

...nor did Pnin, as a teacher, ever presume to approach the lofty halls of modern scientific linguistics, that ascetic fraternity of phonemes, that temple wherein earnest young people are taught not the language itself, but the method of teaching others to teach that method.

—Nabokov

### Orientation

The first thing Summer noticed about the incoming group of westerners was that one woman, who was heavy and plain, wore a sleeveless shirt. No one had told her. In an hour the bus would come and take everyone to the Zayed Central Library, where the Minister of Education, His Highness Sheikh Mubarak, would give a speech. He would be angry if he saw this woman. He might have her sent back home to Australia or South Africa or America or wherever it was that she came from. Stupid woman, Summer thought. Where does she think she is? She clutched her keyboard and looked around the office space, which was impeccably tidy, wondering what could be reorganized.

Her university ID read *Samar*, but she knew this tasted strange in foreign mouths, like *zatar* and *kofta*, so the nameplate on her desk read *Summer*. It was a good job, Assistant to the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Fujairah International University, so she didn't want anything to stand in her way. International? she wondered. The student body is 95% Emirati girls. There were only a handful of foreign students, and most of them were from Oman, Palestine, Syria. No one who wasn't covered by a headscarf.

The new teachers were native English-speakers, which made sense since FIU courses were taught in English, like almost every university in the region. In the old days, she knew, most of the staff had been from Egypt and Jordan, and some of them were still hanging around, but the new Provost wanted to put a stop to this. He was from Nebraska, or maybe Indiana. He had a sprawling smile and fastidious hair. FIU was becoming a real university. The new professors had been trained at prestigious western institutions, and they published often, and they held regular office hours, and they wouldn't stop teaching a course two weeks before the semester ended. The old guard was quietly afraid or, in some cases, not so quiet at all.

"Dr. Saif?" Summer knocked on the Dean's half-open door, but he didn't seem to notice. His elbows were on

the desk, hands clasped, face planted on his knuckles. “Excuse me, doctor?”

“Hm? Yes? Oh, Summer. What is it?” The Dean raised an unconvincing smile. Ever since the new Provost had been hired, to get rid of the dead weight, he’d been spending his afternoons staring into space, running his fingers over the spines of old books.

“Hello, sir. It is the new professors. One woman, she is wearing sleeveless shirt. Should we inform her of this? Encourage her, yanni...to wear sweater or light jacket?”

Dr. Saif nodded as though considering her question, eyes fastened to a blank spot on the dirty white wall. If you asked what was going through his mind, in moments like this, he wouldn’t have been able to tell you. The air in the room became, for Saif, a softly murmuring penumbra, like the maternal blue glow of a TV screen.

Summer began to worry. Her eyes fell on a large object sitting by the window, an epicene hunk of metal. *Typewriter* was the English word, though she didn’t know the Arabic. She’d never actually seen one before, except in ESL textbooks, disembodied objects floating near unlikely scraps of dialogue. As always, the thought of ESL made her recall the word *enervated*, another bit of English that never materialized in real life. “Sir?”

“Yes...I...what do you think?”

“I think maybe you should have a small word with this woman. The sheikh will upset if he sees her.”

“Um. Yes. But you know, this is a woman’s issue. Better speak to her yourself, Summer.”

“Yes, sir.” She backed away from the office. “Should I close the door, Dr. Saif?” He didn’t answer.

She stood in the hallway rubbing her hands. After three days at FIU, she’d had little contact with the westerners and absolutely no experience telling people how to dress appropriately. Will the woman be angry? Will she laugh at me?

Summer walked slowly down the hallway until she came to the woman’s office. She could hear her voice from 40 meters, and the great barking laugh could probably be heard in Yemen. **Dr. Susan Foreman. Dr. Keith Damiani.** There wasn’t enough office space for all the new people, so they were sharing.

The door was almost completely shut. Summer hesitated, listening.

“—get a load of the make-up, Travis?”

“Keith.”

“What? Did I just call you Travis? Christ, sorry. I *know* your name... anyway, the make-up?”

“I know, I know. Like someone who failed out of clown college for using too much.”

“Streetwalkers with bad acne wouldn’t use so much,” Susan said.

Keith laughed softly. “And the perfume.”

“*Ode*. It’s called *ode*.”

*Oud*, Summer thought. She tried to picture her own face in the bathroom mirror, comparing herself to the new women. Are they talking about me? Do I wear too much? It was a difficult calculation to make. Whenever she tried to imagine a mirror, all she could see was Dr. Susan’s face.

“—right about that, Susan, but it smells like the ugly stepchild of a cinnamon stick and a burning log.” Keith was shuffling papers. Summer could tell he wasn’t paying that much attention to the conversation.

“I don’t mind the smell, not really. I mean yes, it’s sort of ghastly and pungent, but there’s something nice about it too. It’s just that they use so *much* of it, you know?”

“Oh, I know. I hear the Emirati men are worse, much worse. Bathe in it.”

Summer had always thought she was a modern woman. She looked down at her blue jeans, her Italian sandals, her tunic from the Gap in Dubai. Pink lipstick, gold watch, gold bracelets, gold necklaces, gold rings and diamonds. Her head was wrapped in a bright floral scarf, but not so tightly that a few hairs didn’t escape. In her mind, she was more like the American women on TV than the girls she saw around campus, who were covered from head to foot in black silk, some of them veiled as well.

“The local men do wear dresses.” Susan looked at Keith with a smile, waiting for the laugh. What he did was grunt ambiguously, which seemed to serve as some type of comic verification. “They also hold hands.”

“What? You serious?” Keith threw a glossy college brochure across his desk.

“Yep. Saw it at the mall the other night.”

“Well surely that doesn’t mean they’re gay. I mean, technically that’s illegal here, right? Must go on, but there’d be no public display...”

Susan shrugged. “It’s just something they do. Oh, and the men rub noses too.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding?”

“Nope.”

Keith laughed out loud, which was the exit line Susan had been looking for. She sighed theatrically, rooted around in her purse, and started working quietly.

Summer knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Susan said.

“Hello, sorry to, excuse.” Summer entered the office, which was still practically empty. No computers or printers, no bookcases or file cabinets. Just two desks and four chairs. “Dr. Susan. Dr. Keith. Welcome.” She nodded slightly.

Keith leaned back in his chair, arms crossed behind his head. Dr. Keith? He smiled, laughing inside. It’s Dr. *Damiani*, sweetheart. Someone should set her straight.

“What can I do for you, Summer?”

“Oh, well...” Dr. Susan is always smiling, Summer thought, but it’s like a Halloween mask. “Just one item from Dr. Saif. We going to hear the sheikh very soon and it is formal occasion.” She took a break, unsure how to continue. It was a steep climb with no obvious footholds.

Susan looked at Keith, shrugging tactfully. He widened his eyes comically, which almost made Susan burst out laughing. There was nearly 30 seconds of total silence.

“We’re very excited about this opportunity, Summer. I hear the sheikh is a very eloquent speaker.”

“Yes, Miss. He is Minister of Education and Vice President of Executive Council as well. Very VIP man.”

“Very VIP,” Keith repeated.

“Yes, like this.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well great. I’m looking forward to it.” Keith yawned.

“We’ll see you there, Summer, ‘kay?” Susan executed a convincing imitation of enthusiasm.

“Yes, doctor. Oh, and there is one more thing actually. It is formal occasion, as I said. It is better, I think, if you wear sweater or some other...with sleeves actually.” Summer couldn’t make eye contact after the first few words.

Andrew Madigan

“Oh!” Susan held her right hand in front of her mouth, while the left covered her chest. “I’m dressed like a slut, aren’t I?”

“Miss?”

“I’m...not suitably dressed, am I? I should be wearing sleeves to campus?”

“Yes. Would be better.”

“Oh, God, thanks for telling me, Summer.”

“Welcome, Miss.”

Susan giggled. Why is she calling me Miss? I’m a *Mrs.* and a *Dr.*, for Christ’s sake. And I’m 20 years older than her. “Did you know about this, Keith?”

He shook his head.

“Gosh, I’m so sorry.”

“No one told you about this, Dr. Susan? Not discussed in New Faculty Orientation?”

“*Disorientation*,” Keith said.

“Excuse me?” Summer asked.

“It doesn’t...orientation hasn’t been very useful.”

Keith aimed a pencil at a coffee cup and threw it, sinking the shot. “Down to the hospital for blood tests, so they can throw us out of the country if we have HIV. A rainforest of pamphlets and monographs, all impeccably designed and bound, with administrative flowcharts and...hierarchical diagrams...nothing of any real importance. Like, how do you teach girls when you can’t see their faces? How do I teach art history without getting into sex and the human form and politics and religion, all the forbidden subjects... Oh, we did choose our bank. There were four choices, but I think the Minister of Education owns all of them so it doesn’t really matter...”

Susan and Keith laughed.

Of course he does, Summer thought, confused. Why wouldn’t he? These people mock everything. United Arab Emirates is greatest country on earth. Most money, best people, most pure and religious, safe and comfortable lifestyle. Very famous country around the world. Everyone knows us and looks up for us. No poverty like Africa, no violence like West. Very famous country around the world.

Keith noticed the unpleasant look on Summer’s face. He’d spoken rashly. He twisted the coffee cup back and forth, reading the logo. **Fujairah International Uversity: Reach**

**Higher!!** “What else haven’t they told us, Summer? Maybe you can enlighten us?”

“Sir?”

“Teach us! Orient us!”

“Okay, okay. May I?” She pointed to an empty chair.

“Of course, dear.”

“*Haram*. This word you must know. Means bad, unsuitable, religiously forbidden. To eat pork as a Muslim, for example. This is haram. Let’s see....Dr. Keith, many time you might want to have discussion with girl in office, but she will bring friend even if the discussion is private. Because she cannot be alone in room with man.”

“Hm.” He’d been half-joking when he asked the secretary for enlightenment. She’s got some useful insights, though, he thought, and I’d probably benefit from hearing them, but I’m just not in the mood. I need a cigarette. A nap. A something.

While Summer spoke, Susan went out of her way to act interested, adding verbal and nonverbal interjections as needed, but Keith just sat there looking increasingly bored. His mind drifted to other settings, other people, a country he’d left behind for reasons that were beginning to look vague.

“—you just let her fall. Do not touch a girl for any reasons at all.”

“Hold on. Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.” Keith sat up straight and leaned toward Summer.

“Even if girl, say, get dizzy and start to fall over, do not catch her. Do not do this.”

“Let me get this straight.” He was suddenly invigorated. “I’m supposed to let her fall down and crack her head open on the floor?”

“Yes, let it crack open like falcon egg.”

“And this is what her parents would want? They’d rather have her die or get injured than be touched by a man?”

“Yes, like this. If she is injured, then this is God’s will. Better she die than become impure.”

“God’s will? Huh.” He looked at Susan, who’d become very quiet. “Christ. Wow, this really is an orientation, Summer. Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

Keith didn't think he could do it, though, let someone fall down and get hurt while he just stood there and did nothing.

Susan was excited to be in the presence of a real sheikh, even though he was disappointing to look at. She'd seen pictures of the other Emirati leaders, and they all had aristocratic features, charismatic smiles, impeccable grooming. Sheikh Mubarak was overweight and nervous with a slovenly gray beard. He blinked obsessively, like someone who'd been abused as a child. Susan tried to get Keith's attention, but he seemed to be asleep so she looked around the room. The university had over 200 faculty members. Maybe 70 of them were women. They look so casual, she thought. Most of them are wearing pants. No one else is wearing a skirt and pantyhose. Everyone looks so young. Like Teenagers. Susan caught a glimpse of her hands in the sickly florescent light. Veiny, wrinkled. Old. It came as quite a shock. In her mind she had always been a *young professor*, but somehow she'd turned a corner without ever realizing it. Susan was hurt and relieved.

“– welcome a new era of professionalism at the university. We will move from a decree-based to a policy-based institutional culture, from bad habits to best practices, from entrenched ideas to forward-thinking paradigms. I–”

There would have been a murmur in the crowd if it wasn't a Government Minister standing before them. The old guard could read the writing on the wall, though, so they silently gnashed their teeth. The so-called Egyptian Mafia would now have to be responsible for more than one course per semester, and in that course students would be expected to learn something. According to Sheikh Mubarak, a Portfolio Review Committee would examine copies of all final exams and final research papers, cross-referencing them with final course grades. The illiterate could no longer be awarded a B-.

Saif couldn't get comfortable in his seat. His throat was dry and scratchy. I am a good leader and able scholar, he thought. I publish a book review, or an article, once every year or two in an online academic journal. Attend a conference once in a while. Keep the faculty meetings short. What else can I do?

Keith looked at the transliteration of the Arabic-language speech that was being splashed across the movie

screen. He thought of the opera at Lincoln Center, where the German or Italian had been decoded in red on a discreet screen by his right knee. The Met? Is that what it's called? He'd been living abroad for so long that his memory of the US had grown dim. He looked at the Minister, at the screen, at the two Indian men squatting beside a laptop computer. They nudged the PowerPoint along and, like ball boys at a tennis match, were ready to pounce on whatever technical problems might arise. They were paid something like \$200 a month. Keith wondered how much of the speech had been composed by these men and how much the Minister had actually written himself.

Sheikh Mubarak listed the new protocols, methods and initiatives that the new Provost, with his permission, had instituted. He was necessarily vague about the details, however, since he hadn't been told what they were. Keith, listening with half an ear, approved wholeheartedly of the changes, yet he suspected they wouldn't do much good. I mean, would you just look at these people, he thought. The Minister of Education entertained similar doubts.

“—very pleased to see that FIU made the list of the world's top 500 universities for the first time.”

Susan looked at Keith with wide eyes, impressed.

“Yeah, but where does that list come from?” he whispered.

She shrugged.

“No one knows. There was no reference. I saw it on the school's website. Thing is, American University of Cairo wasn't on the list. Or AU Beirut. Not even Duke or the University of Birmingham. It's not even remotely legit. Mubarak made the list himself. Or maybe it was the Provost.”

Susan made an ambiguous face. She was scared to make noise and offend the sheikh.

“Did you hear?” he asked. “After this, we get to shake his hand. Shake the sheikh.”

“Oh you, stop it.”

Keith sighed and sunk down in his seat. He listened to the speech, but there was nothing in it for him. He wanted to know what it was really going to be like, teaching these girls. He'd lived in Russia, Vietnam and South Korea, but that wasn't the same. How could he get through to someone so different, who didn't speak English very well, whose values were so discordant with his own. What was it like to be

plastered in black silk, to be trapped behind a veil? But the Minister didn't say anything concrete, just pale abstraction and empty platitudes. The same jargon you heard in America. Maybe the rhetoric was something you could buy at the mall, like Coke and Levis and Nike. Keith had so many questions about his new job, but the Minister didn't seem to have the answers.

The rental car smelled like cigarettes and stale milk, but that's not what concerned Keith. It was the driving. *These people drive like maniacs* was the chorus to a pop song stuck in his head.

He slammed the brakes in the middle of a roundabout because an Emirati man talking on a cell phone almost crashed into him. "Did you see that guy?"

His wife, Deb, patted his leg. "Just pay attention to the road. Don't worry about all these...crazies."

"What are they thinking? I mean, are they thinking at all? It's fuc—" He remembered the two children buckled into car seats. "—It's unbelievable. They have no thought for the future, even two seconds into the future. They just drive as fast as possible, in as many lanes as they can, and then brake if they're about to hit someone. It's nuts."

"I know, Keith. I know. Just concentrate on the road, okay? Nothing you can do to stop them." Deb was almost more worried about Keith having a heart attack than about dying in a horrible crash. Almost. She'd read in *The Gulf Enquirer* that traffic accidents were the leading cause of death in the UAE."

"Come on, how can they drive like this? You know, it's no different than holding a gun to our children's heads?"

"That's a bit much, Keith."

"Is it? If you drive the way they do, people will get killed. Fact. Same as if you pull a trigger. The only difference is that, with a gun, it'll happen more often."

"A lot more often."

"Even so, it's murder. We need to do something."

"Like move somewhere safer?" Deb wouldn't have minded. She hated Fujairah, and they'd only been there a week.

"Like write to the Minister of...Safety? Do they have one? The Minister of Back-Assward Driving?"

Deb laughed. She looked over her shoulder at Mary and Lisa. They were quiet, bug-eyed, scared. "Let's change the subject, Keith."

He turned up the stereo and tried to remember why he'd left the US, why he'd left Vietnam, why he'd come here.

At the next traffic light, Keith looked into the rearview mirror. He caught Mary's eye. "Hey, buddy."

"Hi, Daddy." She smiled, tilting her head to the side.

"You doing okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good. We'll be home soon. Play cards or soccer or something?"

"Okay."

"How's your little sister?"

"Asleep."

"Good. I— Christ, what is that?"

A wall of black smoke was rising 100 meters behind them.

Deb turned around. "Another accident?"

"Looks like it."

"Pull over."

Keith edged over to the roadside. A change in wind had parted the veil of smoke, and they could see an overturned car. There was a small fire near the trunk. No one was crawling from the wreckage. There was no one else around. No police, no ambulance, no bystanders.

"You should do something," Deb said.

"Me? Why me?"

"Who else is there?"

"I'm supposed to risk my life for them? They were probably driving like maniacs. They get what they deserve."

"That's what you want to teach them?" Deb nodded her head toward the children.

Keith scowled.

"You'd let those people die?"

"What if *I* die. What about the kids then?"

"Keith, I..." Deb crossed her arms, looked back at the burning car. "We can't just leave them."

"Here's the thing, all the other bullshit aside, you're not supposed to touch a Muslim woman. Not in this country anyway. They told us this, no kidding. Even if they're sick or injured, you just let them be. Unless you're a brother, father,

whatever. If I touched them, I'd be fired immediately, maybe put in jail."

"You've gotta be kidding?"

"Nope."

She paused, taking a closer look at the overturned car. "Well, maybe it's just men in the car. You'll have to check."

Keith had been staring straight ahead, toward the next traffic light, but he turned to see what Deb was looking at. It was terrible. He opened the door and let one foot slide down, but he couldn't make himself get out and run to the accident. Mary asked him a question, but he didn't hear it. He'd been listening to people lecture him all week, about any number of topics, but he still didn't know anything.

The fire had spread to one of the car's rear doors. Keith wondered if it would explode, or if that was something that really happened. He wondered what his life would be like if he'd never left Michigan. He could hear Lisa's muted breathing, Mary humming a song. The flames were as tall as the palm trees planted up and down the road, but they were a peculiar shade of orange, like something computer-generated. In the movies, he thought, everything looks more real.