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The Cousin

NAVA EBRAHIMI

Translated by Kelsi Morefield

The photo of his body covers meters of the facade of Lincoln Center.

“What do you think?” he asks me.

“Wow,” I say. Without averting my gaze, I get out of the taxi. The wind lifts my scarf. “You look even better naked!”

The photo is black and white, and he isn’t wearing anything besides really tight little shorts. In front of the gray background his body contrasts like a silver figurine, every muscle carved out clearly and intricately. One leg is bent, the other stretched outwards, pointed clear to the foot. The foot doesn’t touch the ground. My cousin appears to float and looks apprehensively down at us below. Very lightly, frown lines emerge. A fallible angel on judgment day.

“How come you look so serious?” I ask.

“Dance is a serious business,” he answers.

“You don’t even have any chest hair. Did you have to shave your whole body for that photo?”

“You’re sweet,” he says. “Let’s go, the performance is over, and I want to introduce someone to you.”

We both pause in front of the entrance. Warm light stretches outwards to us through the glass facade of the theater. Inside, deep inside in the palatial foyer, we see men and women standing with champagne flutes.

“It looks kind of cozy from out here,” my cousin says.

“It looks way more beautiful from out here than

it ever could inside,” I said. For a moment I feel the wish to stay out here.

“Come,” he says. He pulls me inside by the sleeve of my jacket.

Nick, the young man that my cousin greets with a kiss on the mouth, is a little shorter than him. Nick looks at me and also doesn’t. His glance doesn’t stay anywhere for long. His whole face is warped into a smile. His teeth are bleached. He says something, but it’s nothing that demands a response, and then he disappears into the crowd. We watch him walk away, and I hate him. For me, he is America. He’ll fuck my cousin like it’s a high-performance sport, but he’ll never love him.

My cousin takes my coat from me. “I’ll be right back,” he says.

“I’d love a drink,” I shout after him.

I stand alone on the periphery. I see statement necklaces. Gray hair with side cuts. Wingtips with cream soles. I observe the way Nick chats with an older couple. His eyes are permanently wide open. I can’t look at him very long.

My cousin returns with two gin and tonics. We take sips and stay silent. A few people wave at him. A few people give him a thumbs-up. They seem a little awestruck. One shouts: “Hey, Kenny, can’t wait!”

“They call you Kenny?” I ask. And then: “It’s strange that you’re hanging almost naked on the

front of the theater, but none of these people know who you really are.”

“And you? You wrote a whole book in the first-person. You exposed yourself the same as me. But does anyone truly know you because of it?”

He points to the white sculpture in the middle of the foyer. It’s two women made of white marble without faces. They stand next to each other almost like Siamese twins.

“We’re like them,” he says.

“Who are they?” I ask.

“Two circus women. That’s the name of the sculpture, that’s all I know.”

“Our grandfather, the father of our father, cultivated pistachios in his region,” I say.

“Yeah. And isn’t it crazy what happened to us? You come to New York for a book reading, and I’m the star of the Paul Taylor Dance Company.”

I say nothing.

“I want to show you something,” he says and finishes his glass in one swig.

The auditorium is abandoned but still brightly lit. I’m momentarily overwhelmed by the size. It wasn’t clear to me how many people watched my cousin. My cousin closes the entrances.

“Sit,” he tells me.

I go through the empty parterre and select the center, row four. I set my glass on the floor, lay my bag with my book on the seat next to me. My cousin is silent.

I’m sitting alone in the theater. It’s silent. I look up. A huge spherical lamp hangs directly above me on the ceiling.

My cousin appears with a leap on the stage, on the sliver between the ramp and curtain. He locates me, leans his upper body forward, stretches his arms out to the side and spins like a propeller. He lifts his feet one after the other into the air, and one after the other they touch down. Tap tap. He keeps eye contact. When he loses it for a short moment during the spin, he brings it back immediately.

“That’s the barrel jump,” he says mid-leap. “Barrel, because it looks as if you’re rolling on a barrel. I can picture it so well; me, on top of a barrel going down a slope, endlessly downhill.”

He does a few more barrel jumps, and then he abruptly comes to a halt in the middle.

“Do you still remember when you heard about it?” His voice doesn’t seem louder, but fuller.

I’m not sure what he’s talking about. Still, I say: “I had just turned twenty, I think”. So almost twenty years ago.

My cousin and I, we have never talked about it. We’ve never even tried. I haven’t tried.

“So late? Why do you think no one told you? When it happened, I mean.”

“I was only ten,” I say. “That’s probably why.”

“You have to speak a little louder, please.”

“I was only ten!”

“And I was only twelve,” he says. “If I hadn’t experienced it, I also wouldn’t have wanted to know anything about it.”

A flame begins to burn in my stomach. I’m glad that I can reach down for my gin and tonic.

My cousin opens his shirt and takes it off. He steps out of his shoes and removes his pants. He lets everything lay where it falls and goes towards the left edge of the stage in his underwear and socks.

“One,” he says, “went like this.” He pulls up his shoulders and bows his upper body forward lightly. He tiptoes to stage right.

I smile even though I don’t sense that it’s funny.

My cousin is serious. “Who told you?”

“My dad,” I say.

“How is that? Why did he?”

“He really just wanted to malign your mom. He said she led you to disaster. I don’t think he planned to tell me.”

“I love my mom,” my cousin says. He briefly shuts his eyes as if he has to trace his feelings.

“Another went like this,” he then says. He bends

his arms as if, if he didn't, they'd drag along the floor. He bows shoulder and head forward. He trudges bowlegged back to the left side. There, he arches his back and lets his upper body fall forwards.

"Do you do this too, sometimes? Let everything dangle?" he asks. He sees me upside down through his drooping arms.

"Not enough, I guess."

"Yeah," he says, "You're always tense. I see that."

"Habit," I say. "It's the foreign kid in me."

He smiles and stands back up. Then, he lays his hands together as if to pray and leads his fingertips to his mouth. Slowly he steps to the center. He covers himself with the shirt, widens his arms, and speaks the way actors do in mid-sized city theaters.

"We take a country of the third world, as it was called back then. A country with a Muslim majority. Pick one. Our grandfather cultivated pistachios there on the sparse land. You can substitute pistachios for another plant. In this landscape, not far from ancient archaeological sites, but far from modernity, our fathers grew up in a small village. They weren't from wealthy families and also not from clerical families. Nonetheless, the family of our fathers enjoyed some prestige because of the pistachios. They knew poor and rich, they operated in both worlds. They saw the differences and couldn't help but think politically. In the 60s our fathers, before they were fathers, went to the West to study. Many, many fathers did the same."

He leaps in the air. Right, left. The feet flexed, his knees outwards, there's something foolish about it. "They studied medicine, civil engineering, electrical engineering. The selfish ones studied architecture."

"My dad wasn't selfish," I yell, with my hands on my mouth in the shape of a funnel.

"Shhh," he says.

A door opens. A man in a dark-blue uniform peeks his head in. When he sees my cousin on the stage he relaxes his facial features. "Hey, Kenny? Everything ok?"

"Everything's ok, Bob. Or no: Would you mind bringing my cousin from Europe another gin and tonic? Before the bar staff go home? I'm in the middle of a performance. Thank you!"

Bob looks irritated. I imagine he isn't much older than we, but the hat and the mustache, the shirt that stretches over his stomach, and the rings of keys on his belt make him seem older. He looks at me like he needs to make sure that I'm actually from Europe.

I smile, showing him my somewhat crooked, unbleached teeth.

"Sure thing," he says, and goes. The door closes without a sound. I listen, there's no sound from outside. The foyer seems to have cleared out.

My cousin lays on his back, only his ribcage rises and falls. How nice it would be, I think, if this was actually a performance. If I didn't know from what suffering the performer feeds on.

In a photo album that I took after my father's death, there is a picture from 1982. In it are my cousin and I. I'm three; he is five years old. We're holding hands. We are both wearing the same red, white, and blue striped velour sweater. I'm wearing brown overalls made of corduroy. The background depicts a sandy rockface; that would've been our natural environment. The wall doesn't provide any shade because the sun is at its zenith. It blinds me. My cousin has a baseball cap on, his eyes are almost unrecognizable. But I know he has really long eyelashes. Sometimes he held me when we slept next to each other, and I felt them on my cheek. He was very pretty, he charmed people everywhere, in the supermarket, in the park, in front of the ice cream shop. He should've been a girl, not me, said our relatives. Someone must have taken the photo shortly before my parents

went to Germany with me. My uncle, his wife, and my cousin stayed.

The door opens. Bob is holding the drink in his hand, and he approaches me somewhat stiffly.

My cousin stands up. "If you could leave us alone again now? Thanks, Bob, you're wonderful."

His tone! If I didn't know any better, I'd believe that he had always spent his summer holidays in the Hamptons.

I turn to Bob. Bob does what my cousin says. He goes, but when he has the door handle in his hand he hesitates.

"Bob, please."

I navigate back around. The sudden coldness in my cousin's voice makes me shiver. The door closes. We're alone again.

I want to be closer to my cousin and move to the first row. "Aren't you freezing?" I shout at him over the orchestra pit.

"I'm not," he says, suddenly standing up and running to the left edge of the stage. "Another went like this." He gosesteps across the stage. "Another, like this." On his tiptoes, he prances back. "And one like this." He lies on his stomach and slithers to the other side. Upon arrival he pauses.

"Seriously," he says, still lying on his stomach. "From one day to the other his legs were paralyzed. But no one cared, not one gave him crutches. Before this he used to be one of those really nasty types, and many now got their revenge in that they stepped right on top of him, just like that, when he was in their way. And then they acted as if they just stepped in dog shit. I was happy because I was also always afraid of him. At the same time, I felt bad for him, really. You know me."

"Yeah," I say, "you couldn't even tear a leg off a grasshopper."

My cousin warps his face.

I don't want to ask this question, but I think that he expects it from me: "When that guy could still

walk, what did he do with you...?"

"Leave that," he snaps at me.

I lower my gaze. He can say that, I think, he has every right in the world to.

"Where were we?" he asks.

The curtain suddenly rises into the air; I'm startled, and place my hand on my chest. Behind the curtain a space appears, completely lined in beige with a soft looking material. As if one could throw themselves against it and it wouldn't hurt. Even the corners are rounded. It must be the set for the performance that ran this evening, the set of the last scene, still illuminated.

My cousin also looks around. "Feels like a womb," he says. "Just look at how much space I have now!" He runs around the space very close to the walls which he strokes with his left hand.

"I'm tickling my mom from inside," he says.

I laugh.

"You laugh like your father", he says and comes to a halt. "Oh yeah: Our fathers went abroad to study. They were so full of hope. They were dinosaurs who believed that they could change the course of history and counter their extinction. In a few years they sucked up all of the knowledge they thought would help them make a first-world country out of their third-world country." He forms a circle with his thumb and index finger and kisses the point where the fingers meet. "*Bellissima!* Then they went back to their home, as they still called their country then. Homeland [Heimat]."

He stretches out his arms and starts to laugh, but not like his dad, he laughs like a foreigner, and I'm flooded by a really uncomfortable feeling. I can't understand it, it's running through my hands, yet it was already there the whole night, I'm just feeling it now, and it doesn't completely disappear when my cousin abruptly stops laughing. He runs in a circle around the stage, his arms stretched out behind him like wings. He pulls the circle in

closer, spinning faster and faster along his own axis. And falls.

“A first-class, non-aligned country,” he says, out of breath. “How dumb they were! How megalomaniacal! If only they’d have been satisfied with less for once.”

I have the feeling someone’s there. Seated, I turn around, look behind me, but I’m still alone.

“Listen,” I say, “don’t you think we should go home? They’re definitely closing soon.”

“We are going to finish this now,” my cousin says. He takes off his socks and slowly stands up, stepping forward on the stage.

His toes grasp the rim, he bows towards me. “Am I in your book?”

“Yes,” I say, “but only on the margins.” I feel caught, even though I’ve reckoned with the question.

“Only on the margins? I’m not the main character?” His bewilderment seems real and fake at the same time. He runs backwards into the depth of the stage. “I’m only on the margins? Am I me or am I different?”

“You are a little bit different.”

“What’s different about me?”

“You’re a fund manager, not a dancer. A dancer seemed too cliché to me.”

“And am I gay?”

“No. That also seemed too cliché to me.”

“So the way I am is a cliché?”

“No, you’re the opposite of that. But only upon a second look.”

“Read the passage about me aloud.”

“It’s in German, you won’t understand it!”

“That doesn’t matter. Read it. The rhythm is enough for me to understand.”

I take the book from my canvas tote and flip through the pages. For a moment I lose all orientation between the pages, and that’s exactly what it’s about: Disorientation when everything falls apart. In writing the novel, I went back and gathered everything and put it together again, hoping

that something would emerge that someone else can recognize as an image.

I flip through the pages, read half a sentence, flip through further. The section with my cousin could be anywhere, with it the story could begin and end. It could be in the middle, it could be nowhere, and could have only existed in my head during writing. I concentrate.

The cousin appears in Rome. She, the main character, and he go out to eat at an expensive restaurant. The whole day they tramp through the dusty ruins until she is suddenly overcome with hunger, and the cousin asks an Italian colleague over Messenger for a tip, and she recommends the Trattoria, simple but exquisite. The main character and the cousin stumble in there, in sneakers, unkempt. Dark, even darker than the Italians. The waiter serves them in a patronizing manner which they both try their best to ignore. Just like they have done their best since their childhood to ignore everything that doesn’t fit their self-image. Now that they’re grown up and earn a lot of money, it’s a lot easier. This cousin, as a fund manager richer than my cousin, thinks about the credit cards in his back pocket, he knows that in the end he will triumph over the waiter. She also earns significantly more money in the novel than I, she does risk analysis. But, what is true: She and the cousin are attached to each other and meet regularly at some place in the world. Everywhere around the globe, just not in the place where they were born.

What is also true: They have never spoken about what he experienced when he was twelve, because it likewise doesn’t fit their self-image. The main character, however, thinks that it is now time, once, just once, to talk about it. Because they’re old enough and stable enough, and because they’re still young enough that midlife crisis, depression, and high blood pressure could not yet come between them. She asks him, after the

aperitif and during her Vitello Tonnato: Do you want to tell me about it?

He says no and orders a bottle of wine.

“Did you find it yet?” asks my cousin.

“Yes. Now. Page 115.”

I read aloud in German.

‘Do you want to tell me about it?’, she asks. ‘No, I don’t. I want a bottle of wine.’ He lightly lifts his hand, just to the edge of the table, to an implied peace sign. The waiter understands, nods, and disappears to the cellar. They’re silent until he comes back with a bottle of white wine. He pours Iman...

“You named me Iman? Like the Top Model?”

“Yeah. Bad?”

“It’s fine. Keep reading.”

He pours Iman a glass.

I stop. My cousin dances to my sentences. I want to look but can’t both look and read. I keep going and also listen to the sounds he makes while dancing. The feet that touch or brush the floor, the material of the shirt that rustles when he spins, his breath. I hear how his body replaces air.

He pours Iman a glass. Iman takes a sip and smiles at the waiter. It’s a minimal smile, nothing more than lifting the corners of the mouth. He has learned how to communicate with implied gestures. He’s learned so much in the New York upper class. He learned even more in a Thai prison. What’s true in both worlds: Stinginess with information, everything can be used against you one day.

Thus, to this day, no one knows his story. How would his friends who spent their childhoods in the Hamptons react when they found out? Iman had just turned twelve when his mother decided to leave Iran. Absolutely, immediately. Iman’s father didn’t want to. He tried convincing her to stay, and when that didn’t work, he tried convincing her to apply for migration to Canada. But she didn’t have the patience, she needed out at any price. Falsified papers cost a lot. She

sold everything that she owned. With dollar bills on their bodies, she and Iman boarded a plane to Bangkok, from where they should have continued on to Toronto. But at a passport control in Bangkok, they were found out. They brought his mother to a women’s prison, Iman to a men’s. He stayed there for six months. From then on, relatives talked around these six months in a big curve. These six months became the restricted zone, the Chernobyl of the family history, which was losing ground anyway. The only thing that seemed worth mentioning by relatives who lived spread around the world: Grandfather cultivated pistachios in his region.

Iman finishes the half glass in one swig and says: ‘It doesn’t matter what happened to me when I was twelve. We turned out great, didn’t we?’

I fall silent.

My cousin stops in the middle of his movements.

“That was it?” he asks.

“Yeah, when she wakes up in the hotel room the next morning, he’s already gone.”

“Bit very dramatic,” he says. “They sleep in the same bed?”

I say nothing.

He walks forwards, sits on the edge of the stage in the center, lets his legs dangle. “It occurred to me that you never take a deep breath, not when writing nor when reading aloud. You need to take up more space. Like me.”

“Is that why you became a dancer? To take up more space?” I ask.

A clanging makes me wince. I look up and see two sheets of Plexiglass lowering parallel to each other like curtains. My cousin slowly picks himself up. He takes three steps back and stands still. One wall comes crashing down in front of him, the other behind him.

I turn around. Is someone there? No, there’s no one there, still no one.

“Kian, what is this?” I shout.

My cousin doesn't react. He moves between the walls, jumps, tries to spin, bumps himself against the wall, bounces off, falls. I want to cover my ears, but then his voice sounds from the strip: *90 centimeters, this wide was my mattress in the cell. That was the space that was available to me. Basically. But then one of the prisoners, he went like this:* My cousin runs to the left side of the stage and then stalks, like his limbs were stiff, to the right side.

One of the prisoners took care of me. Already on the third or fourth day. I called him Stihl because a Stihl chainsaw was tattooed on his forearm. Stihl didn't leave my side. The others respected him. That's why I had to entertain him. You're so beautiful, he said to me, show me something. What should I have shown him? I was twelve years old and knew how to do nothing. Show me something! he yelled at me. I remembered another inmate who walked like a gorilla. In my desperation I imitated him. Stihl died laughing. More! he roared. I acted like another inmate, a small one with squat legs. Stihl couldn't get enough of it. Multiple times a day I provided him with a show. For it, he sent all of the others into a corner, he cleared the whole cell for me, so that I had enough space. And I got better. I observed the others closer. I began to let the gaits flow into each other. I started to dance. Stihl had a great time. He had a simple mind, god knows what he did to earn respect. Sometimes I also had to give him a blowjob. I also got better at that. Afterwards he'd always give me a piece of candy. If I hadn't had Stihl-

I don't see the red droplet on the Plexiglas until it is almost level with his head. I look up. More droplets follow, right and left, behind and in front of him. There are more and more, the droplets become a stream that flows down the walls and, on the ground below, forms a lake.

I jump up. "Kian, what is this?"

He now stands there motionless. His voice speaks: *...to bring the story of the fathers to a close: They went back to their home and created a revolution. They, the dinosaurs, extinguished themselves.*

All of a sudden, it's dark. Behind the blood-red

walls I think I recognize the outline of my cousin. "Kian? Kian!"

I reach for my bag, knock over my glass, and run towards the exit. I try to open the door, but it's heavy, I push my whole weight against it and pry it open.

Countless heads that were just raised upward, are lowered, countless pairs of eyes look at me. I can hear myself breathing in the silence. I take two steps forward and see, on a screen above us, the red Plexiglass walls in the dark. A few people start clapping. More and more clap, finally everyone claps. The clapping becomes louder, someone shouts Bravo and whistles as my cousin appears beside me. He's wearing a bathrobe and looks me in the eyes, and I don't know if this now is just between us or a part of the show. He places his arm around me, and as if this is what I have always done, we bow. As I straighten back up, the clapping and whistling and hooting swells. In the faces: Empathy, compassion, respect.

The marble circus women alone stand unmoved in their midst.

"Sold out," my cousin whispers in my ear, "and now let's go, I desperately need a warm bath."