

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

*Patty Somlo*

### A NIGHTLY INTERRUPTION

**L**OU MIGHT HAVE SAID, if anyone asked how it began, that Mohammed offered him a cup of tea. Not even raising his head to look Lou in the eye, Mohammed, almost in a whisper, said, "May I offer you some tea?" He held the dark thermos in his right hand, next to where Lou sat behind the gleaming mahogany counter in the lower lobby, poorly lit at that late hour because no one other than Lou and Mohammed were usually around.

Lou's first thought was to say no, that he disliked tea, its bitterness so unappealing. But seeing how Mohammed bowed his head, a sign of respect, Lou said, "Yes. Thank you. Let me go get a clean cup."

They did not speak more than that after the tea was poured. When the sun came up, the streets outside the hotel that had become slick with rain during the night started to shimmer. Lou and Mohammed both left their respective posts in the bowels of the building, nodded and said good night. Then each, separately, headed home.

It might have ended there and the nights would have passed without incident, one after the next, for years to come. Lou coming into work, taking his post at the desk, as he had done now these past five years. Mohammed following this last year, only moments after, picking up the mop with its long thin lines of rope and starting in on the tile floor. At first, when Mohammed came to the job, there was a simple nod of his head to Lou as he arrived and a second nod when he left. Later, English flowed more easily through Mohammed's mind and he enjoyed trying it out. Along with the nod, Mohammed added a "Good evening," and then, a month or two after that, he stretched it out more with a "How are you," to which Lou would raise his head momentarily and respond, "Fine."

The next night Mohammed offered tea again. This time, Lou understood. Unlike what Lou had experienced before in his life, a bitterness that lingered on his tongue, the tea that Mohammed served him was sweet. If pressed to say more, Lou might even have added that the tea tasted a bit like flowers.

After offering the tea, Mohammed raised his head an inch or so. Lou thought he glimpsed a smile, trying to sneak out the corners of Mohammed's lips. As quickly as Mohammed raised his head, though, he lowered it again. Lou considered making a comment about the tea. Instead, he simply said, "Thank you."

The tea turned into a nightly interruption from the dull monotony of watching the time pass on the fine Rolex watch Lou had bought himself when he'd been doing a lot better than he was now. In a matter of weeks, though he might not have been ready to admit it then, Lou began looking forward to the tea. It wasn't just the taste, its sweetness a sudden surprise on his tongue, but Lou also enjoyed the ceremony.

"The tea is very good," Lou finally told Mohammed one night, weeks after the tea interruption began.

Mohammed, without lifting his head, raised his eyes to stare intently

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at Lou. Lou's strong face, with the deep-set dark eyes and prominent nose, stared back. A Jew, Mohammed thought, likes my tea. All Mohammed could do that night was smile.

After sipping his tea quietly, Lou began to wonder. Where had Mohammed come from? Before Mohammed, there had been a guy named José. But then, in these jobs, there had always been a guy named José. José smiled and sometimes hummed when he worked. Lou almost never spoke to José. He knew that José didn't understand much English.

Two months into the tea ceremony, it seemed to Lou that Mohammed had always been there. And now that Lou thought about him, he had to admit that Mohammed seemed as ill fit for the job as Lou believed he was for his. Lou would have guessed Mohammed to be in his early to mid-forties. With square shoulders and a trim mustache, a handsome proud face, Mohammed appeared the sort to be an engineer or a doctor. An Arab, Lou said to himself, and that made Lou wonder if Mohammed knew. A Jew was drinking his tea.

Around the start of the third month, Lou decided it was time. Looking back, he might have said the change came because he was bored. Bored with the long nights of sitting in the lower lobby of the hotel and waiting next to a phone which never rang. The hotel prided itself on service. If a guest needed anything in the middle of the night – aspirin or a cup of coffee, a bottle of booze – Lou was there to provide it. But no one ever needed anything and so he sat, reading the thick novels that he bought used and sold back to the bookstore to buy other novels he could lose himself in during the long nights.

Biscuits, Lou decided, would go very nicely with the tea. He had stopped at the grocery store a block from his house to pick up something for breakfast. Lou had never eaten anything he would classify as a biscuit but he'd seen them there. A long way back, still a student at the university in New York, Lou recalled the characters in Victorian novels he'd been forced to read sipped tea in the afternoon and ate biscuits.

Not surprisingly, the biscuits turned the tea ceremony into a more formal event. As soon as he offered Mohammed a biscuit, Lou understood. Biscuits meant eating. And eating required a table and, dare he think it, two people sitting down together to eat.

Mohammed's first reaction to the biscuit offer was fear. He noticed his heartbeat suddenly speed up and his neck and face grew warm and flushed. If he said no, Lou might take it the wrong way. He might think, *That Arab. He refuses my food because I'm a Jew.* But if Mohammed accepted, what then?

Unaware of the time, Mohammed had stood silently for several minutes after Lou spoke. It was only then that Lou realized what he'd done. Tea was simple and polite. But a biscuit was asking for it. A biscuit demanded something. Yes, a biscuit even said, *Let's be friends.*

"I thought the biscuits would go nicely with the tea," Lou said to break the awkward silence. "In case you wanted something else on your break with the tea."

Mohammed could feel the relief dripping down the sides of his face.

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“Yes, yes,” he said, probably too quickly, but the relief had taken over, like a transfusion of fresh new blood racing through his veins. “Yes, thank you. A biscuit would be nice,” he added and held out his hand.

An hour later, in the small janitor’s room behind the lobby where Mohammed sat to rest, he bit into the biscuit and slowly chewed. The biscuit was dry and not that sweet, unlike the pastries he was accustomed to eating back home, filled with warm dates, honey and walnuts. His teeth crushed the biscuit into fine dust. He was accustomed to a fruity chewiness that clung to his molars and left a sweet flavor on his tongue. So, this is what Jews eat, he thought, understanding at that moment that the food he was accustomed to had a bold liveliness this biscuit sorely lacked.

Interestingly, the realization made him feel sorry for Lou. As much as he’d disliked Jews his whole life, Mohammed always believed the Jews had it better than the Arabs. This biscuit made him see that he may have been mistaken after all.