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Dinner with Osama

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DINNER WITH OSAMA

I’m on the Boulder mall half an hour before my herbal wrap appointment, shopping for an eyeliner not tested on rabbits, when I get the idea: Why not ask Bin Laden over for a glass of Chardonnay and something light but upscale? Me, Sheila, your average liberal neocolonial with a whiff of Cherokee thrown in way back when. I’ve been known to cook up a delicate Pesto Primavera or some boisterous Buffalo Enchiladas, take your pick. Better yet, something showy to appeal to his self-image as a major player—my Alaskan Salmon à la Tetsuya marinated in fresh basil, coriander, thyme, and grape seed oil.

Shoppers bustle past with gleaming, logoed bags. Though Osama’s hosts, the Taliban, are anti-woman, I’m no threat. Think a latter-day Julia Child stuffing a Thanksgiving turkey. I’ve got a PhD in minding the human 7-11, serving all comers and keeping an eye on the clumsy bruiser who’s about to knock the bottle of olive oil off the shelf. I’m an expert at chatting people up, and this is Boulder, where we aspire to getting it right. A passing tee reads, “meat: that’s what’s rotting in your colon.” There’s an ordinance against marketing fur within the county, and our Eddie Bauer carries the de rigueur parka with the built-in air pollution level monitor. Our city’s joined the suit against global warming,
and some of us have deeded our upgraded designer homes through trusts to the descendants of the original Arapahos. Shops specialize in North Korean ginseng, South Korean ginseng, Nicaraguan ginseng, and a fabulous new strain grown in Connecticut. You can order arias sung for the spleen tailored to your personal astro printout and, if the acupuncturist recommends it, get a liver massage.

The personal, my sis says, is perfectible. Limit kids’ TV ration; then nurture away at the generous impulse. Sis and I are a year apart. I got the buxom look; she got svelte. We’re like Do/Don’t, Before/After. She and Darin’s dad couldn’t get pregnant—they’d resigned themselves to our sperm bank, Immaculate Conceptions—and then they tried Gonal-F ampules made from crushed Chinese hamster ovaries, and this worked.

Sis and I were equal opportunity employers of unisex toddlers, and Sis’s Darin had the nonviolent instinct from the start. He replanted stranded earthworms and got a sandbox rep for being the guy who gives away toys. In high school he got the male stride down but declined the Pall Mall swagger. Later he got into Chomsky et al and announced that he was majoring in International Meditation. It’s all about fear, Darin said. You have to peel it away layer by layer. Wherever he is now, Darin would back my idea of wining and dining Bin Laden. Breaking bread with the enemy was Darin’s rock and roll.

Darin was paying the rent by temping in the Towers when the planes hit. Sis and I rushed east, and talk about sobbing. We worked the streets with Darin’s photo. This was the kid who kept shouting, Auntie! Look what I found! It’s for you! Plump little hand thrusting out the latest-issue crimson leaf.

Grief is expensive—you pay right down to empty. You’re a wrecked hulk, waiting to sink—but you don’t sink. There came the moment when we had to get it: time to give up with the

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photo. We flew back on Prozac. Sis unlocked her place, went straight to the cupboard, and hurled every piece of wedding crystal against the parquet. She slashed the leather couch and matching armchairs with the cleaver, then flung her Dolce & Gabbana wardrobe into the grill pit, sprayed the pile with lighter fluid, and lit it. If I hadn’t already shamed her out of her mink with my “fur is murder” tee, she’d have tossed the coat into the flames.

I wept and swept up. Then we bent our elbows and downed straight shots of Absolut.

—Remember that mother whose son got lynched in Alabama? Sis said. —After the sentencing, the guy says, Can you forgive me? And the mom says, I already have.

—I’m not there yet, I said. —Neither are you.

We kept at the Absolut. A few days later, when we looked up, all over the country the ancient revenge vibe was going strong.

—Revenge is dated, I said. —Who wants yesterday’s flak jacket? Any way you cut it, retaliation takes its toll. Afterward you need a cruise, a laser peel. Finally, what have you got? A pound of dead flesh. What will you do? Bronze it?

—Darin, Sis said, came out against revenge before he could walk. He would not want a war declared in his honor.

Thus our letter to the president and Congress, our ad in the Times. Even as a kid, Sis wrote, my son refused to play with guns. Don’t kill any Taliban boys for him.

After Darin went down, I fantasized buying a gun. The fantasy lasted ten seconds. Think Mother Teresa aiming an Uzi. When my kids flew the nest, I sold the SUVs and the Lexus, and got a condo and a mantra. Now I whip out compassion like it’s an M16, and in my downtime volunteer with the county’s Prairie Dog Low Income Housing Project. I’ve counseled the Bin Laden types, and I can tell you—Darin was right, it’s about fear.
I know boys, and boys are not just a hot soup of testosterone. They act tough, while inside they’re hovering over a powder puff. Take Darin’s smile on first prom night. June doing its blossomy best to produce a seductive dusk, and I’m at Sis’s place. Down comes Darin—black pants, white jacket—thrilled and scared.

—Hey, I said. —Look who’s here: Drop Dead Handsome.

Darin’s shy smile, like he’s somebody’s Christmas present.

You saw the photo of the Bin Ladens in the papers? The family in Sweden on holiday, gathered at the curb for the group shot. Osama’s fourteen, bell bottoms and a Beatles cut, his most fervent wish to ride behind his brother on the moped. I recognize the ambience: he was shy around girls in fifth grade but hustled up daring and presented Shumailia with a Valentine box of chocolates. Osama was the pure flame burning and the petro dollars to make dreams come true. Then he got a little too ardent, this confused billionaire with a fundamentalist chip on his shoulder. Now he gets shunted from country to country attached to the dialysis machine courtesy of the American hospital in Dubai. Without it he’d be dead now, and damn if it didn’t come from the Great Satan America!

And there are fashion implications: who can look chic on dialysis?

I get the word out to Abdullah, my pal at the gyros stand, that there’s this invitation. Though I’m just a tad anxious about the atmosphere in my complex. I live above the Oaxacan muralist. Oaxaca is our Sister City. When Council banned smoking inside the city limits, they had a problem. What to do with fifty thousand gold cigarette lighters emblazoned with our mascot, the Peruvian llama? We gave Oaxaca the lighters; they gave us the muralist. My condo is over his.

Below and across from him the Palestinians moved in, and things were mellow yellow. Rehima lolled on the stoop in her dinner with osama
scarf all perky smiles, and the aroma of tasty cookery rose to my
level. Mohammed did math homework, Mehreen and the smaller
kids chattered away, and when three-year-old Shafia cried,
Mehreen took Shafia on her lap and the sobs turned into hiccups.
Then an Israeli moved in across from me and above Rehima. No
way around it: the presence of someone over you is cause for con-
cern—what if there’s a failure of trickle-down theory? Rachel’s a
sweetheart, but formidable with the magenta hair and spiked
jacket over shimmering décolletage. And she turns up the volume
and forgets to take off her boots.

Next morning she rushes down on her way to work at Cut
Loose. Rehima stands in the doorway.

—You have murdered my children’s sleep with your stomping
of Sharon’s boots!

Rachel rises on spiked heels and smolders past.

This morning when Rachel starts down, Rehima hurl a
rock up to the landing.

—Why my children must study Hebrew! Why your schools forbid reading of great Palestinian poet Darwish!

Ours is not a complex where you invite guests without fore-
warning that they’ll need an army pass and a friend in the Intifada.

Thursday morning my knocker bangs. I open. Abdullah’s in Sufi
ecstasy.

—The fragrance that floats toward you at this moment, he says,
streams from the tent of the secrets of God!

—Osama says yes? I ask.

—Allah willing, Abdullah says. —Tomorrow at seven.

—What was it that convinced him? I say.

Abdullah turns up his hands. Allah is inscrutable.

I put on Madonna’s Erotica, forward to Peggy Lee’s “Fever,”
and clean the dining room. Next morning I buy the salmon, a

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dusky Chardonnay, and some Absolut, just in case. Then I stop at our third-wave feminist bookstore Word Is Out and pick up my special order of a gilded copy of the Koran.

—Hey, you with the clitoridectomy! Rachel shouts from the landing. —Where’s your jallabiya husband? At the mosque with his rear end in the air?

Rehima hurls another rock up the stairs. —Have you crawled past sniper to get to water truck?! Have you given birth to sixth child while standing at army checkpoint?!

At six I shower and slip into full-length flax. Understated, and nonthreatening. Abdullah fills me in by cell phone. Turns out Osama couldn’t finesse the border crossing in his private jet, so he stowed away on a camel shuttling heroin. In Islamabad he shaved. In Paris he got the Caesar cut with spiked bangs, the black leather jacket, Armani shirt. At Dulles, Security confiscated his fingernail file, but hey, here’s a state-of-the-art dialysis machine, and Osama was cool, jacket dangling from a finger over his shoulder.

Abdullah drops him off and drives away. Think who you’re hosting, I remind myself. Don’t forget Darin’s leaf— and remember, before the Towers there were all those dead Kenyans.

Rehima and kids mass on the porch. Osama pushes the dialysis machine up the sidewalk.

—Shalom aleichem, Osama says. —God is great.

—And there is only one, Rehima says. Eyes color of olive trees, cast down.

The kids surround him, chattering and bouncing. He passes out Milky Ways he bought at the airport. Mohammed holds out his math book and a pen.

—Can I have your autograph?

Osama signs, then climbs the stairs. I watch through the peephole. Between the spaghetti-strap top and hip slingers, Rachel’s gold navel ring gleams.
—Tell me please, Osama says. —Where is your Sheila?
I open my door. —Osama! I say.
Rachel looks like she’s just swallowed a matzo ball whole.

Osama settles into the wingback beside the window, where he can see the street. Dialysis machine like a bloodhound at his feet. He takes the Koran off the coffee table.
—Nice place you’ve got, Shelia. —And no mud. Afghan mud is satanic.
—Ordinance against mud, I say. —City council won’t allow it.
He wants Absolut on the rocks, which I take as a hopeful sign.
—Sheila, he says. —Can we speak frankly? Think you could talk George into inviting me to the ranch like he does to Putin?
—But the Towers, I say.
—That was my groupies. Who can control them? They’re convinced that Nostradamus wrote those Towers into the job description.
—George didn’t bomb Mecca and Medina, I say.
—He will, Osama says. —Anyway my fans did George a favor. Your couch potatoes are waving his flag and investing in high-tech weaponry. He’s got the next election in the bag.

I bring on the Portobello starter. Break a little bread together, I think, and armor clatters onto the parquet.
—Say I swing an invite, I say. —Think you could backpedal on the Satan thing?
—Sheila, consider. Jihad is a testosterone high. I’m Islam’s version of The Rock. The *mujahedin* want my autograph. They want a photo op. And George took every video game I had! Half those toys are mine—more than half. And he stole your election!

Time for Fennel Salad with Lemon Zest.

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—Have you noticed George doesn’t have any pals? I say. Tony’s just a wannabe. Legos are all George’s got. If you called off the jihad, you wouldn’t be backing down. You’d be stepping forward in a statesmanlike manner. Rising above petty petulance, demonstrating a hefty bit of tolerance and your own offshore savoir faire.

He likes the image. A little more Absolut and he could really get into it. Then he remembers the other image—he’s been wronged!

—Sheila, he says. —There is such a thing as sharesies. Why aren’t you sitting Georgie boy down and telling him to love the neighbors!? Osama’s jaw tightens. —Clinton took in all those Sudanese boys. Let’s see George take the Iraqi kids with heads that won’t stop growing.

I think of Darin, the pudgy hand pushing that leaf. Beneath Osama’s Armani there’s a five-year-old with mud on his hands and an aching heart. I bring on the Salmon à la Tetsuya topped with chives and kombu on a bed of rice paper noodles surrounded by parsley oil and ocean trout caviar.

—Osama, what’s the bottom line here?

He looks at me, eyes liquid anguish. —Let George be the one who’s left out! Let him feel what it’s like to be kicked around.

—It’s not fair, I say. —Not fair. But remember: Gold becomes constantly more beautiful from the blows the jeweler inflicts on it.

—You Sufis, he says. But gently, like it’s a compliment. Then he clears his throat. —The thing is, we’ve got the oil, and I’ve got a rep.

I sprinkle Chardonnay into his glass. —Say you call off the jihad and invite George to the table. You’ll seize upper ground and up the quality of your rep. George will have to ante up, and you’ll get the Nobel. Or you two can share it. What would it take?
—Tell George to get out of Saudi so we can get the king off our backs and worship without the metallic vibe of his fleet parked behind the mosque.
—That’s it?
—And send Sharon to diversity training.
—And in return? I say.
—We call off jihad and send our women to college.
—What about the *mojabedin*? Some retraining’s in order, don’t you think? They need jobs, and you’d get points.

He considers. —Let the *mojabedin* take up nursing. Let them become art critics.
—Good thinking! I say. —So let’s say you and George hit it off. There will still be all those little boys out there with guns. Let’s find something else for them to do.

—Arafat solved it, Osama says. —When the Black September suicide bombers got out of hand, Arafat called patriotic young women to come forward and offer themselves to the nation. Marry the Black Septembers, he said, and we’ll pay you two grand. Have a kid the first year, and we add five. Osama gives me thumbs up. —Give those boys with guns a girl and a check.
—The girls have to be free to say no, I say.
—Make the girls billionairesses, Osama says. —You can afford it. Direct deposit.

I bring the cappuccino chocolate mousse. We enjoy it slowly. A breeze wafts through the sycamore beside the open window.
—Help me with this Palestinian-Israeli thing, I say. —I don’t think nubile young women and petro dollars will do it.
—Tough nut to crack, he says. —Maybe if you cook something for both.
—It will require many meals.
—But many meals are good. People make jokes. They plan trips to the sea.

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—They fall in love, I say. Much clearing of his throat. —This Rachel across the hall? Where is her husband?

—You want your kids learning Hebrew?

—Even so. Would roses be the way?

If Helen can launch a thousand ships, possibly Rachel can defuse a million M16s, G3s, Uzis, Kalashnikovs, and RPG-7s. I fantasize the offspring. Elihu and Harriet Bin Laden, Sumalia and Mohammed Weissman.

—Roses, I say. —And chocolate. And with the armor off.

Osama and I hear the sound at the same time. Abdullah’s horn. Osama stands. —Sheila, I owe you. I flash on the dead Kenyans and pick up the Koran.

—Osama, you bankrolled some really bad produce. But that’s behind you. So let’s suppose one of your buttons gets pushed. Can you feel the forbearance kicking in?

He gives me a look that’s absolutely level. —I push the buttons myself.

Darin’s leaf floats up, his fat little hand.

—Osama, you said you owe me, and you do. My nephew went down with those Towers. Now I need you to abstain while I talk to George. When I’ve got him prepped, you and I will talk again. Give me that.

I lift his right hand, place it on the Koran. —Promise. No more towers until then.

He withdraws his hand. —See this dialysis machine? It cleans your blood. Once you start cleaning blood you can’t stop. You have to marry the machine.

Oh these boys! The world’s treasures! All that fervor for what is high and good—sharesies!—and what does Allah do? Sends renal failure.

—Allahu akbar, I say, groping for a way to pull him in.
—And there is only one, he says.
—Swear, I say. —For me. For your mother. For the planet.

At that moment my front door swings open. It’s Rachel, thrusting out a CD.
—Musiqah mizrahit! she says. —For you.
—Forbidden, he says. He turns up his hands.
—Do not forbid yourself beauty! Rachel says. Her voice breathy, mint laden.

I withdraw discreetly. When I hear the dialysis machine descend, I go down. Rachel stands with Rehima, kids bouncing around them. Rehima smiles from her scarf and holds out a package wrapped in foil.
—Kabobs, she whispers.

Osama puts his hand over hers. —Keep them for Mohammed and the kids.

Osama exchanges a glance with Rachel: slow flames burning through the evening. Then he rolls the dialysis machine down the sidewalk. We watch Abdullah tool them away in dusk light. A turtledove coos in the sycamore. Rehima tells the kids to brush their teeth. Shafia starts to whimper.
—I want Milky Way!
Rachel picks her up. —Hey baby doll, she says. —It’s gonna be OK.

I sprawl on the couch and bask. It went reasonably well. Now—what will I serve George? Roast Grouse with Bread Sauce? And on the side Braised Spinach and Daikon drizzled with parsley oil, garnished with leek. Pemican starter, a hearty Beaujolais, and for dessert? Apple pie à la mode.

I fall asleep on the couch. At three AM I wake to the shriek of sirens. Squad cars and fire trucks screech to the curb. Overlapping circles of light blare across our lawn. In the distance, rumble of things heavy and huge. Shiver of perception that this rumble is
advancing. Think Waco without Reno: we used to call these monsters tanks. Now they’re armored personnel carriers, and they’re pointing at our building. I rush downstairs with Rachel. Rehima’s door is open, and Shafia’s crying. I go down the steps to the lawn.

Here comes the media, wattage and footage. Al Jazeera elbows out CNN. Reporters charge across the grass, and I’m unprepared—me. Here comes my fifteen minutes of fame, and what am I wearing? Couture flayed into submission. It gets worse. The reporters get me on camera, but in the blat of helicopter rotors they can’t hear me. The helicopters hover, dropping commando soldiers. The commandos move so smoothly they must be on pills. They separate Rehima out like she’s just another file card and strong-arm her to the curb. Rachel and I run to the rescue—though I get there first because I’m wearing Nikes from before the boycott.

—She’s got eleven kids, I say.
—All she did was kabobs! Rachel says.
—She’s pregnant, I say. —And she’s not the one you want.

I am.

A soldier steps in front of me. —Just go crochet some doilies, he says.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, the way Darin taught me. That remark was part of the young man’s basic training. It’s the trainers somebody needs to speak to, and I suppose that somebody will have to be me. But later. Everywhere I look there’s every kind of rifle. It occurs to me to wonder what my file looks like. Did they note my check to the Department of Holistic Studies? My contribution to the Rapid Transit Deficit Bailout? My Kitty Dental Screening Fundraiser for the Humane Society?

Above and backlit, on a levitated platform resembling a cloud, Rumsfeld, George, and Billy Graham in Stetsons and alligator boots strut and frown. A fleet of swanky planes rattles the molecules of the air, getting into position to drop—what?
Fléchette shells? No. Down come the hardcover Bibles. Volumes thud down. They pile up. They dent the lawn. Abdullah forges through, touches my arm. His eyes soft, fragrant concern.

—Osama was afraid, Abdullah says. —He thought you’d turn him in. So he turned you in instead.

Darin said it: it’s all about fear. Now George’s voice blares through a Pentagon-logoed bullhorn.

—Come out now with your hands in the air!

—The kids! Rachel says. She grabs my hand, and we bolt through falling Bibles for the door. I hear a whack. Rachel makes a sound like a word she was about to utter has been jerked out of her. Her hand lets go, and she crumples on the steps.

—Don’t forget Mohammed’s dentist appointment! Rehima shouts. —And Mehreen needs help with math homework every night!

I grip the doorknob, but it won’t turn. —Mohammed! I shout. —It’s me, Sheila! I try to force the knob. Rehima’s voice again, a spiral of ribbon falling from a package.

—And don’t let Shafia run out into traffic!

Her voice is Darin’s voice calling me across chilly autumn dusk, Darin running toward me with a handful of light. I want to tell Rehima she’s not alone, I’ll bail her out, they can’t do this—not in my country! Just before the flash in which I see the bones in my hand, I turn like Lot’s wife and look back.