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Dangerous

by Nadia Shehadeh

TRANSIT Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

Translated by Elizabeth Sun

*Anyway the wind blows,
Doesn't really matter to me,
To me.
- Freddie Mercury*

I grew up in a small town in East Westphalia which—in addition to a cute historic district—also hosted a well-known Christmas market, the “Book Club” of an internationally renowned media company, and an annual “International Socket Eating Festival” in the neighboring town. The “sockets” were pig snouts: deep-fried, roasted, and boiled, served—with mustard or sauce—to pig-snout eaters from around the world. Unfortunately, at the tender age of twenty, while working for the small town’s local newspaper, I also had to attend this event and report on it.

As a child, teenager, and young adult, I wanted to be a typical nobody, plain Jane, “just like all the rest.” But even in the 1980s and 90s, that was hardly possible in Germany if you had a “migration background”—even if this unwieldy term did not yet exist. I have an Arabic name, and already fifteen, twenty, or even twenty-five years ago, Arabic names were frequently associated with terrorism. Becoming an expert on socket eating for the local newspaper didn’t help, nor did interviewing the king and queen at small-town marksmen’s fairs.

Now, one could interject that an association with terrorism might actually just be the privilege of Arab men? Indeed, this is probably so in the vast majority of cases—unless you’re lucky enough to have almost the same name as the female Lebanese terrorist Nadia Shehadah Yousuf Duaibes.

Shehadah was involved in the 1977 hijacking of the plane “Landshut,” and for a while, at the start of the 90s, there was an active “anti-imperialist resistance cell” named in her honor. I learned this neither on my own nor of my own accord; instead, devoted teachers informed me of this at school in front of all my other classmates—particularly when the “anti-imperialist resistance cell” celebrated the birthday of Nadia Shehadah Yousuf Duaibes and a peripheral article about it appeared in some bourgeois political paper like *Der Spiegel*. Once, my German teacher even cut out the article and brought it with him to class to show me and the rest of my classmates: “Shot dead in the onboard lavatory with the back of her head against the toilet bowl, lay the terrorist leader’s beautiful girlfriend Nadia Shehadah Yousuf Duaibes, 22. The Lebanese woman, known by passengers as ‘The Little One,’ fired at the GSG-9 command through the closed toilet door until the bitter end,” he read with fascination. He also showed us the picture of the young woman, shot dead in a Che Guevara shirt, lying on the floor of the small plane’s lavatory. We found it a

bit creepy—we were twelve or thirteen years old—but you always listened to your teacher. I did, anyway, because I also wanted to have good grades alongside my migration background, and proper attentiveness was part of the standard repertoire. Especially in German class, of course, even though German was my mother tongue—but who cared about that?

A little after the Nadia Shehadah episode at school, the First Gulf War broke out. At the time, I would occasionally be asked about Saddam Hussein and Iraq. But that was about it.

But then came September 11, 2001, and along with it, completely new opportunities for terrorist projections. My then-partner and I were in the process of completing the renovation work at our first shared apartment when the television images from New York reached us. Between walls smelling of fresh paint, tool chests, and moving boxes, we sat on the floor in front of the TV, watching in stunned silence the live images of the collapsing World Trade Center.

It only took a few weeks before I was first racially targeted by customers on the phone in the call center where I worked part-time during my studies. One of my least enjoyable tasks was selling magazines to existing customers of a large publishing house, and I had—although it had been recommended—refrained from adopting a German pseudonym for my telephone assignments. I now experienced the consequences.

“Oh, and you still dare to call here? Shouldn’t you have left the country by now after everything your countrymen did in America? HA HA HA!” The customers roared into the phone, laughing themselves half to death at their own eloquent humor.

“HA HA HA!” I laughed in return, before proceeding to help those customers who wanted something from my provider, a Pay-TV channel.

I didn’t really care about these microaggressions at the time; I’d already had years of free, emotionally-numbing training behind me anyway, as far as racist jokes were concerned. One more or less wouldn’t make a difference, and I just wanted to pay the bills. And if there was still something left after deducting all the running costs, maybe buy a Nelly Furtado CD, too.

A few months later, an envelope arrived in the mailbox of our student dorm: It was directed to my partner. In the finest bureaucratic German terms, we were told that his personal data which had been collected as part of an investigation would now be deleted, since it turned out he was likely not a terrorist despite his corresponding “sleeper” profile (Arab, student, inconspicuous). We threw the document directly into the garbage because the university and household management already created more than enough paperwork for our taste. And so, the years pattered along in this country, and dangerous topics pattered dependably alongside them.

Left-wing Arab terror. Muslim terror. Other hot topics were discovered by the tabloid media and TV shows, for example: Arab-mafia terror, carried out by some clan or other in the German metropolises. Over the years, people continued to ethnicize, Arabicize, and Islamize whenever there were problems: on talk shows, in Sarrazin’s first book, the feuillets, politics, and at the locals’ tables in bars across the land.

Bushido, who for a long time only knew his Tunisian father from his birth certificate—and before his rap career, had otherwise commuted briskly between a German mother and standard German schools—was awarded a Bambi Award for being a model immigrant, before he was once again declared a dirty Arab mafioso (i.e. dangerous). Potential danger

was further identified by the media and citizenry after the New Year's Eve celebration in Cologne, which became infamous through ignoble incidents. Contrary to statistics, the not-particularly-accurate term "Arab-looking men" was launched here in order to transform the problem of sexual assault into something that didn't have to do with mainstream society, and could be handled in a racist way by only suspecting non-German men as potential perpetrators of violence.

The racist practice of ethnicizing perpetrators was also a major preoccupation of certain white feminists, for example those led by Alice Schwarzer's magazine *Emma*. This was a particularly bitter pill to swallow because it consistently ignored and denied patriarchal structures of violence. It is not heritage, but hegemonic masculinity which is the core problem of sexual violence. The interplay of socially regressive male traits—also known as *toxic masculinity*—leads to despicable practices such as misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and malicious violence. Whether the perpetrator comes from Islamabad or Rietberg is utterly irrelevant.

Ignoring toxic masculinity and instead focusing on the perpetrators' heritage in order to conceal the true causes of violence could be described as a problem of competence. But perhaps there is also a system behind conjuring racist, colonial myths through this tactic: mobs of "wild" foreigners who harass women or carry out acts of terrorism and therefore have to somehow be kept in check by mainstream society—be it through racial profiling in everyday life or on New Year's Eve. Or the ongoing warning that sexual violence is a basic form of aggression which is more likely to be carried out by "foreign" men—even when empiricism says otherwise.

But you don't have to look to the feuilleton debates if you're once again seeking a shower of racist microaggressions. The little jabs enjoy free reign, day in and day out. I was sitting at my office, advising a customer. It was one of those days after the infamous 2015 New Year's Eve Cologne incident. Despite all the racist smoke bombs in the press, I was still motivated to start the New Year with a beautiful calendar—a rather expensive one at that—printed in various gold tones and adorned with an Arabesque pattern. My client didn't want to concentrate on the task at hand, although I myself was well-rested and well-prepared to go over her agenda with her. Instead, she kept swaying back and forth between me and the calendar on the table until she could take it no longer:

"Mrs. Shehadeh!" She interrupted me. "Mrs. Shehadeh, tell me...Is that a Koran on your desk?"

My still rosy motivation for the New Year didn't even sink into the cellar when I answered: "No, unfortunately, no."

You can't necessarily say that one overcomes the hurt from all these microaggressions at some point; rather, you get used to them, and admittedly very much so. They become a background noise, a constant noise, something one adjusts to like tinnitus. From my end, I have become accustomed to every terrorist joke over the years, to ongoing "Islam-in-Germany" talk shows, and to obscure phrases like "Arab-looking people." Another classic is the accusation that I am a threat to women's rights and must be incapable of sufficiently complex thought since I believe a woman should be allowed to choose to wear a hijab whenever she wants. I have even become accustomed to the act of forgetting that hummus is originally an Arab food in the German vegan scene—but hummus is not a threat, which is why it probably has not earned the label "Arab."

My excitement about racism has long since diminished from an impulsive rage to becoming a simple expression of a political attitude which I would like to maintain in order to remind us—no matter how much I myself become accustomed to it—that none of these should be conditions we accept as normalized and natural. As for my activism, however, I strive to track racism in all its forms and to denounce it with every fiber of my being. To cope with my everyday life, however, I have to dismiss and trivialize racism again and again. And that, I will admit, is something I've gotten quite good at—for better or for worse.