New Fiction from Amar Benchikha: “Flight”

CONTENT WARNING: A hate crime against an Arab-American is committed in the story. Being an Arab-American myself, the hate crime is loosely based on something that occurred to me back in 2004 when I worked as a raft guide in a southern state.

It’s past two in the morning, and it is warm on this early summer night despite a slight drizzle falling through the trees. I’ve just bedded down in my tent, which is my home for the summer and fall seasons here in Copperhill, Tennessee, where I work as a raft guide on the Ocoee River. But as I lie there, my eyes getting heavier by the second, I have a strange feeling that something’s not quite right.

I had spent three hours hanging with Brady at his campsite, feeding the fire dry wood, smoking pot, telling stories, jokes, and, as the threads of conversation dwindled, watching the dance of the flames in silence. Then, with the workday looming just a few hours later, I called it a night, patted Brady’s shoulder in friendly affection, then shined my headlight along the path leading to my tent some thirty yards away. As I approached, I made out a red pinpoint light to my left in the dark, in the distance. Then the light vanished. Odd, I thought, but gave it no further thought as my feet carried me inside the tent. After I undressed, I lay down, eager to fall asleep.

“So you’re the Arab riding around with a peace sign,” a man’s voice says.

I hear this through the fabric of my tent. I must have dozed off, but now my eyes snap open. I am in danger. I reach for my knife, but outside I hear the sound of a gun cocking. Shit.

Then, that same voice coming to me from the darkness: “Come on out, why don’t you.”

I’m considering my options when a blade slashes open the back of my tent. I clutch my knife, ready to defend myself as two dark human shapes stand outside, two red pinpoint lights emitting out of them. I look down at my chest and see both dots upon it.

“You might want to drop that knife, Arab.” He says the first “A” of “Arab” like the letter A. “If you want to live, that is.”

I drop it.

“Now, grab your wallet and car keys and come on out—slow-like.”

I do as I’m told, step out of the tent and wait for further instructions.

“Alright. Listen well, now. We want you to get in your car and leave Tennessee. Tonight, you hear?”

He hits me in the stomach with the butt of his rifle, and I fall to my knees. Then he strikes me again, this time in the face. I hear the crack of my nose breaking before I fall over, warm blood now flowing out of my nose. I taste it in my mouth, noticing for the first time in my life its flavor—salty, metallic.

“You hear?” he repeats.

“Yes, sir,” I manage to say through the pain.

“Oooh, he called me sir. I like that. I like me a courteous Arab. What do you think?”

His friend speaks for the first time. “Courteous or not, the only good Arab is a dead Arab, if you ask me.”

“You hear that, Arab? I think you better go. Now git!”

Holding my nose in one hand and my keys and wallet in the other, I struggle to my feet and start to make my way around the tent to the dirt path that leads to where my car’s parked.

“And don’t come back. Ever. You hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I say as I reach the path and hurry down it, making my way half out of memory and half by the light of the lamp over at the parking area of the campsite.

When I get to my car, I fumble with my keys and get the door

open. I turn the engine, back out, and drive off in my boxers and blood-soaked shirt, leaving my tent, clothes, cell phone, life vest, helmet, rescue bag, friends—leaving it all behind. Except for my life, I think to myself—except for my life. I think of going to the police station, but am afraid that here, in the south, not even three years after 9/11, I might not get the protection and justice I seek. I fear that I might get mistreated there as well. So I just drive. It's a long way to Seattle, where my parents live. I'm twenty-nine, a full-grown man, so I don't know why I think of them as my destination. Perhaps it's natural after traumatic moments to revert back to childhood instincts. I don't know, but the sooner I get there, the better. I drive. First west so I can get to a well-traveled highway where I start heading north, blissfully north. I'm going to Cincinnati, Ohio, I've decided. There I can take stock of the situation, find a hotel, clothes, wash up. There will be no rafting for me today.

I think back to the previous day, at how everything had been so perfect. My life, my job, spending my days on the rivers I loved so much. I recall what led me to Tennessee in the first place—the roundabout way I got to Copperhill from Seattle.

I'd had my first taste of rafting back in Washington when I was still a teenager, and I didn't know that I would carry that experience with me to the east coast. I had wanted to move as far away from my parents' influence as possible. My mother, in particular, was insistent that I join the family business—a small marketing firm—while I wanted to stand on my own two feet and know I could still make it.

I lived in New York City where everything was exciting at first. The city, the people who inhabit it, the multiculturalism, the job itself even. I'd gotten a job in advertising and it was sexy to work on products millions of Americans used; I felt important. And then 9/11 occurred and everything changed. I couldn't get excited about my job anymore, the tragedy having wiped out any semblance of

relevance to what I was doing. Still, though, I did it, woke up, washed up, dressed up, and went through the daily rigmarole. I began to think about things—about why some people hated the U.S., about whether a war with Afghanistan was the smartest way of defending ourselves against terrorism. But in my work life, I had become an automaton. A buddy who worked in IT at a different firm was feeling that same lack of purpose and floated the idea of escaping down to Tennessee to become raft guides. It didn't take much to convince me to drop everything and in May of '02 we had moved and were both training on the river. My friend couldn't cut it as a guide and returned to New York, but I'd had a natural ability for the job and fell in love with the river, its currents, the lifestyle of the raft guide. Save for winters—when I worked as a chair lift operator at a ski area a couple of hours northeast—I'd been there ever since.

As I drive I realize I'm shaking; fear, panic coursing through my body. I grab the steering wheel harder to make myself stop, but still I shake. How I could use some of Brady's weed, I think, to mellow out a bit. I switch on the radio—country music, the last thing I need right now. I turn the dial until I find a rock station, but I can't focus on the music, can't shake the feeling that I'm still in danger, that I've got a target on my back. After all, I do have that stinking peace symbol on the back of my car. Anyone could see it and follow me. I must stay on the highway, must make it to civilization, must make it to Cincinnati.

After a while, my shaking disappears. I don't know what I was thinking choosing to work in the south. And now, now of all times, with the war in Iraq raging… What was I *thinking*? With a name like Farouq Benhajjar and flouting my peace sign like an idiot. Then, a niggling thought comes through to me. Why the heck did they allow me to take my wallet with me? It seems like such a considerate act that it baffles me for a minute, before I realize they wanted to be sure I made it out of the

state. What if I ran out of gas? What then? they must have thought. I might have called the police, then.

I check the gauge. Should have enough to make it to Kentucky—then, I'll refill. I've been on the road about two hours. The radio is still playing its dumb, vapid songs. I'm thinking it could've been worse. They could have shot me. Heck, they might have shot me if I'd done something stupid like refuse to drop the knife, or try to fight, or be defiant, rather than submissive. Yes, sir. I can't believe I said that—twice.

Who did this? I wonder. I've no idea, didn't recognize the voices, couldn't see their faces in the dark. I haven't been careful about who I've had political conversations with. I've had them with other guides—locals and non-locals—as well as with customers. In addition, I've been writing anti-war editorials to local and state newspapers, signing off with "Farouq Benhajjar (Copperhill, TN)." Stupid, I've been stupid! I realize now more than ever that which blacks and whites, heck, what *everyone* knew back in the sixties, that activism in the south is serious and dangerous business.

Of course, in a post 9/11 world, I wasn't so naïve as to think that I wouldn't be victim of some sort of prejudice in the south. There's sometimes a misconception here in the U.S. that Arabs are dark-skinned, but we're not. We're Mediterranean for the most part, look more like Italians or Spanish than like natives of India or Pakistan. So I did think that I would be less conspicuous in the south than, say, a Black person. Thought it would spare me some grief, which I'm sure it did. But still, there were isolated incidents, always unexpected, always hurtful.

Two seasons ago, I was in a store buying firecrackers for July 4th with a friend who said, "Check this out, Farouq," pointing to what were the biggest firework rockets I'd ever seen. And before I could answer, one of three young punks who were

browsing, said, “*Farouq*? Isn’t that a terrorist’s name?” The other two smirked. “Shit,” he continued, “we ought to drag your ass to Polk County Sheriff Department and have you locked up for trying to buy explosives.”

“Forget it, man,” my friend said, getting between me and the three guys. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, beat it, towelhead.”

“Go fuck a camel, *Farouq*,” another one chimed in, to which the three of them busted out laughing.

I shake my head at the ignorance witnessed two years ago, and again today. At the thought of tonight’s events, I feel my heartbeat pick up again. But then, yes, there, I see the sign, “WELCOME TO KENTUCKY,” and feel my breathing come a bit easier. I’m still in the south, but out of Tennessee. I check the gauge again and stop at the next gas station. I step out of the car, fill up the tank, then walk barefoot into the station.

“What the fuck?” says the guy behind the counter, his gaze penetrating, his hand reaching for something out of sight. “Are you okay, sir?”

I look down at myself. My white t-shirt is blood-stained—it looks like I’ve been shot in the chest—and I can feel the blood on my face, sticking to the skin like dry mud on a hog. “I—I—” I stutter. “I was attacked a couple of hours ago,” I say. “But I’m fine now.”

His hand comes up now from behind the counter, and in it is a phone—just a phone.

“Do you want me to call the police?” he asks.

I think of all the explaining I would have to do, when all I want is to escape, be on my way, find a hotel and sleep, hug my parents in Seattle. I don’t have it in me to spend an hour

with police officers going over what happened, let alone here, in the south, where anything could still happen to me—even at a police station, I tell myself.

“No, thank you. I don’t think I could handle the police right now. Could I use your bathroom to clean up a bit, though?”

“Sure, sure. Go right ahead.”

I walk to the back and enter the restroom. As soon as I see myself in the mirror, the darkened blood on me and the anxious, fearful look stamped on my face, I break down. I lean forward and press on the sides of the sink and let the tears stream down, drops of diluted red hitting the porcelain below me. I sob for a minute or two and then, to make myself stop, I throw water on my face, soap, more water. I take off my shirt, wash it too, and dry it under the hand drier. When I don it again, there’s a visible stain, but nothing that would alert anyone of any violence having occurred. I use the toilet, wash my hands, and step out.

The clerk is waiting by the counter with a plastic bag. He walks over when he sees me, and hands it to me.

“After my shift here,” he says, “I go to the pool for a few laps. They’re not pants or anything, just a pair of swimming trunks, but at least you won’t be walking around in your underwear. There’s also a pair of sandals in there.”

I feel the emotion well up in me again, take the bag, and say thank you, holding back tears. I return to the restroom, change into the sky-blue swimming trunks and look almost like an ordinary person, except for the cut on the bridge of my nose. The sandals fit—they’re a little big, but they fit. Now that I’ve got footwear, I take the opportunity to wash my feet from the dirt and when I step out, I wouldn’t say that I feel almost normal, but I feel a little better equipped to face the next few days.

After I pay for the gasoline and some food I've picked up off the shelves, I thank the man again and walk out.

On the road to Cincinnati, I think of the kindness of the clerk compared to the two men in Tennessee just three hours ago. Those men. They must be laughing their asses off right now—having scared the poor Arab shitless—laughing all night, I'd say if I were a betting man. It's mind-boggling and I'm shaking my head at the absurdity of it all. I'm barely even Arab, I tell myself. I'm not Muslim, don't speak Arabic, haven't been to Algeria in nearly two decades. I'd be just another American if it weren't for my name, my father and a few cultural items he's imparted to me and my sister. But I'm obviously not. My broken nose and the ache in my abdomen remind me just how much a name can mean to some.

I turn on the radio, not wanting to get myself all upset again, and focus on the road, think of rafting instead, of yesterday, my last day on the Ocoee, I now realize. The day had been epic—my lines down the rapids clean as could be. If it was to be my last day on the river, I could be proud of it. Eric, however, had flipped his boat and there had been a furious scramble for me and the other guides to rescue the swimmers. After the trip, we had all chuckled about it over a beer at the company bar, watching and rewatching the flip on video, the customers laughing along with the guides, because now they had a story to tell.

Would I ever again have days like that?

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In Cincinnati, I locate a Target, and decide to rest a bit. I recline my seat and try to sleep. But the night's events replay in my mind, over and over again, and I wonder if there was anything I could have done differently. Nothing comes to mind, other than maybe being less openly progressive, less of an activist. But as I consider this and remember how many

innocent Iraqi deaths could have been prevented, I realize how impossible it would have been for me to be silent. No, I conclude, there was nothing I could have done to avoid being singled out. There's nothing to regret here. Just plain bad luck.

And now I'm angry. Angry at these two racist men. Enraged all over again at the ignorance pervasive in America, at how Arabs are dying in Iraq because of the same type of racism I've just been victim of. At that damn president who, in the face of adversity, sees only war as the solution, and death—though I doubt he considers the latter, else he wouldn't put our troops in harm's way, or engage in such violent action toward a people that hasn't done anything to us.

I need to calm down, I tell myself. Nothing good will come out of my anger right now. So I give up on rest and walk into the store where I buy myself a whole new wardrobe, as well as toiletries, a duffel bag and a backpack. Right away I change into jeans and a t-shirt, and, after a full meal at a diner, I feel it in me to drive another couple of hours. Soon I'm nearing Indianapolis and decide to pull over at a Country Inn. I check in, take a nice long shower to wash off the scuzz of the day, brush my teeth and get to bed even though it's still only afternoon. I've been awake over thirty hours and, knowing that no one but the hotel receptionist knows I'm here, that the door is locked and bolted, that there are walls surrounding me to protect me, that I'm abundantly *safe*, I fall asleep at once.

I wake up to use the bathroom around ten thirty—nighttime—then go back to sleep where I find myself back in the forests of Tennessee, in Copperhill, running in the dark with the sounds of men calling out from behind me and dogs barking. I'm running as fast as I can but I can hear them gaining ground, can hear them yell, "We told you not to come back! Ever, you hear? Ever!" That's when I trip on a root, a rock, a branch, on something that sends me flying through the air and landing

on the ground hard. Vicious, wicked snarls surround me and dogs bite at my limbs, holding on and shaking as though trying to rip them away from me. I look up into the night as I struggle to get them off, and see a red pinpoint light there, and I know I don't have much longer to live. Then a voice says, "Did you really think you could escape?" followed by a loud BANG.

I open my eyes and find my shirt moist with sweat. I turn to look at the clock. It's a little past four in the morning and I know I won't be able to get anymore sleep, not after that. I wash up, check out, and hit the road.

About three months into my tenure at Muddy Waters Rafting, I had a group of rambunctious customers who just may have been a little drunk. Once they heard my name, one of them said, "Arabs are flying planes into our buildings and, in the meantime, we give them jobs. Go figure." That was about a month after the fireworks shop incident, and the two coming so close one to the other had me fuming. So I flipped 'em. Flipped 'em good. I'm not proud of it, but I put 'em in the drink and watched them flail. Afterward, I put the blame on them, told them they hadn't paddled hard enough. It felt good to get a little revenge.

I make it to Chicago where I stop for breakfast. As I eat, I realize that nobody back at Muddy Waters Rafting knows where I am. I was supposed to work yesterday and people would be sure to ask about me. I finish off my French toast and eggs, then use the pay phone to call the river manager at Muddy Waters. Sammy's relieved when he hears it's me calling. I give him the lowdown on the assault, on where I am, where I'm heading. He asks for my parents' address so that he can send over my things.

"Thanks for everything, Sammy," I say. "For having given me a job and a home for nearly three seasons."

“No sweat. You take care, you hear?”

And I flinch at that “you hear?” Even though it’s said in a different tone, in a different voice, the phrase reminds me of that man, of the violence, the blood, the fright.

“Farouq?” Sammy says, and it pulls me away from that night and back to my current reality.

“Will do, Sammy. Tell everyone there I wish I’d been able to say goodbye.”

I hang up and then it’s back on the road. Hours of driving, followed by lunch, followed by more driving. It’s dinnertime when I get to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, I’m tired, and I need to stop for the night. The next morning, it’s back at it again, foot to the pedal and trying not to speed on the highway, when I see something strange. A black pickup truck in my rearview mirror is edging ever closer to me, until I feel the truck bump the rear of my car. My eyes find those of the driver and there’s a guy with a big old smile on his face giving me a small wave. Next to him is another man, this one with a rifle in hand. I can’t tell if they’re the same guys that attacked me back in Tennessee, but I step on the accelerator and soon I’m putting distance between me and them. Until my car starts to slow down. I pump the gas pedal, but nothing happens. The truck gains on me, reaches me and passes me on the left. I swivel my head and there’s the passenger aiming his rifle at me through his open window. He motions for me to open mine, and I do. Then he shouts, “Hey, Arab. Remember us?”

I wake up with a gasp. That’s nightmares two nights in a row. It’s like a haunting, and I wonder how long they’ll be chasing me, can’t wait to be in Seattle where I can just…decompress. But the nightmare has got me spooked, and I decide to remove the peace sign from my car. It’s better that way—safer. No reason advertising to whomever that I’m against the war. Then

I put some food in my stomach, and head off. Every so often, I see a car with that “Support Our Troops” yellow ribbon on its rear and, when I do, I have to keep my calm, because it’s such people who support the president and his actions overseas. And I wonder if by removing the peace symbol I’m betraying dead Iraqis, fallen American soldiers, my own nature, for that matter. This assault business has really thrown my head for a spin. I try not to dwell on any of this, insert a CD and drive on, let the music void my mind until it’s become numb. And I realize it isn’t just because of the dullness of the drive; it’s a numbness that has been creeping up on me since the beginning of my flight, a numbness at having had to leave everything behind, back in Tennessee. My life vest which was like a second skin to me; the helmet I had purchased at the beginning of the season; the gorgeous guide paddle that helped preserve my back and shoulders from the strains of the job; my home which, yes, was just a tent, but still, one that I had saved up for and spent a couple of hundred dollars on; the high-quality air mattress I slept on; the camping chairs and half a dozen other camping essentials. I frown. That’s not it. I’m going to get all of that stuff back—Sammy said I would. As for my friends, I know that our paths will cross again—I’m not worried about them. No, it’s more profound than that. It’s the sadness of having to leave behind the rivers. I’m going to miss the rivers. That’s it—that’s what it is.

Moving water has always inspired, and the pristine nature that surrounds it—the lush forests, cacti-sprouting hills, or majestic snow-capped peaks—is an inseparable frame to an awe-inspiring moving picture. But I find the beauty of the river runs deeper—much deeper.

It’s a subtler one, accessible only to boaters—kayakers, river guides, canoeists. The eddies, currents, hydraulics, waves, rocks, boulders are all features of the river that one could examine, but to take such a deconstructionist approach at describing the river doesn’t cut it. Not one bit. The skill we

boaters possess to access a river's hidden beauty is that of reading water; in other words, of deeply understanding the dynamics of water in motion. That's what we do—we read and react to what the water tells us. Put in this way, it can sound somewhat pedestrian, but in reality it is a magical and spiritual feeling, as we're in effect dialoguing with the river. One of the most dynamic creations of nature understood and I harmonized with it, easing my boat from one current to the next, playing with the river, smiling and laughing with it. And, some would say, playing, smiling, and laughing with Him.

I take a large breath and expel it. Yes, I'm going to miss them. But I feel that my relationship towards them has changed. Those men have done more than violence toward my physical and mental self. I can feel it—they've altered my viewpoint. I no longer consider the river with peace and love in my heart and mind, but with dread. Those bastards have made me fear nature, or, maybe not nature itself, but the vulnerability one exposes himself to in these wild and wonderful places. And now—what the hell am I going to do now?

For the moment I set the matter aside and just drive. Drive till I feel the weariness in my body, in my brain, and I wonder how truckers manage to do this every working day of their lives. The tedium is insufferable. I stop in Bozeman, Montana. Tomorrow, last stretch to Seattle.

I would like to make it home for dinner, so I leave early and make it to Spokane by lunchtime. I'm now in Washington, just four hours from Seattle—I've made it. I want to cry out victory, and I do—I whoop as Credence plays on the radio. I can't wait to eat my mother's cooking, to hug her and my pop both. I'll hug them so hard their eyes will pop out of their heads.

But rather than drive west toward Seattle, I find myself compelled by…I don't know by what…by the best of me, the

strongest of me, to turn the steering wheel and head southwest. I know of a couple of rivers a few hours down that way. It’s still early in the season—they might have work for me. And I hear there’s some gnarly rafting on the White Salmon River. I don’t have a life vest, or my helmet, or a splash jacket, or a throw bag or river sandals, or a flip line or a dry bag even—I’ve got none of those. Plus, I’ve got that nascent dread of nature to deal with. But still, I tell myself, it’s worth a shot, no? On the way there I can find a place that sells stickers, something to fill the gashing hole on the back of my car, something colorful and hopeful, something that really has meaning—like another peace symbol.