

*Dancing Naked On The Sun*

by Coraline Ismael Karim

I was raised in a city where white skin was a monopoly and any other was an outlier, a pest, to be treated otherwise. The city of Seminole was named after its native tribe. For most of my childhood, I had thought they didn't exist. I believed they were as real as happiness. Maybe I had met one, somewhere in the throes of childhood. She would not have known it, but she would be my guide, simply by the nature of her words.

“You are beautiful,” she said to that gleeful version of myself, as she reluctantly grazed through my hair with her silver sheers.

I wish I had more time with her. She looked like me, but we were still different in culture and form. Yet, we were alike, our colloquial conversation bred from our shared otherness.

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My elementary school days were like any other. My mother would drop me off at the car circle, her black 2004 Ford Escape stuttering as she slowed to a stop, the black smoke churning from the rusted exhaust, and she told me she loves me.

I'd tell her I love her, too, and I did, because my father was never home. When he was home, he was like any other father: he spat when he was angry, and his flatulence smelled of turmeric, cumin, fennel, cardamon, and a hint of piss and excrement.

My mother met my father at his clinic when the weather was humid enough to cling inside your throat and hot enough to form moving cyclones in the Gulf of Mexico. His workplace was in a small pink outlet mall near the west coast. Giant painted flamingos danced idly above each storefront, their wide rosy feathers floating around some several weathered birds stuck in their endless joy.

“Are the Spanish girls always as beautiful as you?” he said to her when I was not even a thought.

She blushed, I presume, or leaked, and she moaned his name in the night of a raging hurricane stripping palm fronds from the nearby trees, the thick green blades scraping past my father's condo and windows.

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I was meant to be aborted, aborted over the lands of the natives in Seminole, yet my mother was a woman of God, a prevalent deity of the Christian religion that exists all over Seminole.

Yet, even with my father's refusal to have me, I live, and he still visited when he was away from his many medical conferences, always taking a new friend with long blonde glossy hair and pink fingernails or a brunette with square glasses shadowing him for medical school. My father enjoyed frowning with my mother and I. It was his version of the white man's golf, a sport of leisure and self-assessed inadequacy in the bedroom. His lip would twitch, and his eyes would droop. His eyes grew dark, darker than his complexion colored like thin sheets of liquid amber over the richest, blackest soil.

"His hair is too long," he told my mother. "Boys his age are working on lawns and lifting weights already. When I was his age, I'd run down each house asking if I could lift bags of dirt, climb roofs to clean them, and deliver mail just for a few nickels. He needs to cut his hair."

His face was textured, grainy like the asphalt streets surrounding us in gerrymandered sections. His frown lines dug past his brown, thick lips.

My mother deeply inhaled, her bosom rising slow and delicate.

"He's ten."

"What of it? He looks like a faggot. We would beat kids with long hair like that," he said.

He turned to look at me, glaring. "You wanna be beat for looking like a fag?" he asked.

“*Coño, Zauher,*” my mother said, her Spanish accent slipping through, her words thick and drawn with each vowel.

“No,” I said, my eyes growing glossy, and dewy salted drops began to form and fall down my cheeks.

“Don’t be a pussy,” he told me. “I didn’t raise this one, you did,” he then said, misty spit flying at my mother with each word.

“*Exactly,* you didn’t!” she said.

Her pale skin turned crimson, and I saw a stream of veins pulsing through her forehead. I looked down at the dollar store microwaveable dinner meal before me, the gelatinous gravy still congealed over the clump of ground chicken, and the wet broccoli and sliced carrots stuck in their own sort of ooze.

“You’re never here! Take him, I don’t care, chop the damn hair off, but TAKE HIM FOR ONCE,” she would scream.

She massaged her temples, exhaling, shaking her head.

“I don’t have time,” my father said.

He kept his eyes on me, shaking his head.

She turned to him. “Are you serious?”

I continued to stare at my meal, the gravy liquifying through the rising vapor of the melting vegetables.

“Calm down. Always yelling, you,” he said, his food’s steam disappearing.

My mother took another heavy exhale across me, and I felt a cool breeze and the smell of spearmint mouthwash cling to my face. Her dinner tray still had the plastic lining over it with the sporadic fork holes.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll take him tomorrow.”

He struck his utensils at the vegetables, smacking his lips. A mush of green and brown matching our neighbor’s lawn moved around his yellow teeth, bulging each side of his cheek with each chew.

“When are you gonna learn to cook, Leila?” he said to my mother.

She smacked her palms against the edge of the wooden dinner table, the whites of her eyes now streaked with scarlet clouds, and she looked at my father. He chuckled.

There was an idle plume of their spit between the three of us, a murky mist, floating down until it clung to my dinner meal.

“I’m not very hungry,” I said.

“Don’t waste it,” one said.

“If he doesn’t want to eat, he doesn’t have to eat. He’s too fat anyways,” said the other.

They’d continue their argument, and I wondered why I needed to cut my hair. Where we lived, the beach was a few minutes down the road by car, and at its entrance was a painted porcelain statue of a toned native man with red skin wrestling a great hawk. His burgundy bandana trailed behind it, his face caught in ardor, and I imagined blistered palms gripping the neck of that giant avian towering him. What caught my gaze the most was his long, black hair, draped past the muscles of his back, the strands frozen in a flowing motion. I marveled at this statue, the only one I ever saw representing the natives, even though the statue was created by pale hands, envisioned by their blue eyes.

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My mother was a stern woman, mysterious, secretive, with little want to share her life because her eyes would turn glossy and pink and pressurize if I asked what happened to her father, yet she would slip in stories during her commercials.

“Our ancestors come from America, you know?” she told me with a smile while her TV spoke Spanish and displayed bright yellow corn tacos with bright tomatoes, lettuce that probably crunched with each chew, and a moist mound of seasoned ground beef.

She wore her moss-colored sundress, a modest fit with printed roses lining the stitches around her waist and ends of the garment. A striking perfume wafted from her body, something that attacked my senses and forced me to sneeze relentlessly. It smelled like flower petals soaked in honey water and lemon soaked in bleach. I kept pinching my nose until it was raw and dry.

“We’re natives?” I asked after several sneezes.

“Yes, we are.”

She wore that dress on the weekends when my father said he was coming home from another one of his conferences. Sometimes he would tell the truth.

“Like the indigenous people? Those natives?” I said with a crack in my voice, scratching my patchy facial hair. I sneezed again. I was considered a late bloomer, though I’d argue my body was refusing masculine transformation.

“What? No. From Europe,” she would say. “People from kings and queens.”

She formed a massive smile with her white teeth and pink gums and nodded with her statements.

I drew my head back slowly, my eyes caught in a flutter, my mouth wide open, and I roared a sneeze.

My mother shuffled in her chair, checking the fabric of her dress.

“I don’t think that’s what natives are, momma, they’re their own people, I think,” I said, sniffing.

“Are you sick?” she said, her bushy brows burrowing into her eyes.

“I think I’m allergic to your perfume,” I said with heavy breaths.

She shook her head, scoffing. “No, no, not allergies,” she said, pointing her red fingernail at me. “It’s because of your father and you spending too much time with each other.”

“Momma, what?”

“No, no, don’t ‘momma’ me. You forget your mother now? I’m not important because your father gives you attention now? Man didn’t even want you.”

My lips twitched, and my fingers grew cold. I scratched the back of my hand, and saw the blood draw from the gash, a singular color of red like that of the statue.

She drew closer in her seat, her brown eyes looking directly up into me, her lips pursed and turning white.

“That man has done nothing for you, and he doesn’t give a shit about you, but, you know what, go with him if you love him so much,” she said.

“What? Momma, I didn’t say anything about him,” I said, a faint pressure pushing around my eyes, and my sight became blurry as if they were open underwater.

“Show me respect, *carajo*,” she’d say, her voice cutting into me.

I nodded my head, and I felt a tear drift down to the tip of my nose.

“Why are you crying?” she raised her palms above her, her face contorted and confused.

“Did I hit you? Did I yell at you? Why are you crying?” she repeated.

“It’s my.. allergies... I’m.. sorry,” I said between sneezes, my voice breaking.

“‘Sorry, sorry’. That’s all you and your father say. You are the same, you two, the same face, the same voice! Can’t stand you!”

She shuffled in her chair again, her gaze back onto the Spanish novela on the TV.

“Good for nothing people,” she said aloud.

She crossed her arms over her bosom and continued shaking her head, muttering under her breath, and a sexy buff man with his chiseled jawline and bare chest caressing his black-haired damsel, tracing her oily brown skin with the tips of his fingers appeared on the screen.

“I’m sorry, momma,” I said again, my nose and eyes beating.

She waved her hand away and clicked her tongue. “Shh!”

I sneezed once more, the wet air seeping through the insides of my nostrils, and a taste of copper filled my throat. “Sorry.”

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My back would stay facing my mother as she drove off in her Ford Escape, leaving the school car circle. It was freshman year, and Seminole High School’s mascot was the “Warhawk”. It was an anthropomorphic bird, upright on its two white-feathered legs, the ends of its wings fashioning clean, cream gloves, its orange beak lifted high, and those blue eyes stared down at the students, its smile more a smirk.

There were no natives at this school, none I had ever encountered at least. My aquiline nose would cause the other white boys to classify me as simply Arabic, rather than the mixture that I was. They’d call my nose a “beak”, and then follow it by asking me if I had bombed any buildings.

My hair was short, dry, and its natural black curls were temporarily straightened from the constant pull of my comb. I shaved, as best as I could, but I would usually cut the topographic acne that covered my cheeks, causing blood to dry in mounds beneath the patches of my short beard, the liquid camouflaged beneath the thick black stubble.

In AP human geography, I learned nothing from the teacher. He was a fat, pudgy white man with a grey caterpillar over his thin, pink lips, and he adored breaking into conversation with the skinny pale girls during class. A classmate named Scotty asked me if I was the one who shot up a queer nightclub.

“What?” I’d ask, forcing a laugh.

“Like, were you related to him?”

“Uh, why would I be, haha?”

“I mean, he kinda looks like you. Dude’s a terrorist, just wanna make sure we’re safe here.”

“Dude, what?” I said in a quiet whisper, pulling my face into a smile, my cheeks sore.

“Calm down.” His voice grew deeper, his chest raised.

“I’m just—”

“Mr. Smith!” Scotty yelled, his hand raised.

The teacher lowered his head, shook it, turned from a white skinny girl with square glasses and clear braces and looked at Scotty. “What?”

He pointed at me. “He’s making terrorist jokes, and it’s making me uncomfortable.”

I dropped my mouth, my wide eyes drying at the sight of the teacher.

“Seriously?” he said to a class of giggling white faces, “Get out my class, and go to the principal’s office, Ali!”

“That’s not true! That’s not even my name!”

“Go!”

Scotty laughed as I walked out, and I stood outside the classroom with no direction of where to go. I had never been to the principal’s office, but when I found the administration room, they told me to sit down and think about what I’ve done.

“You hanging with the wrong crowd, ey?” the receptionist with tight red lips and badly drawn eyeliner asked me. I sneezed from her sour perfume, and the scent of vinegar filled the room. “Typical.”

I felt no point in speaking my truth. I wanted to ask them if there was anyone I could speak with that looked like me, or someone, at the very least, who didn’t look like Scotty. It seemed, in that moment, like I was the only sensible fleck of dirt in the office with its white walls and countertops.

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The day after I was sent to the principal’s office, a poster was placed on the notice board of our school with my face beside that of the club shooter. It said, “TERRORISTS, BEWARE”.

“Was that when he was a kid?” a student asked aloud, pointing at the poster.

“I think so,” another responded.

The same pictures were then posted online. The identity of who posted them or on the notice board was never revealed. The account was banned, eventually, and I was never approached or consoled by any of the teachers or staff. I wasn’t given the privilege to face my perpetrator, their acts now as distant as raindrops falling onto hot asphalt. I wondered if the natives’ magicks could be brought back to life, to turn me into someone that didn’t look like me.

I ran to the boys' restroom into the handicap stall and slammed the door shut. I could hear the hinges ring from the force, and a screw dropped onto the checkerboard tile, its rusted metal disappearing from my sight's growing blur. I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hands, the hard, coagulated blood from the cuts scratching my face, and I wanted to scream. The mirror was unclean and unpolished, drawn figures of penises and misspelled versions of slurs covered the many fingerprints that tattooed its reflective surface.

I inhaled. I held the air in until my heart itself began to pound against my chest, pleading for my release, yet I did not falter for at least I had control over the pain I gave myself. I wanted to claw at my body before another could do it for me. I wanted them to find me in a pool of my innards and finally react.

"I hate you," I said to the brown blob in the murky reflection, and I exhaled, heaving, gasping for any sort of air.

I pulled a brown paper towel wipe from the dispenser and drew water over it. I squeezed it, a stream of gray water dripping from its darkened roll, and I wiped the mirror of the dried oils that blinded me. The drawn penises floated around me, the wild lexicon of faggot, tranny, spick, beaner, paki, jihadi, terrorist and a call to kill black folk in their derivative splayed around the chrome.

I could see the stubble of my father, those grays of his black, and the growing texture of my ruined face from his enforced shaving. I saw this head of hair, kept and straight and waiting to bald. I inched closer, squinting, and I swear I could see the smile of that younger self, laughing, aching to last forever in their joy.

"I hate you," I said again, and I heard his voice come out of my mouth, deep and resounding.

I felt my wholeness shake, and my hand squeezed into a tight fist. I stared at the mirror.. I imagined a plan, a shard of that broken glass marked with whatever motley of a slur it chose, grazing into my neck and through the soft flesh, microscoping fragments of the mineral finding its way into the gashes I've made, sifting into my body, digging deeper and deeper.

I heard the bathroom door open, and the laughter of boys filled the room. They spoke about how good a girl's vagina felt, and another said he walked in on his parents having sex. They laughed, and I heard striking steel until the smell of burning gas and marijuana filled my stall.

They kept laughing, their voices sounding like Scotty's, like pigs squealing, then they stopped.

"Yo, who's in there?" one asked.

I kept quiet, my eyes still on my reflection.

"Probably a freak," the other said, his long drag breaking the silence. "Freak, say anything, and we'll kill ya."

They laughed. It was a boisterous laugh, a polluting laughter that could kill them if they forgot to breathe. The sound of chatter then entered the bathroom, and the slow hiss of a closing door was all I heard until it shut. I felt a warmth cover my fingertips and unclenched my fist. They were velvety red, and my palms dripped sweat and blood. My cries were silent, and I blew my nose so much the snot ripped through the paper towels and mixed into my bloodied hands.

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When I had long hair, I think I was at my happiest. It was the peak of my lengthy locks, the curls falling past my shoulders, and my father was furious when I told him with a wide smile,

teeth and gums and all, that my fourth-grade substitute teacher called me a girl the day before he took me to cut my hair.

“Dumb bitches didn’t get to work when I was a kid, and now they just let them teach kids whenever,” he said, putting a collared shirt and his blue scrubs over his hairy chest and large gut.

“When I was a kid, we’d spit on dumb bitches like that,” he continued, dragging the waist of his pant-scrubs beneath his hanging belly fat.

He pulled me by the arm and into the car, and we drove to the school that morning. He walked into the classroom with me, and the substitute teacher was there, a tall white man with cerulean eyes and pink lips. My father's grip on my shoulder loosened, and I could feel the blood pulsating around my shoulder, the flesh growing numb.

“Is everything okay?” the substitute asked, scratching his gelled blonde waves.

My father’s eyes remained on him, and he smiled and chuckled. “Ah, yes! Just wanted to see who was teaching him, worried father and all. Hey, can I ask you something?”

My father did not move. The substitute nodded, placing worksheets back on the desk behind him.

“It’s no issue at all, none whatsoever, but this is my son,” he said, motioning towards me.

“Okay,” the substitute said, his eyes wide and watching my father’s softening face.

“It’s just... he told me you called him a girl, and it’s just a bit disrespectful is all. That’s all, my friend, and what’s your name?”

“I’m very sorry! I don’t remember doing that, but I’ll make sure it won’t happen again.”

He shook my father’s hand, and I could see the sheen forming around my father’s forehead.

“Tim Shrober. And you are..?”

“Bill- Dr. Bill,” my father responded. “I have a clinic down the road, feel free to stop by.”

They conversed until school began at eight, and my father left in a gayful glee. He didn’t say goodbye or tell me he loves me. Rather, he left, as he does at home, but it was a nice moment for him to visit my elementary school for the very first time.

Still, I could not release the smile for quite awhile, as the sound of being called a girl repeated itself within my mind many times that day. I felt light, the weight and expectations of what my father wanted absent for that moment, and an ecstasy brewed in my thoughts and dreams and past the short night until it was time for my long hair to be sliced apart.

When we got to the salon a kind lady with a nude-lipped smile greeted us. She took me to her seat and pushed the lever beneath it, raising me to her bosom. She didn’t have the white skin; hers was dark, almost black, the melanin filling each pore created a canvas of trees finding refuge deep in a sunlit forest. She was a mahogany tree, I would tell myself, and she spoke like wind through a wooden flute.

“Now why are we cutting off these pretty locks?” she asked me, her sweetness making me giggle.

Her hair was long and inky, like the statue I had seen long ago, except hers was a tapestry of curls interlocking within each other, and they were reflective in the light, shining and full of volume.

“My dad said I have to,” I said, the giggle faded away.

“Oh?” she began partitioning my wavy curls, testing their lengths. “Is that what you want?”

I moved my eyes into hers in the reflection of the mirror. The irises were like mine except within a horizon of green. She really was a forest.

“I don’t know,” I said, looking down at my lap, the black salon apron covering my entirety.

“That’s okay,” she said, the words soft and gentle, and I could see the sadness in her eyes staring down onto me.

She washed my hair, massaging my scalp and applying oils and creams to my roots. She then took out her scissors, and clipped a strand of my long hair with her fingertips. I saw her look at me as I frowned.

She smiled. “Hair is like leaves, babygirl, they’ll always grow back as long as you care for the soul of the tree.”

I looked in the reflection to see if my father noticed, but his nose was deep in a newspaper about another storm hitting Florida.

“What’s that mean?”

She chuckled, cutting the ends of my hair with a delicate touch.

“It means you ain’t got nothing to worry about,” she said. “It means all your beauty is inside you, not outside.”

I saw the wet strands flop down behind me and onto me, the smell of shea butter and coconut wafting into my nose. I deeply inhaled, the scent pleasurable.

“My dad says I’m not supposed to be beautiful,” I said.

She stopped, and her face became softer, her eyes looking into mine, blinking.

“I-” she began but returned to her cutting.

She moved my head around with gentle pressure, her bare fingernails clean and kept. Her eyes were focused, and each lock that fell made me wince.

“Don’t cry, babygirl,” she said as I sniffled. “You ain’t walking over hot coals or anything. It’ll grow back.”

I dared not to go past the sound of my sniffles, the fear of my father lashing his words at the sight of my tears kept them at bay.

“He says I’m a faggot because of my hair,” I said, my face scrunched and twisted from the blocked tears.

The salonist stopped, her shoulders dropping, and her face was nothing like my father’s or mother’s. It was something unfamiliar, warming and radiant.

She lowered herself to my ear and whispered, “Sweetheart, you are beautiful. No matter who you are, that beauty of yours will always be there.”

She finished my hair, the ends short and limp. I wanted to hug her, tell her thank you, that I don’t feel like a boy at all, no matter how I look, but I couldn’t. My father’s grip was too tight at my wrist, and we left, far from her. I imagined her to be a Seminole. I wondered if she were like me, too, when she was a child. Maybe she had a father who wanted her to be a man, but she became the beauty of her soul. I would perform for her, a jig, maybe, and she would applaud and laugh at the movement of my feet, striding past the other as I bounced around the floor as if I was dancing naked on the sun.

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There is a moment after a hurricane rages through home where everything is silent. The whirling clouds and sky are black and starless, the wind is still, and the animals that once found homes in the sparse flora are gone or dead. It’s a muted sensation. Sometimes I tap my fingers by my ears and sigh in relief from the echoes of skin.

The world is alien. The streets are empty, caught in the same darkness, the buildings mere hulking shadows, and the rules of society, too, feel changed, for a time. I touch my cheeks, dry palms scratching against the stubble, and I stare above into the abyss.

I imagine the skin to be supple and hairless, smooth and unmatched by the moisture of my palms. They slide over my neck, and I pretend the small mound of an Adam's apple isn't there. I rub my arms, the thin hairs soft. I undress, my body remains indiscernible in the black, yet I still feel the body oils rubbing into my palms. I sense the tips of leg hair kissing my soft hands. A coolness emanates from the ground, blacker than the starless sky, and it feels as if I'm standing on sunlight. Where there was a penis, there is now weightlessness. My chest feels like a bosom, mounds of air hanging from my upper body.

“Hello, world!” I scream through the silence.

I dream of its permanence, and I cry, I cry for nobody but myself to hear.

And the sky cracks apart, the blue, lunar light seeping through its crevices, and I bathe in its radiance.