

## **Joseph Rathgeber**

### **Nor I**

The first time my brother went to court was through no fault of his own. He was a minor, and despite the gruesome nature of his crime, the case was handled in civil court. Old Man Gags had been using phrases like *You're gonna fry for this!* in the weeks leading up to the proceedings, but the judge was much less hyperbolic. Old Man Gags got his compensation; my brother's skinny neck was spared; the case, closed. Noor's first encounter with the justice system didn't involve federal agents, grand jury subpoenas, or search warrants. His latest involves them all.

My brother and I were both born at St. Joe's and began our lives in South Paterson. We're two years apart, so I'm better at recalling those inchoate days in South P.—what my parents and every other Arab in North Jersey called Little Ramallah. We lived in an apartment off Crooks Avenue above Discount Plus, a liquor store.

Yaaba has always been a working-class sucker. A streets-paved-with-gold true believer no matter how many times he's been forced to settle for a low-wage job sweeping the pyrite dust from those very streets. He scrounged and saved enough money to move us across Crooks to Clifton. He took out a mortgage on a no frills stuccoed home on East Fifth. It wasn't more than a half-mile from our South Paterson residence, but the schools would be better. Yaaba read that Clifton schools had computer labs.

I remember Yaaba unpacking the U-Haul on moving day. I sat on the curb with Noor and we surveyed the neighborhood.

An Indian family lived behind us. They had seven Camrys and as many small children. Next door was an old Italian codger with a personalized street sign in his driveway: *Gaglione Way*. There was a Pentecostal church across the street with a sign out front that asked: ARE YOU WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB? And to our immediate left was a yellow DIP sign, though there was no perceptible dip in the road. Yaaba took it as a personal insult because it wasn't there when he closed on the house. He interpreted it as a sign of unwelcome, of go back to Paterson, of no Arabs allowed.

Yaaba hollered from across the lawn—a lawn green with crabgrass, but green nonetheless: “Noor, bring me that dolly.” Noor was riding it like a skateboard down the sidewalk as awkward as a goddamn amputee. Old Man Gags' dog—a small terrier—had his snout stuffed through a fence link and was barking like mad.

Noor started out as a pipsqueak. He got teased for his lisp. He got teased for his name. He came home from school crying about kids ganging up on him. One classmate would say, “If Noor doesn't know the answer, neither do I.” Then the other students would systematically add, *Nor I*. *Nor I*. *Nor I*. *Nor I*. *Nor I*. *Nor I*. It was like they rehearsed it. To them, Noor was nothing more than a coordinating conjunction.

I told him to stand up for himself, knock a punk in the snot-box. I told him that's how to make it stop. He needed to be taught by example, so I bloodied this one kid Lenny's face. Noor stood his ground from then on, but would never throw down. He was a regular Handala—defiant with his hands clasped behind his back. He eschewed violence but ran his mouth

nonstop. He gave a lot of lip—to elders, to school administrators, to bullies. He was stirred by incidents of injustice and let it be known when something was amiss—lisp be damned.

You could call Noor a troublemaker—plenty of people did. When there were no righteous battles to wage, he got bored.

He had a disposition toward pranks involving pyrotechnics. He didn't burn ants with a magnifying glass like a normal kid; he burned library books. An extremist, my brother. He drank Windex once—said he thought it was Hi-C. He lifted a lighter and a Binaca bottle from Discount Plus and fashioned a mini flamethrower. He ran around the yard torching squirrels. There was always this boredom, always this mischief—what I called his serial killer tendencies.

Another time Yaaba awled out the weeds from the freeze/thaw cracks in the driveway and then blacktopped the whole thing—sealing it up, keeping it neat. It made for a strange and sweet smell when the sun beat down against it during heat waves, like skunk. My brother put his tongue to it—that's right: *he put his tongue to hot tar*—on a dare, and came running into the house with his tongue hanging from his mouth, a hunk of burnt tissue.

Yaaba sometimes attempted to shout at us in English. It sounded like a sputtering engine, like he'd been debilitated by a stroke. He struggled to find the words, as if there were a blood flow blockage to his brain. He'd eventually give in and blurt the message in Arabic. Or whup us. The hot tar ordeal was one such case.

Yaaba worked early mornings. He drove a bread truck. He delivered loaves to bodegas, delis, minimarts, and the rest. It was a hell of a career choice for him. He was a harum-scarum driver. Yumma would slap his thigh when he drove the family minivan with what people call reckless abandon. Yaaba's leg would be red and raw by the time we got to our destination. Yumma bought a guardian angel sun visor clip at a flea market that said *Dad, please drive carefully* and made Noor give it to Yaaba as if it were his idea.

I went on his route a couple times when I was younger. The Quran on tape would be in his cassette deck. He'd say to me, "This man's *tajweed* is by far the best," as if I gave a fuck. To my untrained ear, one recitation was the same as the next. I had become less religious with every birthday. Too many existentialist novels.

We drove along sounding like daybreak in Mecca. I chided him until he felt obligated, I guess, to listen to "American music" instead. He bought CDs from gas stations—those pop compilations full of vacuous singing. I begged him to put the Quran back on.

Yaaba never sat in traffic. I swear, any time there was a slowdown—even intermittent brake lights—he would alter his route. He'd go fifteen miles out of his way to avoid gridlock. When stoplights turned green, not a nanosecond would pass before he shouted *It's not getting any greener!* and lay on the horn. He could say "rubberneckers" in perfect English.

Yaaba taught me to flash my high beams at slow drivers in the left lane so they let you pass. He claimed it was in the driver's manual. He'd impart this wisdom to me in between commentary on faith, duty, and submission. He knew I was adrift.