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TOWELHEAD

A NOVEL

ALICIA ERIAN

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For David Franklin

We all do better in the future.

—Raymond Carver,

“On an Old Photograph of My Son”

TOWELHEAD

ONE

My mother's boyfriend got a crush on me, so she sent me to live with Daddy. I didn't want to live with Daddy. He had a weird accent and came from Lebanon. My mother met him in college, then they got married and had me, then they got divorced when I was five. My mother told me it was because my father was cheap and bossy. When my parents got divorced, I wasn't upset. I had a memory of Daddy slapping my mother, and then of my mother taking off his glasses and grinding them into the floor with her shoe. I don't know what they were fighting about, but I was glad that he couldn't see anymore.

I still had to visit him for a month every summer, and I got depressed about that. Then, when it was time to go home again, I got happy. It was just too tense, being with Daddy. He wanted everything done in a certain way that only he knew about. I was afraid to move half the time. Once I spilled some juice on one of his foreign rugs, and he told me that I would never find a husband.

My mother knew how I felt about Daddy, but she sent me to live with him anyway. She was just so mad about her boyfriend lik-

ing me. I told her not to worry, that I didn't like Barry back, but she said that wasn't the point. She said I was always walking around with my boobs sticking out, and that it was hard for Barry not to notice. That really hurt my feelings, since I couldn't help what my boobs looked like. I'd never asked for Barry to notice me. I was only thirteen.

At the airport, I wondered what my mother was so worried about. I could never have stolen Barry away from her, even if I'd tried. She was 100 percent Irish. She had high cheekbones and a cute round ball at the end of her nose. When she put concealer under her eyes, they looked all bright and lit up. I could've brushed her shiny brown hair for hours, if only she had let me.

When they announced my flight, I started to cry. My mother said it wasn't that bad, then pushed me in my back a little so I would walk onto the plane. A stewardess helped me find my seat, since I was still crying, and a man beside me held my hand during takeoff. He probably thought I was scared to fly, but I wasn't. I really and truly hoped we would crash.

Daddy met me at the airport in Houston. He was tall and clean-shaven and combed his wavy, thinning hair to one side. Ever since my mother had ground up his glasses, he'd started wearing contacts. He shook my hand, which he'd never done before. I said, "Aren't you going to hug me?" and he said, "This is how we do it in my country." Then he started walking really fast through the airport, so I could barely keep up.

As I waited with Daddy at the baggage claim, I felt like I didn't have a family anymore. He didn't look at me or talk to me. We both just watched for my suitcase. When it came, Daddy lifted it off the conveyor belt, then set it down so I could pull it. It had wheels and a handle, but it fell over if you walked too fast. When I slowed down, though, Daddy ended up getting too far ahead of me. Finally he picked it up and carried it himself.

It was a long drive back to Daddy's apartment, and I tried not to notice all the billboards for gentlemen's clubs along the way. It was embarrassing, those women with their breasts hanging out. I wondered if that was how I had looked with Barry. Daddy didn't say anything about the billboards, which made them even more embarrassing. I started to feel like they were all my fault. Like anything awful and dirty was my fault. My mother hadn't told Daddy about Barry and me, but she had told him that she thought I was growing up too fast, and would probably benefit from a stricter upbringing.

That night, I slept on a foldout chair in my father's office. There was a sheet on it, but it kept slipping off, and the vinyl upholstery stuck to my skin. In the morning, my father stood in the doorway and whistled like a bird so I would wake up. I went to the breakfast table in my T-shirt and underwear, and he slapped me and told me to go put on proper clothes. It was the first time anyone had ever slapped me, and I started to cry. "Why did you do that?" I asked him, and he said things were going to be different from now on.

I got back into bed and cried some more. I wanted to go home, and it was only the second day. Soon my father came to the doorway and said, "Okay, I forgive you, now get up." I looked at him and wondered what he was forgiving me for. I thought about asking, but somehow it didn't seem smart.

That day, we went looking for a new house. Daddy said he was making a good salary at NASA, and besides, the schools were better in the suburbs. I didn't want to go back on the highway because of all the billboards, but I was afraid to say no. Then it turned out that the billboards on the way to the suburbs were for new homes and housing developments. The prices started at one hundred fifty thousand dollars—almost three times as much as my mother had paid for our town house back in Syracuse. She was a middle-school teacher, so she couldn't afford very much.

Daddy listened to NPR while I watched the road out the window. Houston seemed like the end of the world to me. The last place you would ever want to live. It was hot and humid and the water from the tap tasted like sand. The one thing I liked about Daddy was that he kept the air-conditioning at seventy-six. He said that everyone he knew thought he was crazy, but he didn't care. He loved walking into his apartment and saying, "Ahh!"

Some news about Iraq came on, and Daddy turned up the volume. They had just invaded Kuwait. "Fucking Saddam," Daddy said, and I relaxed a little that he would swear.

We went to a housing development called Charming Gates and looked at the model home. A Realtor named Mrs. Van Dyke gave us the tour, which ended in the kitchen, where she offered Daddy a cup of coffee. She talked a lot about the beauty of the home, its reasonable price, the school district, and safety. Daddy tried to bargain with her, and she said that wasn't really done. She said if he were buying an older home, that sort of thing would be fine, but that new homes had fixed prices. Back in the car, he made fun of her southern accent, which sounded even funnier with his own accent mixed in.

For dinner, we had thin-crust pizza at a place called Panjo's. Daddy said that it was his favorite and that he ate there a lot. He said the last time he'd been there, he'd come with a woman from work, on a date. He said he'd liked her quite a bit until she took out a cigarette. Then he realized she was stupid. I thought she was stupid, too, not because she smoked, but because she'd gone on a date with Daddy.

That night, on the vinyl bed, I thought about my future. I imagined it as day after day of misery. I decided nothing good would ever happen to me, and I began to fantasize about Barry. I fantasized that he would come and rescue me from my father, then we would move back to Syracuse, only without telling my mother. We would live in a house on the other side of town, and I could wear whatever I wanted to the breakfast table.

In the morning, Barry hadn't arrived yet. It was just my father, standing in the doorway and whistling like a bird. "I don't really like that," I said, and he laughed and did it again.

That day, we went to see more model homes. And more over the weekend. On Sunday night, Daddy asked me which one I liked best, and I picked the cheapest one, in Charming Gates. He said he agreed, and a few weeks later we moved in. It was a nice place with four bedrooms—one for Daddy, one for me, one for an office, and one for a guest room. Daddy and I each had our own bathroom. The name of my wallpaper was "adobe," since it looked like all these little earthen houses, and my sink and countertop were cream with gold glitter trapped underneath. It was my responsibility to keep my bathroom clean, and Daddy bought me a can of Comet for under the sink.

Daddy's bathroom was twice the size of mine. It connected to his room and had two sinks, plus a walk-in closet with one rack on top of the other, just like at the dry cleaner's. Some of his suits were even in dry-cleaner bags. His toilet was in a little room with its own separate door, and right away, after we moved in, it started to smell like pee. He didn't have a bathtub like I did, but he had a shower stall with a door that made a loud click when you shut it.

There were formal and informal living rooms, as well as a formal dining room and a breakfast nook. We started using everything for what it was named for. Breakfast in the breakfast nook, dinner in the dining room, TV in the informal living room (which also had the fireplace), and guests in the formal living room at the front of the house.

Our first guests were the next-door neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Vuoso and their ten-year-old son, Zack. They came over with a pie Mrs. Vuoso had baked. Daddy invited them to sit down on his brown velvet couch, then brought them all hot tea, even though they hadn't asked for it. "Oh my," Mrs. Vuoso said, "tea in a glass."

"This is how we serve it in my country," Daddy said.

Mrs. Vuoso asked him what country that was, and Daddy told her. "Imagine that," she commented, and Daddy nodded.

"You must have some interesting opinions on the situation over there," Mr. Vuoso said. He was a very clean-looking man, with short, glossy brown hair and a black T-shirt. He wore jeans that looked ironed, and had very big arm muscles. The biggest I'd ever seen. They got in the way of his arms lying flat at his sides.

"I certainly do," Daddy said.

"Maybe I'd like to hear them sometime," Mr. Vuoso said, only it sounded like he didn't really want to hear them at all.

"Not today," Mrs. Vuoso warned. "No politics today." She wore a tan skirt and flat shoes. Her face was young, but her short hair was totally gray. I had to keep reminding myself that she was Mr. Vuoso's wife, and not his mother.

"Do you know how to play badminton?" Zack asked me. He sat between his parents on the couch, his legs sticking straight out in front of him. He looked a little like his father, with short brown hair and neat jeans.

"Sort of," I said.

"Do you want to play now?" he asked.

"Okay," I said, even though I didn't. I was more interested in staying with the grown-ups. I kept wondering if Mr. Vuoso was going to beat up Daddy.

The Vuosos had a badminton net in their backyard, and Zack kept hitting the birdie into my boobs and laughing. "Cut it out," I finally told him.

"I'm just hitting it," he said. "I can't help where it lands."

I let him do it a few more times, then I quit.

"Want to do something else?" he asked.

"No thanks," I said, walking to his side of the net and handing him the racquet.

We went back to my house, where the Vuosos were just getting ready to leave. "Who won?" Mr. Vuoso asked.

"I did," Zack said. "She quit."

"We don't say *she* when the person is right beside us," Mrs. Vuoso said.

"I don't remember her name," Zack said.

"Jasira," Mr. Vuoso said. "Her name is Jasira." He smiled at me then, and I didn't know what to do.

After they left, Daddy told me that Mr. Vuoso was a reservist, which meant he was in the army on the weekends. "This guy is something else," Daddy said, shaking his head. "He thinks I love Saddam. It's an insult."

"Did you tell him you don't?" I asked.

"I told him nothing," Daddy said. "Who is he to me?"

There was a pool in Charming Gates, and Daddy felt strongly that we should be using it. He said he wasn't paying all of this money just so I could sit around in the air-conditioning. I told him I didn't want to go, but when he asked me why, I was too embarrassed to say. It was my pubic hair. There was getting to be more and more of it, and some of it came out the legs of my bathing suit. I'd begged my mother to teach me how to shave, but she said no, that once you started, there was no stopping. I cried about this all the time, and my mother told me to can it. I told her that the girls in gym class called me Chewbacca, and she said she didn't know who that was. Barry said he knew who it was and that it wasn't very nice, but my mother told him that since he didn't have any kids of his own, he could go ahead and butt out.

Then one night, when my mother had parent/teacher conferences, Barry called me into the bathroom. He was standing there in his sweats and a T-shirt, holding a razor and a can of shaving cream. "Put your bathing suit on," he said. "Let's figure out how to do this." So I put my bathing suit on and stood in the tub, and he shaved my

pubic hair. "How's that?" he asked when he was finished, and I said it looked good.

When it came time to shave again, Barry asked if I remembered how to do it, or if I needed him to show me one more time. I told him I needed him to show me, even though I did remember. It just felt nice to stand there and have him do such a dangerous and careful thing to me.

My mother would never have found out except that after a while, the tub got clogged. She called the plumber, and when he used his snake, all that came up were my black curly hairs. "That happens sometimes," he said. "It ain't always the hair on your head." Then he charged my mother a hundred dollars to pour some Liquid-Plumr down the drain.

"Take off your pants," she said when he left, and I did. There was no use fighting her.

"Did I tell you you could shave?" she asked. "Did I?"

"No," I said.

"Get me the razor," she said, and I told her I didn't have one, that I'd snuck and used Barry's. When he came home, she made me apologize to him for taking his property without asking. "That's okay," he said, and my mother grounded me for a month.

Then, a week later, Barry broke down and told her the truth. That he had shaved me himself. That he had been shaving me for weeks. That he couldn't seem to stop shaving me. He said the whole thing was his fault, but my mother blamed me. She said if I hadn't always been talking about my pubic hair, this would never have happened. She said that when Barry had first offered to shave me, I should've said no. She said there were right and wrong ways to act around men, and for me to learn which was which, I should probably go and live with one.

Finally Daddy forced me to go swimming. I figured he would probably like all my pubic hair, since it made me look ugly. But then,

when we got to the pool and I took my shorts off, he said, "This bathing suit doesn't even cover you."

"Yes, it does," I said, looking down at the low-cut legs.

"No, it doesn't," he said. "You're falling out of it. Put your shorts back on immediately."

I put my shorts back on and sat on my towel, watching Daddy swim laps back and forth in the single lane that had been roped off for adults. Once, a little kid got confused and drifted under the lane divider, and Daddy had to stop in midstroke. I thought he would probably yell at the kid, but he just smiled and waited for him to get out of the way. I saw then that everything would be fine between me and Daddy if only we were strangers.

School started, and a lot of the janitors, who were Mexican, talked to me in Spanish. I couldn't really understand them, but I signed up for Spanish class so I could learn. Then Daddy made me change to French, since that was the only other language his family back in Lebanon spoke, and maybe one day I would get to meet them. I didn't talk very much in any of my classes, except when the teachers called on me. When the other kids heard my accent, they asked where I was from, and I said New York. They said, "New York City?," and since they were kind of excited about that, I said yes.

I got a job babysitting Zack Vuoso after school. Mrs. Vuoso worked in the billing department of a doctor's office, and Mr. Vuoso ran his own copy store at the local shopping center. He came home at a little after six, and she came home later, around seven. They called the couple of hours I spent with Zack each afternoon "keeping him company."

It made Zack pretty mad to have a babysitter. He was always pointing out that I was only three years older than he was, and also, when we played together on the weekends, his parents didn't pay me

anything. "That's because they're home on the weekends," I said, but he was still insulted.

To make it seem like he wasn't being babysat, he had an idea one day to go and visit his father at work. I didn't want to, but Zack just started walking, so I followed him. I thought for sure Mr. Vuoso would fire me on the spot for not doing my job, but he seemed happy to see us. "Just in time," he said, and he put us to work in the back room, collating packets about how to knit a Christmas stocking.

After a while, Zack got bored and starting xeroxing different parts of his body. He stuck his face under the lid, then a hand, then a hand flipping the bird. "Maybe you shouldn't do that," I said, watching this, and he pulled his pants down and xeroxed his butt. Then he brought all the copies over and started collating them with the knitting packet. When Mr. Vuoso came back to check on us, he asked what was the meaning of all of this. I said I was sorry, and Mr. Vuoso said, "Did you make these pictures?" I shook my head, and he said, "Then you have nothing to be sorry about." He told Zack that he could go ahead and redo all the packets from scratch by himself, and that we would be up front waiting for him when he was done.

I didn't know what to say to Mr. Vuoso at the front of the store. Sometimes a customer came in and I didn't have to say anything; other times I just sat there on the stool he'd given me, trying not to be so quiet. I knew from Daddy that it was bad to be quiet. Except other times, when I talked, he didn't like that either. The worst thing about him was that his rules were always changing.

Finally I said to Mr. Vuoso, "I'm sorry I'm so quiet."

He laughed. He'd just taken an order for a thousand business cards, and was finishing up the paperwork. "I'll tell you what," he said. "There's nothing worse than talk for the sake of talk."

I nodded, then relaxed a little. It was nice to watch Mr. Vuoso do his job. He didn't seem to notice that I was there, and I was glad. I was tired of being noticed.

When Zack finally finished up his packets, we closed the store and rode home in the Vuosos' minivan. Mr. Vuoso told me to sit up front, even though Zack had called shotgun, and when he started kicking the back of my seat, his father told him to cut the shit. For a joke, Mr. Vuoso pulled into my driveway and dropped me off, even though we lived next door to each other. He said, "Zack and I are going to have a talk tonight about authority. I think you'll find that tomorrow will be a better day." Then he leaned over and opened my door for me.

The next day, Zack only seemed angrier. We played badminton, and he kept hitting me in the boobs. When I told him I was quitting, he called me a towelhead and stormed in the house. I went inside to find him, but he wasn't in the living room. "Zack!" I called, but he didn't answer. I went upstairs then and found him in the guest room, sitting on the edge of the bed and looking at a *Playboy*.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Leave me alone," he said, without looking up.

The closet door was open and I saw a whole stack of magazines in there. Some of Mr. Vuoso's army uniforms hung from the rod above. "C'mon, Zack," I said. "Put that away."

"Why?" he said. "I want to look at it."

"You're too young."

"Don't you want to look at it?" he asked.

"No."

"Then you can go downstairs," he said. "You can go watch TV."

I went downstairs and turned the TV on, but I couldn't find a show I liked, so I went back up to the guest room. "Okay," I said to Zack, "put it away."

"Look at this," he said, and he held up a picture of a woman who was riding a horse naked.

"That's stupid," I said.

He shrugged and went back to flipping through the pages. After