

Selected titles from Arab American Writing

*Bread Alone*

Kim Jensen

*The Cairo House: A Novel*

Samia Serageldin

*Does the Land Remember Me? A Memoir of Palestine*

Aziz Shihab

*Letters from Cairo*

Pauline Kaldas

*Love Is Like Water and Other Stories*

Samia Serageldin

*The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy: A Novel*

Frances Khirallah Noble

*Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11:*

*From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*

Edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber

*Remember Me to Lebanon: Stories of Lebanese Women in America*

Evelyn Shakir

*Running for All the Right Reasons: A Saudi-born Woman's*

*Pursuit of Democracy*

Ferial Masry and Susan Chenard

# Through and Through

TOLEDO STORIES

*Second Edition*

JOSEPH GEHA



Syracuse University Press

20113

6

Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York 13244-5160

Copyright © 2009 by Joseph Geha

All Rights Reserved

Second Edition 2009

09 10 11 12 13 14 6 5 4 3 2 1

First edition published by Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minnesota, 1990

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the following periodicals, in whose pages many of these stories were originally published: *Epoch* ("Monkey Business"), *Amherst Review* ("Everything, Everything"), *Iowa Review* ("Almost Thirty"), *Forum*, #7 ("Something Else"), *Mississippi Valley Review* ("News from Phoenix"), *Northwest Review* ("And What Else?"), *Webster Review* ("Holy Toledo"), *Oxford Magazine* ("Through and Through"), *Nebraska Review* ("Stepping Out"), *Homeground* ("Homesickness"), and *Townships* ("Where I'm From—Originally").

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

For a listing of books published and distributed by Syracuse University Press, visit our Web site at [SyracuseUniversityPress.syr.edu](http://SyracuseUniversityPress.syr.edu).

ISBN: 978-0-8156-3210-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Geha, Joseph.

Through and through : Toledo stories / Joseph Geha. — 2nd ed.

p. cm. — (Arab American writing)

Originally published: Saint Paul, Minn. : Graywolf Press, c1990.

ISBN 978-0-8156-3210-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Arab Americans—Fiction. 2. Toledo (Ohio)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3557.E3544T48 2009

813'.54—dc22

2009024354

Manufactured in the United States of America

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

## Through and Through

Back when I was first on the lam from the Jackie Kennedy murder (the Toledo beer baron, not the other one) I spent some time in Damascus, Syria. There, not far from the house where my father grew up, is a street called Straight. *National Geographic* says it's the oldest continually inhabited street in the world—more than five thousand years old—and my uncle took a day off work to show it to me. He was a bricklayer, helping to put up the new (then, in 1933) church commemorating the spot where Saint Paul was supposedly knocked from his horse and blinded by the light of Jesus. I remember how my uncle tried to put his arm in my arm and walk me along like a girl. I'd been warned they did that over there, men even holding hands. All pretty harmless, but I shrugged him off anyway. Twenty-two and on the lam, I'd just as soon keep my hands free.

(Yes, we really did say "On the lam"—the movies got that from us, not the other way around.)

It was about noon when we reached Straight Street and the *souk* stalls were crowded. A metal framework stretched building to building over the street, supporting sheets of canvas that protected from the sun and wind, but which also trapped clouds of yellow dust that hung in the air as thick as cigar smoke back in the old Devon Club on a Saturday night.

Well, there I was, twenty-two, and I remember trying to grasp the whole five thousand years, imagining all the sweat, blood, and urine spilled on this one piece of ground, the semen and the spit and the tears. Not long ago the *National Enquirer* had an insert that I cut out and put in my wallet; it says that, per minute, a human being at rest sheds more than a hundred thousand microscopic particles of flaked off flesh, saliva, lint, sodium, dandruff, dead mouth tissue. Per minute. At rest. A slight head movement, and the number jumps to five hundred thousand particles. Five million when you walk real slow. Thirty million before you even get going good.

Five thousand years. Even now I try to grasp it. What the hell was I standing on?

\*

Today, fifty-two years later, I am standing at a motel window with a view of a storage tank off Ohio Route 12, on the road to Toledo. It is night. There are crowds outside, people selling T-shirts and photographs of the storage tank, which is orange in the vapor lights. The *Review Times* says it is filled with soybean oil. I have prayed to Saint Helen, who first recovered the True Cross, and to Saint Anthony of Padua, finder of lost things. I am not drinking. At first I saw only rust streaks and flaked paint, not even a pattern. The diagrams published in *Time* magazine didn't help me any, even with these bifocals. I tried polarized sunglasses, and they were no help. I wished for those red-and-green lenses from the 3-D movies of the fifties. Then my eyes started playing tricks on me.

I suffer from poor eyesight. And from an ache in my hip. The doctor will probably say it is rheumatism. (But at night, alone in bed, I sometimes watch him shake his head and say cancer.) Only six of my own teeth remain in my mouth, and all six of them hurt. And I have gas. Everything I eat gives me gas. Which is particles that

shoot out of you. Most people don't know that. Keep your nose clean, we used to say. We didn't know what we were saying.

I try opera glasses, but all they do is give size to what I think I see. The hard rainbow edges hurt my eyes and confuse me, all of it trembling because my hand won't hold still. In my other hand I hold the microphone to a portable cassette tape recorder. I tested it, and I sound just like me, whispering. Only younger. I even have an accent again, like when I was a kid, whispering.

In 1927, in the Detroit Pick-Fort Selby Hotel, Thomas "Yonnie" Licavoli, who was six feet tall and weighed 210 pounds and who never in his life talked above a whisper, told the Big Guy himself, Al Capone, "Stay the hell out of Detroit. It's my territory." The Big Guy agreed, and Yonnie's name—which is everything in this business—was made. At the time he was waiting for the Purple and Little Navy gangs to finish each other off in the war they were having. The famous Collingwood Avenue Massacre was what finally ended the war. That, and the ten-storey death leap of a beautiful young woman, a known companion to one of the Purples. It seems that the *Detroit Free Press* somehow discovered that what the police were calling a suicide victim happened to've been bound and gagged at the time of death. Detroit put up its hackles, and things got too hot too fast, even for Yonnie Licavoli. It was right about then that Jacob "Firetop" Sulkin made all those trips to Detroit he bragged about later, convincing Yonnie and his gang to set up in Toledo. The only problem, he told them, would be a minor one, name of Jackie Kennedy.

Was he in with the dicks? Yonnie wanted to know. In solid, Firetop said. And with the Irish politicians, too. But Kennedy's only real connections were with Egan's Rats out of St. Louis. And Yonnie Licavoli knew all about them, their shooter with the smoked glasses,

name of Browning. Yonnie was from St. Louis himself, dropped out of the Christian Brothers college there.

Me, my only school was what we called the College of Hard Knocks. My father enrolled me. He used to brag about how he'd lifted a sliver of the True Cross off a Turk who tried selling it to him. He always kept it wrapped in adhesive and slung around his neck on a string. He told people that if he ever lost it, he'd lose all his luck.

Back when I was about twelve or so I figured I'd need all the luck I could get. It took some doing, but I was already a good sneak. I managed to get it off him without his ever knowing what happened to it. Not long after that I said good riddance to my father's house and made it through Ellis Island in 1921, just under the wire of the Quota Act. Lucky me.

I traveled with "relatives" from my village, and we wound up running a produce market in Toledo's North End. By that time word reached me that I'd left none too soon—it seemed my father's health was declining, and his feed and grain business wasn't feeling so well either.

Like most of my people, these "relatives" I worked for were what was called industrious, but what I called penny scratchers. The North End was a clannish neighborhood—Little Syria—and in no time I'd developed a name for myself as something of a pickpocket. I took this as a compliment—I was a kid, what did I know?—but it was embarrassing to my adopted family who were straight shooters, doing their best by sending me to Catholic school and finding me work afterward (although it wasn't in school or in work but by playing hooky at the movies that I learned to speak English without an accent). So I moved on and ended up working on Canton Avenue in old Saint Patrick's Parish at the B and L Confectionery—a candy store where, on the QT, a Catholic could get himself a pail of beer after

mass. The beer was supplied by Jackie Kennedy, who wore pearl gray spats and a pinky ring. He was twenty-four years old and handsome and singing a love song to his sweetheart when they killed him. They put eleven holes in him. Jacob "Firetop" Sulkin supplied the roscoes. I was the fingerman.

We really called a pistol a roscoe. It sounds funny now, after so many movies. It was at the B and L that I first learned to talk like that. I met Firetop there, and through him I got to know "Chalky Red" Yaranowsky and "Yonnie" Licavoli and "Wop" English and the rest. We all really did use those nicknames. Firetop because of his red hair and Chalky Red because of his complexion and Joe English the Wop because his true name was Serifina Sinatra. There was even a Buster and a Blackjack in the old Licavoli Gang. Just like the movies. They called me "Dip." Somebody spread around a lie about me that I picked pockets. It was a bad name and a reputation I didn't deserve, as it was a knack I rarely used anymore, and only when I was desperate. Myself, I'd've settled for something like "The Shadow" or even "Sneaky Pete" (my name was once Peter, in Arabic, Boutros) but Dip was what stuck because the big shots, Yonnie and Firetop, made it stick, and there wasn't much I could do about it. Al Capone said once that there's nothing lower than a dip. (Well, "Rummy" would've been worse, which was why I did most of my drinking on the sly.) Capone himself never stood for being called "Scarface" — he preferred "Snorky," which in those days we used to mean a snappy dresser. But nobody called him that, either. I saw him only once, on an elevator in Cleveland. He looked thick more than fat, back then in 1930, and on the short side, yet I could tell right off why everybody called him "The Big Guy." His reputation shone off him like a glow, like the golden light you see in holy cards. The Big Guy. He wore a

cream fedora with the brim snapped down on the left to shadow the double razor scars. He nodded to me. Hasty, like somebody who didn't like to waste his time. Then one of his boys gave me the thumbs out sign, and I got off at the next floor.

For me it was pretty clear that if I ever did want a respected name, I'd have to work for it. So when Firetop called — I already knew what for — I was quick to be of service.

I uncovered Jackie Kennedy at a cottage over in Point Place, near Toledo. It took a sneak with talent to find and finger him. I learned that there was only one bodyguard, who was mostly kept busy playing babysitter to Jackie's four-year-old son. The time was right, I figured, even though Firetop wasn't around and Yonnie was in Detroit for his father-in-law's funeral. Chalky Red couldn't make it either, but his Ford V-8 did. And me in it, sitting behind the wheel.

When the boys got out, they found Jackie strolling hand in hand with Audrey Rawls, a beauty contest winner. He was singing "Love in the Moonlight" to her, like in a movie. Afterward some of the papers called her the "Tiger Woman" because they figured her to be the Judas. But she wasn't involved at all. I watched through the windscreen as Wop and Magnine shoved Miss Rawls out of the way and emptied both their .38 revolvers. One round blew off his watch. The other eleven were what coroners list as "through and through" — in then right out the other side; clean, but they leave less evidence. Kennedy was tall and muscular and so strong his feet did the Jackson Shuffle for a full minute after he went down. That happened on July the 7th, 1933, a Friday.

Today is also a Friday — October the 3rd, 1986. My present name is John Doe. I deny all and any other appellations, true names, nicknames, monikers, handles or

tags. I am seventy-four years old, and this is my deposition, which I give freely and without coercion or duress, without hope of reward or recompense.

The names I name have not been changed. Harry "Chalky Red" Yaranowsky is a real name. So is Jacob "Firetop" Sulkin. So is Thomas "Yonnie" Licavoli. They are as dead as Jackie Kennedy. But they have not disappeared. They are in the *Toledo Blade*, the *Detroit News*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *New York Times*. Me, I am in none of them. I got away. My current whereabouts are known only to the four walls of this room.

Until nine months ago my address was the same as that of my latest place of business, the English Language newsstand, mezzanine, St. Georges Hotel, Beirut, in what, as far as I know, is still being called Lebanon; my more recent names and addresses are too numerous to list. My father has been deceased for over sixty years; I didn't have a mother that I could remember. I never married, and currently I cannot be found.

\*

Because they were so well known, Yonnie and Firetop couldn't get away after the murder. But they had the lawyers and the alibis. Now all they had to do was keep their mouths shut. Which they did until the Toledo cops sent to Detroit for a pair of dicks who specialized in extracting information. For some reason the *Toledo Blade* called these two the Clarke brothers, which anybody who knew anything knew wasn't their real name. But most people don't know anything. Most people think things like this happened only in the movies. But they should believe what they see in gangster movies. Who do they think made the movies? Anyway, the Clarkes figured Firetop to be the soft one, since he bragged so much. One session with him lasted from after supper one night until 2:30 the next morning. His ribs were cracked and he couldn't walk because his groin hurt so.

Me, I'm hearing all this and I figure he'll spill in no time. Anybody would've. So if ever there was a time to take a fade, this was it.

I remember one night I'd sneaked out to eat at a place down the road from Toledo in New Regal, Ohio. (The place still has a reputation for the best ribs around. I ate there two nights ago. Some things, like food, never change.) So there I was, fifty-some years ago, adjusting the napkin at my neck, the whole time thinking should I blow town or the whole midwest—in other words, how long is the long arm of the law?—when I happened to touch the lump of the True Cross where I kept it beneath my shirt. If anybody ever needed direction, it was me there and then. So I asked. Nothing. Okay. I started eating my ribs. Then, an instant later, I had my answer. There was a voice, not in my ears exactly, more like inside my head, telling me what to do.

I'd been an altar boy, but unlike most I took it seriously. I have always considered myself a spiritual person. To this day I believe that God speaks to us, and not just on the road to the holy city of Damascus, but on the road to Toledo, Ohio, too.

What the voice said was this: Do not blow town, My child. Blow the whole country.

\*

Beirut would have been like heaven except that on the way there I discovered that my piece of the True Cross had been lifted from me. I was in New York Harbor, undressing in my cabin, when I felt, then looked and saw that it wasn't there. The last place I'd had my shirt off was in my flat above the B and L. So it had to still be in Toledo. But it was too late to go back. And too hot—Yonnie's trial had already begun. Being on the lam is like swimming underwater in the movies. You surface for air, see the patrol boat closing in behind you, and you go down again, deeper this time.

I had a couple of drinks, and after a while I said to

myself Okay, it doesn't have to be the one great tragedy of your life. Go on, then, and make your own luck. I was surprised at how cocky I sounded. Besides, word had it that Lebanon, if not heaven, was a lot like home. A handful of family syndicates ran the whole place with defined territories, bosses, and soldiers. Like the States, except it was called politics. Sure, vice was pretty much legal, gambling and prostitution, but there was the black market. And plenty of business from the hashish growers in Baalbek north of Beirut. Beirut Harbor itself was a conduit between the Turkish poppy fields and Marseilles.

Unfortunately, the luck I ended up making for myself over there wasn't too good, and before long I developed a liking for *arraaq* (which is similar to absinthe, and because of that is illegal in the States to this day), but not so much that I got a name for it. The depression ended in the States and in Europe, but in the Middle East it lingered on into the war. Later, working with the *heil* Hitler Vichy government was like doing business with the Boy Scouts. So our cheers were real when the Free French Senegalese marched into Martyr's Square to liberate us, their faces as black and shiny as their boots. After the boys in Italy finally did Benito (long overdue), the Mediterranean shipping lanes reopened and business started booming again.

The Bourj Plaza educated me. At one time I could speak French, Arabic, and get by in Greek and German. When I used to change money in the Ashrifiyeh District, the Armenians thought I was one of them. But I've lost all that now, all of it faded.

I worked on the up-and-up at hotel newsstands, and for real as a kind of errand boy for couriers who needed interpreting. In other words, one step above a dip. What I was called was *Il Amerikain* because my Arabic had developed an accent. You might say I didn't really have a name. Still, it became a life. I almost got married once

but I sobered up and decided not to. There were even times luck came my way, as they say in the movies, and for a while I'd be what anybody'd call happy. *Arraq* stayed cheap, and even under the Boy Scouts the prostitute district remained open in Bourj Plaza, just behind the Gendarmerie. It was a life. If I had no name, at least I could say I was hanging on to the fringe, anyway, of the kind of work where a man might some day make a name. And, unlike Yonnie and Firetop, I was free.

Firetop served thirty years for his part in the Jackie Kennedy murder. He was granted parole in 1965, on his seventy-fifth birthday. Word reached me that he'd turned sour. Nobody feared him, calling him "Schmuck" to his face. He had to be straitjacketed, finally, and sent to the Toledo State Hospital for the mentally ill. He died there in 1971.

I took the news hard. It was, as they used to say in the movies, like losing a part of myself.

Beirut had a dozen or more picture shows called cinemas, and for a while I went to every American movie. In 1971 I saw *Easy Rider* dubbed in Arabic and subtitled in French. It frightened me. I was fifty-nine years old.

For me, the boom years—such as they were—ended with the Lebanese civil war. People got so they couldn't trust their own cousins, much less *Il Amerikain*. When the Syrians marched in with their half-a-goosestep clomp, it was like the Boy Scouts all over again. Car bombs went off sometimes twice a day, and I found myself reduced to working the crowds that gathered afterward. A dip.

Then, not long ago, I read in *Time*, in an article on organized crime, that Yonnie Licavoli was dead. Had been dead for over a dozen years. Nobody'd sent word. There was nobody left to send word. I closed the magazine and rolled it tight. I walked away from the newsstand without even bothering to lock up. The bottle of



*arraq* sat uncorked on the counter. I left it there to evaporate. I began walking and I kept on walking, all the time twisting and choking the magazine. Those steps were the beginning of my journey back to Toledo.

\*

Thomas "Yonnie" Licavoli, while an inmate of the Ohio State Penitentiary, had been granted two first place awards in international stamp collectors' exhibits. He also won recognition for fifty songs he wrote under the name Tommy Thomas. Over the years three different wardens lost their jobs for allowing him special treatment. So for Yonnie, too, it had become a life. When he was sixty-seven years old he pleaded for release. "I have a daughter who was born three months before I came to prison," he wrote the governor. "Now she is married, with two lovely girls and a little boy of her own, and none of them have ever seen me except behind bars. My first-born daughter was killed, along with my father, while they were on their way to visit me one day." The letter is public record. The only word that reaches me anymore is public record.

Yonnie Licavoli was released after serving thirty-seven years, one month, and twenty-seven days. And he died less than two years later. His obit made the *New York Times*. The FBI attended the funeral in Detroit. A sixty-car procession followed the hearse.

Now they are all gone—Wop English, Chalky Red, Blackjack, Pimp Bruno, Buster Lupica. Johnny Mag-nine, like me, was never found. Word had it he died in Akron back in '35. A week ago I stopped there on my way back to check it out. Nobody knew. He was the other triggerman, but the memory of him had faded completely. Through and through. For the first time in fifty-two years I felt free to surface. What was left of me.

It was while I was on my way back from Akron, almost to Toledo, that I read about the face of Jesus on a water tower.

Except that when I got here it turned out to be this soybean oil storage tank, and maybe it's the light or something reflecting on the rust and the paint that edges the rust, but whole crowds are seeing something there. I tried, and for the briefest instant I thought I saw something, too. Yet what I saw—if I saw it—was nothing like the Image outlined in *Time*. What I saw had on a hat, a fedora, with the brim snapped down to hide the left cheek. Then the light began to hurt my eyes and the Image receded once more to rust stains and peeling paint and crowds of people looking. All of them faders. You'd think He wouldn't waste His time on faders. On sodium and lint and dead tissue that flakes away with every motion. Standing still even, I feel myself changing. The light blinds me the more I stare. I pull the drapes against it.

There's nothing left in Toledo, not after all this time. I can see that now. Now what I want to see is how much of me will be left when I get there, and what I'll be.