

To Hit a Woman (Lightly)

by Andrew Bowen

The force of my husband's open hand spun me to the living room floor. Neon sparks flashed around me like my first Fourth of July. The copy of the Qur'an Dr. Bakhtiar gave me at the library tumbled out of my hand and lay open in front of me. I remembered the last line of chapter 4, verse 34. "...as to those (women) on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping places and (daraba) go away from them—"

Seyyed snatched the book away.

"This isn't the Qur'an," he said in Arabic and shook it at my face. "It's feminist propaganda."

I touched my cheek with trembling fingers. My face throbbed and burned, as if my heart had been ignited and transplanted into my jaw.

He walked by me and into the kitchen. The hinges on the metal trash can squeaked before the lid shut.

I pushed myself to my feet and pulled the blue hijab off my head. My hair fell over my shoulders as I walked toward the threshold between the kitchen and the living room. The cool tile floor announced my arrival on the soles of my feet.

I looked over at the end table by the kitchen entry. The curved dagger of Seyyed's Bedouin grandfather was displayed on a mount within its metal sheath. My fingers curled into a sadly empty fist.

Cold air washed over my legs. I shivered and looked back into the kitchen. Seyyed bent forward behind the refrigerator door.

My voice quivered. "I want a divorce, and I'm taking Ali with me."

Seyyed slowly raised his head and glared at me.

I lifted my chin and crossed my arms.

He laughed, shook his head and said, "You aren't taking my son. Besides, where would you go? There's no one here for you."

Dr. Bakhtiar mentioned shelters, intervention organizations, but once the question rolled off my husband's lips, it became a nauseous

reality. I blinked a few times, tried to brush off fear, and tightened my arms' grip on my ribs.

"We aren't in Egypt anymore, Seyyed. American law protects against spousal abuse."

He poured a glass of apple juice. "The same law that allows abortion, homosexuality? No, we abide by the Qur'an and Shari'a law in this house." He took a sip and pointed at the trash can. "*That* translation is false. God permits a husband to strike his wife should she become disobedient."

"Disobedient?" I stepped forward. "Dr. Bakhtiar showed me that the Arabic word *daraba* means to 'go away from' in the context of that verse, not 'to beat.'"

"This conversation is over," he said and took the last gulp of juice.

I opened the trash can lid, reached down through damp paper towels and vegetable peelings and pulled out the text. I steadied my breath. "Please, I'm not asking you to abandon God, only your belief that it's permissible to hit me."

He began to turn, but stopped short of looking over his shoulder at me and stared out the window over the sink. "If I'm not mistaken, it's time to pick up Ali from school."

I opened my mouth to protest but the pain in my jaw from his blow advised me otherwise. I draped the hijab over my head, took my purse from the counter and left.

Ali looked up at me from a crowd of friends as I pulled up to the school. I smiled and waved but rolled my lips over my teeth, self-conscious of the chip in my incisor Seyyed had given me during a past argument. He slung his green book bag over his shoulder and waved goodbye to his friends. I glanced in the rearview mirror to ensure the fresh makeup I applied at the stoplight concealed my wound. He opened the back door and hopped into his booster seat.

"Hey sweetheart. Have a good day?"

"We learned about amphibians today. Mrs. Reynolds brought in tadpoles from the pond at her house—they were so cool! Can I have some tadpoles? I want bullfrog ones..."

Ali went on about swamps and frogs in that child-like zeal of discover. The glint in his eyes, the passion in his voice that rises with everything new he encountered reminded me of Seyyed when we first married.

He was a medical student in Cairo, an ungainly young man uncomfortable socially and happy only in the company of his studies. Under pressure from his parents, he gave into taking a wife. The cost of Seyyed's schooling broke his parents and thus what they could offer for a respectable dowry was pitiful at best.

"A bargain," they said of me, a recent widow and thus deflowered. My parents didn't negotiate long.

Seyyed's awkward nature made him vulnerable and endearing. I admired the voracity he displayed in practicing medicine which opened a window into a personality few had seen. Late at night, I listened to his retelling of exciting cases he had at the hospital and, slowly, I began to love him. As his confidence grew, his passion in other areas of our marriage blossomed as well, and it wasn't long before we were pregnant with Ali.

He sat at the kitchen table one day after work and fondled his grandfather's dagger—a nervous habit for when something was on his mind. "Let's move to America."

"America?" I looked up from a sink of dishes and laughed. "Why, of all places?"

He slipped his arms around my pregnant belly from behind, took a deep breath through his nose and exhaled, "Fresh air."

And with that, I knew he'd grown bored with the medical establishment in Egypt. He wanted more: more technology, new developments in medicine and research...freedom.

So we obtained our visas, said goodbye to our families and made our exodus from a land our forefathers had called home for thousands of years.

Seyyed's enthusiasm and knowledge won the admiration of all his new colleagues. We obtained U.S. citizenship a year after Ali's birth and with Seyyed's career secured, we had planted roots.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq changed everything. Seyyed became obsessed with the news, following the events of the insurgency with every free moment. He became more involved with our local mosque and was influenced by the older, more conservative brethren who desired more American Muslims to shun Western values in favor of Sharia Law. Settled in his new paradigm, he handled his grandfathers' blade less and less. Our nightly chats waned, as did his involvement with Ali and the warmth of his personality as a whole.

The first time he struck me, dinner was late.

"I'm sorry. Ali has the flu and—"

"That's no excuse!" he said and slapped the table.

I jerked as Ali, then three, began to cry. I knelt in front of him and brushed his tears away. "It's okay, papa didn't mean to scare you." I stood and glared at Seyyed. "Ever since you started meeting with those men from the mosque you've grown harsh and impatient."

"What I do and with whom I spend my time is none of your concern."

I perched my fists on my hips and lifted my voice. "Beg your pardon but it *is* my con—"

The back of his hand struck my jaw and sent me to the kitchen floor. "Don't ever talk back to me again!"

The taste of blood swelled in my mouth. I touched the chipped edge of my incisor with the tip of my tongue. Trembling, I looked up at his blood-speckled hand. The gold ring his father had given him before we moved had cracked my tooth. It was then that I realized I had lost my husband and best friend.

My daydream ended at a red light that led into our subdivision. Ali hummed in the backseat as he turned pages in his science book. I closed my eyes, the pain in my jaw still throbbing in my head. I opened them and looked in the front passenger seat. The Qur'an Dr. Bakhtiar had given me lay closed, seemingly innocuous until opened—like Pandora's box. I wanted to regret listening to her, but I couldn't. I wanted to ignore the sweet freedom and reason of her

words, but to no avail. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, the price I was paying for knowledge was suffering.

A horn honked behind us. I looked up at the blinking green arrow as it pointed left into the subdivision. My hands shook. My toes curled inside my shoes. I wanted to fly. I stared at the road ahead as sweat beaded across my forehead.

“Mom?”

I hit the gas, cut off another driver, and continued down the road.

Ali leaned forward and watched the gilded entry to our subdivision pass behind us. “You missed the turn.”

“I know honey. We're uh, I thought we'd take a drive to the country. Won't that be nice?”

He looked down, thought for a moment, and tilted his face at the rearview mirror. “Without papa?”

I looked away from his face in the mirror and tightened my grip on the wheel. “Papa's busy.”

Ali leaned back, deflated, and mumbled, “Oh...”

I lifted my chin and sat up straight and proud as we crossed over the city limits into the countryside. Fields of corn rushed by in a blur of green. A flock of geese spear-headed east toward a pond a few miles up on the right.

I glanced in the mirror at Ali. “Still want that tadpole?”

We pulled over on the shoulder of the road where a dirt path spotted with clumps of ankle-high grass winded toward an abandoned mill next to the pond. Sunlight burned my eyes as I stepped out of the car and rounded the front. Ali was already out, a wide grin turning his cheeks red as he looked out on a shaded pool adjacent to the pond.

“All right,” I said and inhaled air infused with honeysuckle. “Got something to catch them with?”

The smile fell slack on his face. “No.”

“Hmm...” I swatted at a mosquito as it buzzed near my ear. “Oh, what about your lunch box? Did you save your sandwich bag?”

"Yeah!" He opened the car door and rushed inside.

I folded my arms, leaned against the car, and imagined being a single mother. Boldness swelled in my chest. We could be free.

A ringtone competed with the birdsong and croaking frogs of the countryside. Ali handed my cell phone to me. "It's Papa."

I looked down at the caller I.D. Cool sweat moistened my skin. I opened the front passenger door and tossed the phone inside.

"Ready?"

"What about Papa?"

"I'll call him when we leave. Come on." And with that, I led my seven-year-old son along the edge of the dirt road toward the pond.

Ali gasped and looked up as a bullfrog croaked from the pond. He took my hand. "Papa would never take me here."

"Well, you know he's very busy with work."

"Yeah, you're never busy though."

I snickered. "Thanks."

Ali stopped and pointed. "Snake!"

"Where?" I squealed and grabbed my chest.

He stepped forward, still pointing. A black snake lay curled on a log at the water's edge.

"No. It might bite."

Ali laughed. "It's just a black snake. He won't bother us. Come on."

He went a few feet ahead of me as I stared at the black coils on the log. Ali looked back at me over his shoulder. "Coming?"

"Just get your tadpoles," I said, my eyes still locked on the snake. "But don't go too far!"

My fear of snakes locked me in place. I tried to look away but couldn't peel my eyes from it. I became lightheaded. My hijab whipped against my neck with a sudden burst of air. Sand went into my eyes and blurred my vision. I rubbed them until tears wet my knuckles.

A splash.

"Mom!"

I looked up. Ali had fallen in waist deep.

“Ali!”

The snake's presence anchored my heels to the ground. My hands trembled and I grew nauseous. Ali cried out again, stuck in the mud and reaching for shore. I closed my eyes, ripped my feet away from the muck of fear, and wrestled my son out of the pond.

“Stupid woman!” Seyyed said and slapped my other cheek. I staggered backward and sat on the couch with my hand on my face. “I can't believe you did that, and ignored my call.”

My voice cracked. “We were at the pond, I didn't hear—”

“Shut up!” he said and paced back and forth in front of me. I could hear the muffled whimpers of Ali coming from his room.

Seyyed pointed down at me. “If you ever take my son out without my permission or knowledge of your whereabouts...you'll have your divorce.” He walked by toward our bedroom, said, “And you'll never see Ali again,” and walked inside.

I made ablution for evening prayers and washed the makeup and mud off my face in the shower. Tears mixed with the water and burned as they seeped into the cut on my lip from Seyyed's latest blow. The steam choked me as I wept. I bent over and sat down in the shower, the weight of my reality forcing me to the floor.

We prostrated facing East, Ali on my right and Seyyed reciting sura on my left. We rose in unison, still on our knees. I glanced right at the dagger on the end table. An emerald on the sheath shimmered, as if an angel had winked in approval.

The wound tingled. I looked down at Ali as his eyes swept over my face. Seyyed continued, asking for guidance and protection for his family. Ali stared at my cheek and crinkled his brow as if something were out of place. I slipped my hand from my lap, wrapped my fingers around my son's hand and gently squeezed as I whispered a prayer for bravery.

Seyyed pulled the chain on his bedside lamp. The thick, silent dark pressed against my body like a wet blanket. I lay on my back as panic shook me. The dagger was missing when I had tried to sneak it away before bed. Had Seyyed overheard my prayers and hid the blade?

He draped his arm across me and nibbled on my ear. The hairs on my neck sprang up as chills flowed over me.

"I was thinking, maybe I've been too harsh lately. I realize you were only trying to please him by taking him out to the pond, but you should have told me. Do you understand that?"

I nodded. "Mm hmm."

"When you were tucking Ali into bed, I took a look at that verse you mentioned and some hadith. It states that, as a last resort, a husband is only permitted to hit his woman *lightly*." His hand tumbled over my breasts on its way to my ribs. I gradually bent my knees to my chest. He continued. "I asked God to forgive me for being...excessive." He pecked my left cheek with little kisses.

I winced at the pain of his lip's contact with my skin. Then, something hard pressed against my head through the pillow. I slid my hand up under the pillow cover and felt the cool metal sheath of Seyyed's dagger. A gasp seeped through my lips.

"We'll start over tomorrow," he said. "All right?"

His fingers tip-toed along my oblique and approached my closed legs. I pressed my knees together as he wriggled and pried his fingers between my thighs. I gritted my teeth and struggled with how the dagger got under my pillow.

"Want to learn more Arabic? Here is your first lesson. The word Islam means submission."

I gazed into the void for the face of God and answers.

When he didn't show, I turned my face and watched as the shadow of Ali's feet move outside the bottom of our bedroom door. He was waiting. My eyes widened with the arrival of my answer. I realized then that he was already a braver—nobler man than his father, but if I went to jail for murder or if we lost Seyyed's support, he would be lost.

With Ali and Seyyed waiting, I closed my eyes and daydreamed about another man...my grown and honorable son. Tension slipped from my grip on the dagger as my legs and faith fell apart.

