what she is doing. One way or another, they've all heard the story of the goat.

Her hands move gently along Asfoori's arm, the shoulder, the neck, the face (and just then Zizi thinks he sees the eyelids flutter—but no, he is staring too hard), the chest, down the belly, the waist.

"What'cha bet," someone says in a loud comic whisper, "she's gonna crank up his Oldsmobile too!"

And like a thunderclap everyone is laughing. Then Braheem is there, not laughing. And Aunt Afie, shaking with anger as she grasps Uhdrah's hands from the corpse and spins her roughly around.

"Wait!" Braheem stares at Aunt Afie. She understands. She takes the ring from Uhdrah's finger and gives it to him. Then, suddenly, the ring is in Zizi's hand. He does not know how it got there. So many people are talking at once. He puts the ring in his pocket. People chattering and laughing. Then Braheem motions, and Zizi follows him out of the noise.

It seems quiet in the car despite the wipers and the drum of rain on metal. All during the ride home Jameel, huddled alone in the back seat, says nothing. Nor does Braheem, who must have had a great deal of Taffy's "coffee"; he keeps the car at a crawl, weaving it slowly across the center line and then back again toward the curb.

Finally, stalling the engine in front of Zizi's apartment building, Braheem clears his throat to speak. "You're better off," he says. "But you shouldn't 'a let her do that to Asfoori."

"I saw his eyelids move," Zizi says firmly. Then, less firmly: "I thought I did. Besides, what if—"

"What if what? What if it worked? Say she did bring Asfoori back. Okay. But to what? So he can walk around the block some more?"

"God gives the power sometimes." That was how Uhdrah had said it. "To those who believe. And the goat, if it's possible for a goat, then maybe..." Zizi's voice trails off. He is not saying what he means to say. He means to say something for Jameel's sake, so young, sitting back there, listening.

"Goat? If Asfoori got up like the goat, what would people say? Tell me, Cousin. A miracle? How great is God? Not me. I'd say: Bad business." Braheem looks up toward the drumming roof. "Bad business!"

"The boy," Zizi whispers.

"Hah? Never mind, he catches on."

"Please." Then Zizi turns to his son. "Go on upstairs. I'll be up in a minute." Jameel nods but remains where he is.

"Hey—" Braheem says, looking up once more, "—why that old fart Asfoori and not this boy's mama who was young when she died?"

"Go on, Jimmy," Zizi says.

"Or why Asfoori and not Taffy's son who died in Detroit? What do you think, Cousin, would it heal Taffy's heart to see Asfoori jump outta that box?"

"Jimmy."

"Yes, Papa." Jameel opens the car door. He hesitates, then steps out into the rain and disappears beneath the wet shadow of the building. When the hall light winks on, Zizi turns again to Braheem. The old man's head is bobbing slightly, privately, as if in answer to a question nobody asked.

"Yep. But that's the trouble with miracles, Cousin. Wanna know what a practical man would say?" His voice drops, and Zizi has to lean in to hear him. "Why a goat—he would say—a goddam goat, and not me. You understand, Cousin? Me."

*

The rain is cold. Zizi stands a while in it, twisting Samira's ring around the knuckle of his little finger. His

clothes are getting soaked, but it feels good in a way, the rain dripping cold and clean from his hair. A practical man would laugh.

Going in, he tries to be quiet but the door closes loudly after him and his shoes make sucking noises on the stairs.

"Papa," Jameel stands at the bedroom door, laughing. "Lookit your shoes!"

Zizi looks. There is a puddle where he is standing; the top of one shoe has started to wrinkle, the other is curling up from the sole.

"Sit down, Papa." He takes Zizi's suit coat off. "I'll put this over the kitchen radiator." Zizi sits on the bed. He hears the sounds of the kitchen faucets.

Jameel returns with a clean towel. "Here." He hands Zizi the towel. "I put on some coffee." Then he kneels at his father's feet and begins loosening the shoelaces. Zizi lets him do it.

He lets him pull off the shoes, the stockings, lets him unbutton the wet shirt. The coffee has yet to boil, but already its smell fills the apartment. He swats at the thought of a mama. That is all.

The boy undoes the suspender straps. Then, grinning, he takes the ring from his father's finger and turns aside. When he turns back, the ring is on his thumb. It fits, and he keeps it there.

Zizi lets him. The boy will catch on—monkey see, monkey do. He will be a practical man someday. And that is all.

"Lift your legs." Jameel pulls the trousers off. "Now your arms."

Zizi obeys. Someday the boy will have his own business and sell all the food in waxed paper. And that is all. He will marry and teach his children to speak only English. But that is enough. That, and the smell of coffee in his house.

Everything, Everything

This has happened before to Barbara Saleeb. In times of strain her nerves will light upon some carefree tune and cling to it stubbornly. Like the time last winter, rushing her mother to the hospital. That time even the paramedics were sure it was the real thing—and all Barbara could think of as she knelt in the ambulance, squeezing Mama's hand, all that went around and around in her head, was the jingle to the Diet Pepsi commercial.

And here it's happening again. Ever since she came back from loading her dryer, Barbara has tried to ignore it, suppressing the urge to turn and stare down whoever that is standing behind her, impatiently rocking back and forth so that his cart full of wet wash is tapping against her shoulder, practically. Is it her fault she got the last available dryer? The whole time he's kept whistling—softly, full of breath and hesitation—but the same song over and over, with a melody so insistent that it's started repeating in her mind like a stuck record.

There's no telling what you're going to hear people singing or humming, or whistling down the back of your neck, ever since one of Toledo's top FM stations adopted an all-oldies format. She recognizes it, a Rosemary Clooney song from the fifties. Just the other day Uncle Junior was singing it along with the radio while he scraped down the butcher block. Barbara can even recall