

Arabic Lesson

2017 1/2 K Prize Winner

Shadaydah had passed out in his chair at our kitchen table, though I'd seen my father give him his insulin before his morning espresso. My father drew the medicine into the needle from a plastic jar that looked just like the one he used to deworm the sheep back on our farm. My grandfather was much easier to inject. We never had to run after him flapping our arms, to herd him into a pen, to hold him by his spiraled horns as my father jabbed the needle into his skin. Shadaydah simply rolled up the plain white sleeve of the loose salwar kameez he wore every day, and spoke in low tones to my father, words that sounded like he was clearing his throat, but softly. When they spoke like this even my father, with his hands rough from farm work, seemed gentle as he stuck the needle into Shadaydah's arm. This was the miracle of Arabic, and it belonged only to them.

It was when my father was reading the Sunday paper that Shadaydah had gasped, "Sukar, sukar!" and slumped in his chair. I've never known whether sukar was Arabic for sugar, or whether Shadaydah had secretly harbored his knowledge of this English word and had, in a moment of desperation, revealed himself.

I ran to the counter and filled a glass with a little water and a few tablespoons of sugar. My mother had pulled my grandfather to the floor and was trying to pry his mouth open. She didn't notice me standing by her side, holding out the glass of sugar-water for him to drink. Perhaps it was no longer needed, now that his tongue had swollen to three times its normal size and could no longer fit in his mouth, now that my mother was pulling out his dentures, now that she was pressing her mouth to his.

I thought what I might say to my grandfather, should he die there on the floor, and the choice was easy between the two Arabic phrases I knew: "peace be upon you," and "pass the bread," though neither seemed to be quite right.