

## Lessons on America

Brian Allan Skinner

Auntie Moona called to tell me Uncle Habib did not come home. She called me two hours ago, but I did not hear her knocking on the door to my room. I had my headphones on, listening to Brief Heavy Downpours, my favorite. Auntie knows her twelve-year-old nephew does not speak such good English. She asked me to go look for Uncle.

There is a curfew in the park that prohibits persons from being there between one and six in the morning. Once I step off the bridge from City Island, I am in Pelham Bay Park. It is nearly three in the morning. I could be arrested and sent away like my father. That is why I pay attention to all the laws. I do not know where they send people arrested in America. Maybe to Chicago, where they are never heard from again.

There are many stars tonight, and some lights from the city. It is easy to see where I am going. I look for Uncle's red and white and green umbrella with the yellow letters, *Habib's Halal Market*. I know he pushes his food wagon along the concrete walkway at the edge of the sand. But Orchard Beach is long and I am tired.

It is hard walking in the sand, like dreaming, walking so slow, the ground grabbing at your feet. I think I see his wagon, but it is no use hurrying. The faster I walk, the slower I go.

I love my Uncle more than anybody. He is my mother's brother. One day, he told me, when I graduate high school, he will adopt me. But I worry I will never learn English. It's too hard. Each word means so many different things and many sound alike.

I see Uncle Habib's food cart. His umbrella is down. Everything is shadows. I try to walk faster, but it feels like I am going backwards. I do not see my Uncle. I am worried he is sick.

Uncle has made a shallow pit in the sand and covered himself with his *jānamāz*, his prayer rug. It is cold at night and there is much dew on the beach.

"Uncle!" I shout. "Uncle Habib!"

"Quiet, Basim. You'll disturb the stars," Uncle whispers.

He rolls up his rug and sits up. He pats the sand and invites me to sit beside him.

"This is the only place in New York where you can see stars like back home," he tells me.

"I do not know. We were afraid to go out after dark," I remind him.

“Yes, poor boy. The stars and the moon were taken from you. But now you have them back.”

Uncle Habib pats my knee. I am sitting on my hands. The sand is warm where Uncle has lain.

“I know your Auntie has sent you. But I cannot go home just yet. Stay with me, Basim.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

I am pleased he has asked me to stay. I do not wish to trudge back so soon, especially if we must haul the wagon.

“I have lost the money. Your Auntie will be very angry with me.”

“Lost, Uncle? How? I will help you look for it. Soon it will be morning.”

“Someone has taken it, my child. I was robbed.”

“What did he look like, Uncle? I will find the man, beat him up, and get your money back.”

“Worse is the shame, my boy. It was a woman. Two women. They came to my food wagon to order something. They spoke our language. They fluttered their eyelids at me. I was flattered. Beware of flattering women, Basim.”

“I will, Uncle. I’ll be very careful of women who smile.”

I see my Uncle grinning. His teeth appear in the faint light, and a sparkle in one eye.

“One woman was deciding what to order and talking like a magpie. The other woman slipped behind me while I was listening to her friend and stole the cash box. Two-hundred eighty-one dollars. Auntie will be hot as a pepper.”

I want to ask Uncle what the women looked like, but he is too kind and will not report them. Uncle Habib likes to tell me, *The devil always wears familiar garb*. Now I know what he means.

“You should call your Auntie, Basim. Tell her I am safe, but say not a word about the money.”

“I won’t,” I promise him.

I reach into my pocket for my phone. I also find the envelope Uncle's friend brought me after school, tucked inside the schoolbook I had lost, my English lessons. I don't know where his friend found my book.

"This is from Mr. Nicolás," I tell him.

He crinkles the envelope and feels its thickness. I call my Auntie and tell her all is well, that I have found Uncle and will stay with him until daylight.

We lie back on the sand and Uncle Habib covers us with his *jānamāz*. I do not know if this is acceptable. But if Allah has made the night cold, and has blessed my Uncle with a beautiful rug, how could we not cover ourselves with it?

I have never seen so many stars. There are too many. As I stare up at them, the earth moves, just a little. I feel dizzy and close my eyes. I hear my Uncle snore. Even though I do not know how to pray, I thank Allah that he has kept my Uncle safe. I love my Uncle more than anyone. As much as I loved my Mother.

\* \* \*

I awake shivering. It is near dawn. The sky ranges from fiery white at the horizon to deep blue above, but the sun is still below the water. It is Uncle's praying that awakened me. I sit up.

Uncle crouches on the rug, facing where the sun will rise. His forehead touches the rug. I do not understand much of what he is saying.

When he is finished saying his *Fajr* prayer, he rolls up his rug and crawls back to me across the sand. He pulls himself up by the handle of his food cart. Uncle sends me to the water fountain to get water for coffee and cooking. I feel the first warmth of the sun on my back.

After Uncle grinds the coffee beans and puts the water on the burner, he tears open the envelope from his friend. It is full of money. Uncle counts.

"Two-hundred eighty-one dollars," he says. "And here is a note. Read it to me, Nephew."

"Yes, Uncle Habib. This *abjadīyah*, this alphabet, I understand. It reads, *Dearest Habib, As the saying goes, You cannot steal from a thief. I believe I have recovered the correct amount from the thieves. Yours, Nicolás. PS I have no doubt your nephew will graduate English at the top of his class.*"

"I am proud of you, Basim."

"But this is not American writing, Uncle. Here. Look."

I glance down as I hand Uncle Habib the note from Mr. Nicolás. It is now all in English and I recognize every letter and I understand every word.

Uncle smiles at me as he pours too much milk and sugar into my coffee. He does not make it the American way, *naked*, as he says. I want to ask him how his friend knew how much money had been stolen—knew it the day before—but I know what he will tell me. He will shrug his shoulders and turn his palms up.

“Why don’t you ask him?” Uncle says.

I help my Uncle open his red and white and green umbrella with the yellow letters. We lift it up and put it in the holder on the side of his food cart.

“I *will* ask him,” I say. I hope I have not shown disrespect.

“*The boy becomes the man,*” he remarks.

I promise I will go see Uncle’s friend the next time I am in the village of Manhattan. I have coffee with Uncle and then head to school. I know he is watching, so I make sure to turn the right way at the painted iron bridge.

\* \* \*

Nicolás is the new owner of Uncle’s old store in the City. It is now a café. *Café Kundalini*. It is Indian, I think. I did not recognize Uncle’s friend in his handsome red jacket. His full white beard is neatly trimmed. He bows to me and folds his hands.

“Thank you, sir, for finding my book,” I tell him.

“A good man is grateful and always remembers his debts, though I suspect you hoped that book would stay lost forever.”

I nod to him and look down. My face is hot.

“Come, let us have tea.”

The tea pot and tea glasses appear on an empty tray in Nicolás’s hands. There is a jar with honey, but no milk.

“You want to know how I know things? How I do things.?”

I nod to Uncle’s friend.

“I have never learned anything without first wondering about it, Basim. There are no answers without questions.”

The tea is made with rose-hips. It is my favorite. My mother made such a tea for me when I was very young. Just a sip with lots of honey, especially when I was sick.

“How did I learn American so quickly, Nicolás?”

“I read your English lessons, the whole book, kiddo, cover to cover. It was a real snooze. When you touched the book after I sent it to you, you learned everything I learned.”

“But why? Who cares?”

“Your Uncle cares, Basim. Your Uncle is sick. You must become his son very soon. I have asked a lawyer to draw up papers so it can happen. Please take these with you. You and Uncle Habib and Auntie Moona must sign them.”

A thick envelope appears in Nicolás’s hand, and a fresh pot of tea on the table. It is a different tea, more like the dark tea my Uncle makes. We touch glasses and smile.

I think that the picture on the wall moves. It is a picture of clouds, high summer clouds. They look real enough to touch. I stand up and reach towards the picture. I can almost feel the cold cloud mist on my fingers after the hot glass of tea.

I am small again. My mother cradles me. I reach up, furious I cannot grasp the clouds overhead. My mother sings. It is a song about clouds. I watch them float past, one becoming the other, one becoming two. My mother’s melody floats. Two becoming one. There is honey on her tongue. I am sleepy. I am sleeping in my mother’s arms.

Nicolás clears his throat and I return at once to the table, and sit across from him.

“Perhaps you could repay me for the ‘English lessons’ with a favor. A very small favor,” he says.

There is a brown paper bag on the table. Nicolás writes on a piece of paper and hands it to me. I do not know what is in the bag, maybe something illegal and they will put me in jail.

“Relax, Basim. These are just two fortune cookies for friends of your Uncle Habib. Do you know where Riverside Drive is?”

“Yes, Mr. Nicolás.”

“Good boy. It won’t be so far if you ride your bike.”

“What bike, sir?”

“The one somebody left for you. I forget his name. You must have seen it on the way in.”

“The red one with the sparkles and the skinny tires?”

“That must be the one. You must deliver this bag on your way home. There is no charge,” Nicolás says. “And pay close attention. It is one of your American lessons, one not in the book.”

I cannot wait to ride the bike, my bike. I finish my tea in one swallow, and take up the bag, the slip of paper, and the letters for Uncle Habib to sign. Nicolás bows to me and puts his hand on my head. I think maybe he is a holy man, but I do not know what kind.

I am a little bit afraid. There are many laws about traffic and right-of-way. I did not pay such close attention because I walk or ride the bus or the subway. I am very careful. I ride up to Union Square to find Broadway and stay on Broadway so I do not get lost. It is a long way, but once the cars and buses speed ahead of me, I have the road to myself for a minute and I go very fast. The wind makes noise like thunder in my ears. I feel so free.

“Watch out!” I holler. “Here comes the camel jockey!”

I love my bike. I love my Uncle Habib.

\* \* \*

“I did not buy you the bicycle, Basim. You must...”

“Yes, I know,” I told my Uncle. “I must ask Nicolás.”

“Yes, you must. And he asked that you bring the lawyer papers back to him. The lawyer wants to bring us before the court so that you may become my son.”

“I would like that, Uncle Habib.”

“Go now. Bring my friend my greetings. Tell him The Bronx is not so far. He must come visit me soon.”

I kiss my Uncle. He is a very good man. Then I go down to the basement to get my bike. Auntie has given me an old bedsheet to cover it. I did not want plaster and dust falling on it.

\* \* \*

*Café Kundalini* is not yet open. Nicolás is in the kitchen making a special dish for a customer. It looks like a celery root with stripes. He slices it so thin and so fast and the knife is so big and gleaming sharp I am afraid he will cut himself.

“That’s why I keep my hands in my pockets. It’s safer that way,” Nicolás says.

I look down. He takes his hands out of his pockets to show me he has not cut himself. I look up and the odd root is sliced as thin as an onion skin.

“You are a magician,” I tell him, and laugh.

“I do not think it’s magic, Basim, just science without an explanation, like how you learned to read and write American just by touching the book. So what did you learn the other night on your errand?”

“You sent me to bad men,” I tell him.

“Your Uncle is my dearest friend, Basim. Would I throw his nephew to wolves? Why do you say they are bad men?”

“They answered the door in their underwear.”

Nicolás laughs. He pushes the sliced root from the cutting board into a pot of hot oil. It sizzles and hisses.

“If I had a quarter for every New Yorker who answered the door in less than full attire, I’d be astoundingly wealthy, my boy. Better steel yourself.”

This is not the sort of advice my teachers give me at school. Uncle Habib thinks his friend is wise. I am not so sure.

“They were sitting on the couch together, under the same blanket.”

“Was it cold?” Nicolás asks. He cuts green onions and adds them to the pot.

“Cold and raining,” I say.

Nicolás shrugs his shoulders and turns his palms up in my Uncle’s imitation of him. He is forcing me to say it.

“They are *faggots*.”

Nicolás puts a cover on the pot and takes off his apron. He walks with me to the front door. We stand and look down Avenue A to the park. He puts his hand on my shoulder. It is a sunny afternoon, cool, with high white clouds. There are many people in the park.

“What do you see, Basim?”

“I see America.”

I smile. I think it is a clever answer the teacher will like.

“Who is America for?”

I imitate my Uncle’s imitation of him with my palms and shoulders up.

“That is your assignment: an essay, *Who Is America For?* One full page, in American. There’s a notepad and pen waiting for you on a bench in the park. Lock up your bike first, the one the bad men bought for you.”

“What? Why? Why did *they* buy me a bike?”

“One of the men has known your Uncle since your Uncle’s first week in America, when the man—his name is Six—was only a little older than you are, Basim. He wanted to do something nice for your Uncle. But there is never anything Uncle Habib wants, so he says to buy a bicycle for his nephew, a red one that sparkles.”

“Then, technically, the bicycle is a payment to my Uncle.”

“The little lawyer is in his office.”

“If you please, sir, go easy on me.”

“If it was easy, Basim, you’d already be a millionaire. Time for the essay,” Nicolás says.

I nod to him and set off toward Tompkins Square Park. He is a tough teacher and he does not forget.

I puzzle over the bike from the men my friends say are a bad kind. Must I give it back? The men did not seem bad to me. They were friends. That cannot be wrong.

The paper and pen are on a bench. No one has stolen them. I chain my bike to the iron fence and sit across from it so I can keep an eye on it. I watch people in the park: young and old, tall and short, thin and fat, white and brown and black, people alone and people together. Are they all Americans? I do not know.

The words do not come. It is easier to watch the clouds. They look like they will get caught on the tall trees overhead, very old sycamore trees that seem to hold up the sky.

The afternoon is mild and sunny. I watch the people. Like the clouds, they come and go, one by one and in groups, some light, some dark. A young African woman carries her baby in a pouch in front of her. She sits down on a bench and feeds her child. I think of my mother. An old man hobbles past with his cane, reminding me of my Uncle Habib. Two men sit down on another bench. They hook their little fingers together, what Americans call *pinkies*. They are like the men who bought my bicycle for me. I see they are friends.

I think of myself and how, if my Uncle had not sent for me after my mother died and my father disappeared, I might be in the militia, shooting guns and killing people, maybe getting killed. My friends do not like anybody, only themselves. They call me “camel jockey” and “towel head.” They do not like niggers and faggots and stupid bitches. Who is left? If they ran things, America would be like an empty sky. Maybe *my* friends do not know everything.

I write some words on the paper. It is still strange to me to understand American without thinking about it. I wonder if I have lost my old writing, my old *abjadīyah*, but it is still there. That makes me happy. Soon the page is full, but I do not like most of it. I cross words out. There is not much left. It will have to do.

Across the way, a pretty girl who has been eyeing me, approaches.

“You have beautiful eyes,” she tells me. “So deep. Is that your bike?”

“Yes,” I say. “My... my... Uncle Habib got it for me.”

“May I ride it?” the girl asks.

“Yes,” I tell her, and go to unlock it. “But don’t go too fast.”

“I won’t.”

She can barely reach the pedals and the bike wobbles. I am a little worried. She sets off down one of the paths and seems to do all right. I wait for her. Soon she comes from the opposite direction. She has gone round the entire park. The girl smiles at me and waves. I wish she would keep her hands on the handlebars. I wait for her to come round again.

I wait a long time, but the girl does not come back. I do not know her name. I go to look for her. I ask people in the park and on the street, but no one has seen her. It is getting late. I run back to Nicolás, to tell him what has happened. He is waiting for me with a tray of tea.

“Nicolás, my bike is gone. My red bike!”

“Easy, Basim. Didn’t you lock it up?”

“Yes, I did. But a girl wanted to ride it. She smiled at me. I told her she could, but then she didn’t come back. No one has seen her.”

“Ah...” Nicolás says, drawing out his breath. “The lesson of your Uncle with the cash box, was that not a good one?”

“Yes, but... but... I forgot.”

“That is OK, Basim. Everyone makes mistakes. I will get your red bike back.”

“But I will be late for supper. Auntie will be cross with me.”

“I can fix that, too, my boy. Let me have your phone.”

I give Nicolás my phone. He touches it and hands it back. I can only guess what he has done, who he has called.

“Now, let us have tea. I want to hear your essay.”

The tea is again rosehips with honey. I show Nicolás my page of writing with almost everything crossed out.

“I see you have filled up the page with American writing.”

“Yes, but most of it is not good, just some of it.”

“Well, then read me the best part.”

I take a sip of tea and clear my throat. I am nervous. I am afraid he will laugh when I do not want to be funny.

“*Who is America for?* America is for people who have nowhere else to go.”

Nicolás says nothing. He raises his glass of tea and I raise mine to him. We clink them together.

“That is good, Basim. If I were your teacher in school, I’d give you an ‘A.’ You will be a great American some day”

I smile and look out the window. It is almost dark. There is a rumbling outside. Two men ride up on a motorcycle. They take off their helmets and come inside. It is the two men I saw in

their long underwear. They are wearing blue jeans and leather jackets. They look very cool. I feel very ashamed.

The men shake Nicolás's hand and laugh.

"I believe you know Basim, but he may not know your names."

I stand up and shake their hands. I feel very small next to them.

"Six will take you home, Basim. Antonio and I have business to discuss. Don't forget to leave your Uncle's papers here."

I wonder what kind of name "Six" is. He is blond with blue eyes. The other man is more like me: dark skin and eyes and hair.

Antonio hands me his helmet. I feel so cool. But it falls over my eyes. I make a joke.

"Maybe the towel-head needs a towel," I say.

Everyone laughs. Nicolás comes back from the kitchen with a towel and winds it around my head.

"Basim is studying to be an American," he says. "I guess he's now got another lesson down: *Laugh at yourself before somebody beats you to it.*"

They laugh again. The helmet fits perfectly now. I see myself in the glass front door. Yes, I am pretty cool. I wish my friends could see me.

I sit at the back of the motorcycle. Six warns me the muffler is hot. I hold onto the belt of his leather jacket. Now I am worried my friends really might see me—see me with one of the men they call *faggots*. No, I don't care if they do see us. They will be jealous.

The engine is very loud and the motorcycle goes very fast. At the red light I move forward and hold onto the pockets of Six's jacket. We take off like a rocket. It is scary and I do not want to look—but I do. I am flying like Prince Husain on his magic carpet.

We go onto the big highway in The Bronx. I have never gone so fast. I hide behind Six to escape the wind. I am cold. I watch the buildings race past me, and the road beneath me is a blur. I look up. I am flying as fast as the clouds.

There are not so many streetlights now. At last I see we are on City Island Road going through the park. Then we cross the old iron bridge and I am home.

I want to kiss the ground. My legs are sore. It was like riding a donkey, a donkey with the devil after him. I take off my helmet

“How’d you like it, Sport?” Six asks me.

“Fantastic,” I tell him. I think it may be OK to tell a small lie to make someone feel good.

Uncle Habib and Auntie Moona come out to see what all the noise is about. They both hug Six. Then they hug me. They pull him inside and tell him he must stay for supper. He does not even try to turn them down.

We have goat stew with carrots and salad with lentils. I am glad there is enough for everybody. I am very hungry.

“It is a shame about the bicycle,” my Uncle remarks, as though talking to no one.

I nod. I do not know how much Uncle Habib knows of the story. I hope he does not ask me anything. I cannot lie to Uncle Habib.

“Nicolás has said he will get it back for me, Uncle.”

“And then you will owe him another favor.”

“Yes, Uncle, I know.”

“Antonio brought the bolt-cutters,” Six tells my Uncle.

My Uncle shushes him. They smile at one another. I do not know what bolt-cutters are, but I will find out.

I see how my Auntie and my Uncle are with Six, how gentle they are. I see how they love one another. I see it in their eyes, in their smiles. My Uncle Habib would never love a bad man, nor would my Auntie.

Six gets up from the table. He kisses Auntie and thanks her for the meal. Auntie says Uncle made the stew.

“There will be more visits from the social workers, Habib, but you have all been through that before. I think it wouldn’t hurt to point out little Basim’s sudden mastery of English.”

I do not like him calling me *little*. I am taller than Uncle Habib and almost as tall as him.

“When do you want me to swing by again, Sport, so you can pick up your bike?”

“He found it?” I ask.

“With Nicolás on it, Basim, it’s only a matter of time. Later, dude.”

Six hugs Uncle and kisses Auntie and goes down the stairs. I hear him start up his motorcycle. I wave from the window.

I think I like Six. Maybe not as much as my Auntie and Uncle do, but he is OK for a *faggot*. Now that I know I will get my red bicycle back, I can think about the next thing to wish for. I think I would like a pair of blue jeans. I am going to be an American some day, a great American, as Nicolás says. I need to get ready.

\* \* \*

That night I have strange dreams. Those are the only kind I have. If things are not strange, I know I must be awake.

It is not a magic carpet I am on, it is my bed that’s flying. I roll to the edge and look down. I see all of New York, all the lights sparkling. I wonder why I am not terrified to be so high up. I see Uncle Habib’s house and the park and the Statue of Liberty and my school, all of it as tiny as toys. Six and Antonio go by on a motorcycle in their long underwear.

I am standing with my Uncle and Auntie in the court. The Judge stands at the top of a ladder and looks down at us. I am a lawyer. I have papers. I address the Judge.

“Please, Sir Judge. There are enough laws in America. We need only one law.”

“And what law is that, Basim?” the Judge asks.

I turn to my Uncle Habib. He smiles at me like the rising sun.

“Be kind,” I tell the Judge. “Just be kind.”

\* \* \*

Six comes by for me the next Friday. He brings two packages, a big square one and a flat one. It is my own helmet—one that fits me, a red one—and a pair of blue jeans. I go to my room to try them on while Uncle Habib and Six have a discussion over tea.

I hate the blue jeans. They are stiff and scratchy. Putting them on is like trying to get dressed in a cardboard box. I cannot sit or walk in them; everything rubs.

I want to wear the blue jeans Six has brought me, but I put my old tan trousers back on. They are so comfortable. Six sees I have not changed.

“Maybe your Auntie will wash the new jeans for you a couple times,” he tells me. “They will get softer.”

His jeans look soft, but these jeans are impossible. Americans must be crazy to wear blue jeans.

Uncle Habib and Six finish their discussion and their tea.

“Ready, Sport?”

I nod to Six and kiss my Uncle good-bye. Everything he wants to tell me is in his eyes. I am a little bit happy, a little bit scared. He touches my head in blessing

I ask Six if we can drive by my school, what my friends call the “Hairy Ass Truman High School.” My friends will be sitting outside on the steps, passing judgment on the world.

We stop. There they are. They pretend they are looking somewhere else, but they are checking out the motorcycle. I unfasten the strap and take off my helmet. I wave to them.

My friend Bonkers waves back. The others nudge him. They pretend not to see me and how cool I am. Their mouths hang open like a bunch of stupid boys.

I put on my helmet and tap Six’s shoulder. I hang on tight. He revs the engine and takes off so fast the front wheel rises in the air. He is showing off for my friends.

It is cold and I am glad I have on a sweater under my jacket. I think about many things on the drive to Nicolás’s café in Manhattan. I found out on the Internet what bolt-cutters are and I found out a *faggot* is a homosexual, a man who likes men. I do not really understand the fuss. I am more worried that Six’s friend Antonio may have done something unlawful with the bolt-cutters and been sent to a prison.

Six finds a parking space near the front door of the café. We take off our helmets.

“Will you tell me what the bolt-cutters are for?” I ask Six.

He seems surprised. He stops.

“I don’t want to go against your Uncle, Basim, but you seem a smart young man. How did you think we were going to get your bike back?”

I shrug and raise my hands. I had not thought about the *how*.

“Nicolás spotted your bike a couple streets over, chained to a street pole. It was your chain but not your lock. He stood guard while Antonio cut the chain on either side of the lock.”

Six reaches into his jeans pocket and gives me the new lock and keys. They are warm in my cold hand.

“But you stole it from the poor girl.”

“Yeah, from the girl who stole it from *you*. By the time we filed a report and made nice to the parents and wheedled the girl into giving the bike back, you’d have been too old to ride it. Nicolás said the bolt-cutters were a shortcut around the law. Come on. I need something warm.”

I do not think I like the idea of shortcuts to the law, but I am happy to find my red bike in the kitchen. I look for scratches. Nicolás is making hot cocoa with cinnamon for us.

Six finds the table where Antonio is sitting and bends over to kiss him.

“You are homosexuals, right?” I ask them.

Six and Antonio sputter and look at each other. Then they laugh.

“I guess that’s letting the cat out of the cellophane bag,” Antonio says. “Yes, Basim. Most men like women, but some men like other men, like Six and me.”

“That’s like *gay*, right?”

“Six and me like *queer*, Basim. That’s another word for *odd* or *strange*.”

“So if my friends say you’re *faggots*, I’ll tell them you’re *queers*.”

“I’m not sure that will help much,” Six says, smiling.

I think I understand, but American is such a *queer* language. Everything means something else—or three other things. How do Americans understand each other?

Nicolás brings four steaming mugs of cocoa. He sits down next to me and winks.

I feel like a man tonight. Six did not tell me a nice lie. He told me the truth. He is a good man. I know why my Uncle loves him. I love him, too. And Antonio.

\* \* \*

It is the day for me and Auntie Moona and Uncle Habib to stand up in the court and speak with the Judge. I am nervous. I could not eat breakfast.

Today I am wearing the blue jeans from Six. They are the newest and darkest pants I have. They are still scratchy, but not so much. I think they help me stand straighter, but I do not like them. Maybe if I rub them in the dirt again, Auntie will give them another washing.

We stand looking up at the Judge. The lawyer, Mr. Juan de Crisco, does all the talking. Papers go back and forth, up and down. It is like my friends playing cards in the parking lot.

“Young man,” the Judge says to me.

My face is burning. My tongue is stuck. I step forward.

“I was sorry to learn of the loss of your parents, my boy. But I was happy to hear that your Uncle and Auntie love you so much they want to adopt you.”

I like that the Judge calls her Auntie, too. I think I like him.

“Your Uncle will be your Father from now on. You do understand the difference, don’t you, young man?”

“Yes,” I tell him. I am nervous; my voice shakes. “My Father will be stricter than my Uncle.”

The Judge smiles. “Exactly so. And what, would you say, is the most important lesson your new Father has taught you?”

“To be kind,” I say, as I did in my dream.

The room turns fuzzy and all the talking seems far away and mumbled. I grow dizzy. I wish I’d had breakfast. I faint, hitting my head on something. Then I see the polished stone floor.

I awaken on a wooden bench with my Auntie and Uncle, and the lawyer and even the Judge standing over me.

“Welcome to America, Basim,” he says, and pats my arm. “Sit up slowly.”

I learn from Mr. de Crisco that the adoption is approved. I am now my Uncle’s son and the nephew of my Father. I am now an American, too. And I am wearing my blue jeans.

The lawyer shows me the papers with my name on them in American. My Auntie and Uncle hug and kiss me—I mean my new Mother and Father. I think I will begin wishing next for a motorcycle. I am not yet old enough to drive, but it will take time to find the one I like. It will have to be a red one.