

LEIGH CUEN

Fresh Meat

In October there was Amit. Amit was a fresh off the boat Israeli come to earn his post-army fortune peddling novelties in American malls. He had startling green eyes, dark and polished skin. He always smelled of zealously applied designer cologne. But most importantly, Amit was not Arab. He said so. If I ever made the mistake of suggesting otherwise Amit would suddenly flush baby-shower pink and his speech would be reduced to a head-shaking sputter. He was of Iraqi descent and quasi-fluent in Arabic, longed for kubeh like a man for his wife, but Amit was not an Arab. Amit proudly ordered his hamburgers naked and cheeseless, then chewed them with the simpering air of performance. Amit was a Jew. An Israeli Jew.

“It’s 200 dolla for a room,” the Indian motel clerk spat out at Amit and I from behind the counter. The clerk was dressed in all drab, earth-toned clothing and had many misshapen moles on his face.

“Aw, but is it your best room? I want your BEST room.” Amit wagged his index finger at the clerk. Amit grinned too broadly and with too much familiarity, as if they were brothers at a picnic. The clerk gave Amit a piercingly disinterested stare. “200.” The clerk repeated.

“I’ll give you 175,” Amit wiggled his eyebrows.

The clerk turned to me accusingly. His neck and face didn’t move, only the languid eyeballs. “Come’on, just pay the man and let’s go.” I whispered from

behind Amit, tugging on his sleeve. I suddenly felt that my makeup was too thick and greasy, my heels too high, my body too young.

“Motek, be quiet. Let me talk to Bubi,” Amit hushed me. The clerk had never told us his name. “Bubi, I’ll give \$190 for your best room for the night.” Amit declared.

The man behind the counter blinked at me. I tossed him an apologetic smile. It was too weak and unnatural to look anything but pained. A grimace.

“Two...hundred.” The man repeated, vowels stretched and consonants scrunched by his accent. I hissed at Amit to hand the man his credit card and I.D. Amit’s eyebrows shot up towards the cracked ceiling.

“How about 2 hundred and no need identification?” Amit waved his hand in a Jedi mind trick arch, still wearing his solicitor’s grin. But the gesture fell limp against the severe disinterest of the oily clerk. I told Amit to “just fucking do it” and hurried outside. I stood out in the autumn winds, transferring my weight from one foot to the other. *Gawd, I can’t wait to get these heels off.* My fingers wandered mindlessly up to my throat as if to tug away a constricting shirt collar. That clerk probably thought that I was a drug-crazed prostitute or worse.

Worse: someone so lonely that she had come seeking refuge in a cardboard mattress and tattered bedding with questionable green stains. But he just didn’t understand.

Amit and I finally stumbled into the room long past the witch’s hour.

Amit: nursing a lukewarm vodka mix.

Me: still too young and too privileged to be in a place like this.

And then it started again. Once the stories start they don’t stop.

“You don’t know it like, to go and see a soldier with a bullet in head,” he pointed at his forehead and then briefly and drunkenly impersonated a corpse, tongue lagging to the side and eyes rolling wildly. “To go for a week without shower. Make shit in helmet...So afraid.” He mimed that one for me too, placing his hand behind his rear-end and then bringing it back in front, palm unclenched as if offering a present. For some reason the gesture reminded me less of the horrors of war and more of a children’s sing along. Every accent-slathered statement had its corresponding hand gesture. The lyrics along the bottom of the screen light up as you say them. Sing along. Feel engaged and included. *I can’t.* I turned and wandered the room instead, retreated inside myself like a snail. Glued the front door shut. Let my mind resurrect memories of a soldier who’s pains had not bored me. *Oh Ori, where are you now?* I sighed. Confessions from a sinner that I loved had given voice to my own wounds. But this man’s blabbering chaffed my eardrums.

I let Amit rip himself open and pour the flashbacks down the drain. No need to feign interest. He wouldn't notice even if I did when he was down there, still wallowing beneath the weight of his memories. Amit had led a small band of troops into Lebanon in 2006. Later he would show me the pictures and point out on the map where they had crept away from the border, up and further still, flirting with the region south of Beirut. "Where did you stay?" I asked him. It's not like an infiltrating army can just ask Bubi for a room. In Lebanese apartments, he told me. "And the Lebanese let you?"

"We did not ask for permission," he answered.

I stopped pacing the circa-Ronald Reagan maroon carpeting for a moment.

"You mean you forced civilians out of their homes?" I asked.

Instead of answering he told me about his favorite tie.

Amit had taken it from the home of a Lebanese doctor. It was a rich, evocative satin with cartoons printed all over it, Looney Tunes characters. I tried to imagine these vibrant, animated faces smuggled back into Israel among the ammunitions. I chastised Amit with an unrelenting stare. Bubi style. Amit insisted that they had found guns and a Hezbollah flag in the doctor's apartment. I wondered what the face of the homeless, tie-less doctor looked like. Did he have a thick beard or silky, dark cheeks like Amit's? I sighed and returned to my pacing. Back and forth, until Amit's stories ran dry.

"You don't understand!" He kept moaning. So I sat down next to him and placed my hand on his shoulder, gingerly. With the same tenderness of a lover cupping a breast. I looked into his eyes.

"I know," I whispered to him. "I know. It's okay."

LEIGH CUEN is a poet and journalist from California. She now lives in Tel Aviv. Her work has been published by the *Earth Island Journal*, *San Francisco Public Press*, *World Literature Today* and *Women's eNews*. Read more of her writings at <http://leighcuen.tumblr.com/> and follow her @La__Cuen.