

MALAK ELSOURI

Her American Dream

“**W**hy are the girls on the telly all them slim tiny-assed white girls?” I asked my husband.

My husband tore his gaze from the television—much too slowly, I noted grimly—and fixated his eyes on me. Bored.

“Because them people in the high-up know us men like to stare at ’em. It’s called,” he paused and he put his hand to his head like he did whenever he was thinking, “good advertisement, that’s what.”

I glared at him. By God, if my mom heard him talking like this, she’d have slapped him right back to Nigeria, she would. He’d deserve it, for sure.

“Do you like to stare at ’em?” I asked because what kinda wife would I be if I didn’t ask?

“Nessa, honey, you know I ain’t like that,” my husband replies because what kinda husband would he be if he didn’t?

I ain’t convinced. Then I turn back to him, so quick the dainty little armchair I was perched on rocked violently before righting itself and I broke into talk. My husband didn’t want me to talk, quite surely, but I talked anyways.

“You know,” I said, my thoughts fluttering from my mind to my lips, “it ain’t always gotta be them white girls on the telly.”

My husband grunted unenthusiastically, but I ignored the flick of his hand trying to silence me into boredom and continued. The image was fresh in my mind, all dazzling lights and success and stability and all.

“I mean, look at me, alright?” I waited till his eyes focussed on my

face and giggled at his damn slow response. He was just so darn slow.

“What *about* you?” He groaned and I knew he was eager to get back to staring at the white things. I knew my husband so well but ain’t I the stubborn one.

“Well why don’t you tell me, honey?” I imitate his use of that word from earlier because it sure riles him up. I earn a glare more dead than the one before, which only makes me grin even wider.

My husband only ever shows two emotions, death and irritation or an artful mixture of both. My husband sure is a damn award-winning artist, he sure is.

“You’re definitely not white,” he says and I roll my eyes. Definitely my favourite conversationalist.

“Nice of you to notice, dear husband,” I replied, “but I mean. *Look* at me.” I gesture wildly down my body.

“I am looking at you, honey.”

“No you’re not. You’re not *looking*.” What am I missing if my own husband sees them white girls and not me, I ain’t got a clue. “I’m exactly like them white girls, no less talented or beautiful or whatever’s going on in that big ol’ head of yours.”

At that, that dear husband of mine blinked rapidly at me, his eyes opening up as big as them corn cans in the kitchen. Quite wide and sort of alive and that ain’t ever happened before so there I was blinking just as fast right back at him.

“Damn you right, honey,” he imitates my wide grin and leans in, “I’m sure these pretty white girls got two kids on their hips and a house to run for sure and a husband who needs that nice hot meal at home. I’m sure they like that I’m sure.”

And suddenly my husband disappears and instead I see that joker villain my little boy hates. That’s him, for sure.

He didn’t see me.

“Ain’t nothing missing from me. I could easily be up there, on the telly. Ain’t nothing missing from me at all,” I whisper finally and push myself up and go off to tend to the little ones before bed. Abraham Lincoln didn’t end slavery so I don’t get to live the American dream, right? Damn right, I convinced myself. I could be the next Hattie McDaniel, sure I can.

Next day, I’m off to work at the small grocery store down the

street, all cosy'd up in my little coat and uniform and it's way too small for me, all tight around my boobs. I grumble and pull my scarf a little lower to cover 'em up. Moments like this I be happy for the New York weather, all loud and windy like the children's choir up at the church, ain't not one of them got a good voice yet they singing anyways.

I pass the big theatre on the way and by some dumb luck I spy a poster, all fancy coloured and big writing, pegged to the notice board and there's a few women staring up at it, clucking excited together. Young white women, of course so I saunter over, pulling my already tight coat even tighter around me, trying to look uninterested but interested enough to have walked over.

"What y'all googling at, huh?" I speak to the women and they all turn to see me staring up at the poster from behind. So you wanna know what they do then and I really don't think they mean it rudely but these white girls just part like the Red Sea. Not that I complain, of course. I walk right between them and it's like I've switched bodies with Moses, getting that close up view of my heaven...

The notice board was plain, all expired offers on popcorn and shows. And then there was that big ass ad them ladies were eyeing. An ad for a telly actress, all exciting curly writing. Now of course, the ad's got a white girl on it...what'd the husband call it last night? *Good advertisement*. But ain't nowhere on that poster did it say no African Americans to audition. I laughed out loud because I sure felt damn prophetic today, all miracles and signs from the Lord.

Work was like a drag of my old man's cigars, not that I'd tried it, oh no. But I sure had seen him huff and puff like that old tale and groan and cough and look on the brink of death. That sure is the best way I can describe the drag that's my work. But I did manage to call up the ad people and damn, it sure was the awkwardest conversation I ever had with a white man. And I assumed it was a white man because ain't they all white men in the high up?

"Hello," the voice had said, a British voice at that, all posh like on the telly. I winced slightly, because damn what was I to say?

"Hi," I replied finally, my voice all soft and low. Dammit.

"Can I help you?" And I couldn't see his face to tell what he was thinking so I close my eyes and try to imagine and instantly snap

them open because all I got was a man looking the white version of my damn husband, all bored and dead. And it hits me that maybe men just ain't the friendliest. They just born naturally dead.

"Sure you can, Mister. I wanna register my name for that telly ad actress thing."

He grunted down the line and then he goes, "Just turn up at the theatre for the audition. It isn't any use calling up. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't but I'll tell you it now... I'm Nessa Belafonte."

He grunts again and I almost giggle because damn this man like them little piggies constantly gruntin' away.

"Are you Italian or...?" He asks and that gets me in a little knot because why the hell that matter, eh?

"Are you?"

"Don't be smart with me, darling and just answer the bloody question." I gotta note here his voice is rough or maybe he making it rough? So that he got that British accent and he got that rough voice to scare the 'Jesus outta me?

"I ain't Italian for sure, mister," I'd replied and I weren't lying. I crossed my fingers and my grip all tightened on the tellyphone.

"Well, do turn up at the theatre. Auditions begin 5 sharp and it's a better image if you're there on time. Do you understand?" No grunting after that one this time.

"I sure do, mister. I'll be there 5 sharp, don't you worry," I reply, all chirpy and bright because damn you bet I'm gonna be a movie star, I am.

So 4:45 comes round and I'm right there at the theatre doors, knowin' full well my husband gon' be back home, waiting on his late dinner that ain't coming and for once I just ain't giving a damn.

Now the theatre ain't a place I'm often at, only them rare moments we can spare a little dime for a little treat. And damn the place is packed with white girls and all I seeing is they all that woman on the telly my husband be eyeing. I take a short breath and raise my head and I note they all stare right at me as I walk in. So I just raise my head a little higher. And now they look away. I breathe.

I scan their faces one by one, and they all slim and young and pretty and they ain't no different from me, not really they ain't. My

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skin tingles, all electricity shivering on every little hair on my body. I ain't a wife or mother no more. Just a young woman tryna chase her dream; her goddamn American dream.

I'm the only black woman in that room waiting and by god I tell you it's scary as hell. All them eyes just piercing your back, all glares and all.

And then I'm called in and here I am walking in to that theatre hall and I'm just starin' around. It's a big place, it sure is and it's all velvet curtains and crimson walls and the three judges just there, all small and antlike. Then there's all them lights above making the stage look golden and bright and it's like my dream all over—me on that stage, my heart be dancing about with me as I laugh and prance all elegant like them lioness queens back home ruling their land.

And then I *am* on that stage and I am ruling my land.

I smile all wide and huge and warm and I'm under the dazzling sun and ain't nothing gonna stop me dazzling that bright.

One of the judges clears their throat and I finally focus on them; can't be losing my mind right now. 'Specially not in front of these lots. Now the judges, they all white men like I'd expected and I ain't never know what I gotta expect now but they speak before I can make no assumptions.

"What's your name, miss?" Now this the British man on the phone and I almost be giggling because I sure got him right in my head, he all round and big and pink-faced. Kind of cute in the same way like them dwarves in that Snow White cartoon like fifteen years ago.

"I'm Nessa Belafonte and I sure ain't Italian, mister," I reply and he just grunts like he gotta.

"Ah, so you're *that* girl, eh?" he replies, and I come to the conclusion his voice just rough. He just naturally like that.

"Now you ain't what we expected..." Now this was the white man to the left and he was all tall and slim and a scrunched up paper face. And he sure was an American, this one.

"I ain't?" I say but I know.

"No, we expected someone more..." his voice trailed and it was like nails scratching on hard wood, that damn irritating sound.

"White?"

“Exactly.”

I’m all silent for a minute because I knew, I really did. There’s now like a huge rock in my stomach and it’s all pulling me down into the deep dark sea, all heavy and hard. I just stand there.

“I ain’t gonna drown, I tell you, mister,” I say and they all just look confused and awkward and just shifting their asses about in their too small chairs. “I’m still here, I ain’t moving.”

The British man grunts and it’s like an out-of-body moment because I now seein’ him grunt in real, not over the phone.

Now the third judge been sitting all silent and he’s the youngest of ’em all, barely older than me I say. And damn he sure as hell is handsome, all dark, smudgy charcoal hair and ocean-like eyes and all. Maybe I am drowning? I sure got a thing for artists or art itself. Now he speaks up and his voice is soft and warm—just like the big ol’ star above.

“Alright, you’re a young newlywed woman, okay? Now you’ve just found out your husband recently died in the war and obviously you’re distraught and overwhelmed. Dazzle us then, Miss Belafonte.” His eyebrows do a little quirky thing up at me and I close off my eyes, letting the calm of the ocean wash over me. Drowning ain’t so bad I tell you.

Then my eyes open and I am at one with that stage, I tell you. My eyes water and I sob and laugh and it’s like I’m drenched in water so cold. Suddenly that woman is me and her misery is my misery and every movement I do is her and me and I sure tell you I can’t tell the difference who’s who anymore. A tragic dance of loss and tragedy and picking yourself up again—a phoenix from the ashes—all ethereal strength and all.

And then I stop.

The three white men just stare up at me and I stare down, full aware I’m sweating. I shake my head and smile. Then the young one just stands up and starts clapping and the sound just echoes through the empty hall and it echoes right through my soul and ain’t I sure this one’s a good ghost, I’m sure.

“I say yes, Nessa Belafonte,” the pretty one tells me and his smile be just as big as mine, I tell you.

Now, the other two...now they don’t agree. They just keep

shaking their head because damn they determined to get that slim tiny-assed white girl for the role, they sure are. If they keep at it, their heads gon' fall off, dammit. But the pretty one, he puts his hand out, his eyes never leaving mine and the men stop with all that shaking. I gasp, because how in the heavens he do that? I ain't no clue, but he does it anyways.

"This girl," he speaks, all authority and I realise this is the man. *The Man* in the high up. And I sure realise my husband *is* wrong, because damn this one sure don't want a pretty little white girl, he don't.

"She's the one. She. Is. The. One." And he lets out a little surprised chuckle and I giggle because damn I'm feeling drunk of some sorts.

The other men can't say nothing and neither can I, I tell you, but I smile and curtsy and thank them, 'specially the pretty one. And lemme tell you he can't stop smiling and neither can I. And then I leave and I ain't no longer feel like I'm missing anything. No sir, I ain't.

The entire walk home I just be singing and laughing and all because dammit this really be happening. Now all these white folk just staring at me as I walk like I be some alien or something but no sir, I don't care, not at all.

And then I'm home and it's way dark out when I knock on the door. My mind feels all tight and clouded and I ain't any idea what's firing in my mind right now. But the door flings open and it's that dear husband of mine, still dead as ever and we ain't ever been more different.

But the little ones, my little ones, just rush at me then and I hold them close, their small bodies pressed warmly to mine. They too, are alive and I sure am gonna make sure they stay happy forever.

"You won't guess what, sweetpeas," they look up at me then, all innocence and smiles and purity and I grin, "your momma's gonna be a movie star, she is. She really, really is."