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A Lebanese Hillbilly, or An Arabi-lachian at the Big Lick Farmers' Market

*Shiera S. el-Malik**

‘What are you looking for?’ The question comes from a man in blue overalls, of middling age, and with patches of still-dark hair scattered around his head. His accent carries the thick Appalachian vowels that distinguish it from the drawl of Southern accents. Conscious of being perceived as foreign, I demurred. ‘I am just looking,’ I said.

I enjoy going to The Square. It boasts a robust farmers’ market in the Spring, Summer, Autumn seasons, which brings in craftspeople of all sorts, soap-makers, woodworkers, painters, and the like. It is near the art museum and a print shop that collects and sells all sorts of paper goods, including old advertisements from when this place was a little railway town. Norfolk and Southern made Big Lick a real town and Carillion turned it in to a sprawling medical center. Later, I would notice that the doctors’ families brought brown faces to this deeply racially divided valley center, not unlike the cosmopolitan space of Virginia Tech. But, I did not know this yet, and experience taught me to be cautious.

He hovers. I feel nervous. Finally, I offer that my husband and I are growing a small garden and that I want to buy some plants, mainly tomato and peppers, but I would also really like eggplant.

‘Eggplant?’ He says. I notice that he has a smattering of teeth left in his head. A cliché, I think. My husband comes from up in the mountains around valleys like this one, but with less industry, healthcare, or anything other than natural blue ridge beauty that is sold to tourists. He and I joke about the clichés and how the movie *Deliverance* has impacted conceptions of people who live up above these valley towns. Yet, here I am attempting a code switch, yanking out the various versions of self that I have spent years crafting for the mobile life that I live. But, I’m not fast enough; this interaction is now carrying me off too quickly. Yes. Eggplant.

‘What do you do with eggplant?’ he asks. I share a bit, but drop myself out of the sentence. Roast it and mix with garlic and yoghurt. Make a tomato stew with beef.

‘Momma loves to cook with eggplant! She stuffs it with meat and spices.’ He continues to tell me how his momma has a garden and grows eggplant, peppers, garlic, and so on. His momma is a great cook, I am told. I am not listening carefully enough yet, to see where he is taking this

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conversation. Instead, I am concentrating too heavily on fitting in. I neglect to hear the changing of gears.

‘Where are you from? He asks. Chicago, I tell him. But, my mother grew up here. Still, I try to deflect my foreign-ness, my brown skin and dark curly hair. I make sure to utilize a non-descript, but non-nasally, midwestern accent. We talk more about the vegetables and how we can stuff tomatoes and peppers with rice. Yes, yes, I love that. I make stuffed vegetables, also, I tell him. I am starting to relax into our encounter.

‘So, you’re from Chicago? You make that in Chicago?’ Yes, I say. Then, thinking of the food we are reminiscing over, I add, I was born in Lebanon.

‘I was born in Lebanon!’ He nearly shouts.

My surprise must have been visible. He starts talking to me in a colloquial Arabic that I find difficult to follow. We are the same age. He came to Appalachia when he was five, not long after my family moved to Chicago. His family, which includes momma, older siblings, spouses, and a next generation, grow and sell vegetables and vegetable seedlings. He remembers a load of dirty jokes in Arabic that his older brothers taught him. I know none and he appears chagrined. We revert to English, but find ourselves staring at each other. I no longer feel nervous. Rather, I am grateful that he persisted. I marvel at how I had been protecting myself against even such kind encounters.

I buy four tomato seedlings, four pepper seedlings, and four eggplant seedlings, and thank my new friend. Then, with a *ma salaama* and a wave, I head back up into the mountains to share my story of meeting a Lebanese Hillbilly, an Arabi-lachian, at the Big Lick Farmers’ Market.