

“Ohio” by Yussef El Guindi\*

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I hear a bellow, a two chorused groan coming from the basement; followed by a brief silence like somebody had spliced in white noise; then a trudging up the stairs— heavy footfalls, as I pick the last grape off the stem and throw it in the bowl. I take a swig of beer and ask Candice what we had lost, but Candice doesn’t say anything and heads straight for the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

I consider whether I should go and ask her if everything’s alright but sense I’m too inebriated to sound solicitous, and I wasn’t sure I really cared. I make a motion anyway towards the bathroom door and stand outside with the bowl of grapes and beer in hand. I hear crying and the ‘whoosh’ sound of tissues plucked. Then more sniveling. Followed by the nose being drained.

I think: is this a private moment? Or is this staged drama? Heartfelt, real, but drama nonetheless, and one that called for an audience. Even audience participation. Me knocking on the door and asking her if everything’s alright. I think: am I close enough to this couple, and to Candice in particular, to intrude on any kind of emotional display? Outside of those meant for public consumption?

Then I think, this is election night. Everything’s public, or at least feels public on this night. Every laugh, look, or freak out somehow seems connected to the high drama going on around us. All day I had felt this bonding with strangers, on buses, streets, even the urinal where the man next to me invoked the name of the Lord, his candidate, and

prayed that the former might find favor with the latter. I smiled at him over the partition, even though it wasn't my candidate, and he smiled back.

In that spirit of citizenship I ask Candice, "Is everything alright?"

Silence, then: "I'm fine. I'll be out in a moment."

I feel I've done my duty and start to walk away, but then add: "Don't worry. We'll win. I feel it in my bones....In fact...I had a dream last night....I saw myself standing with Kerry in the Oval office. He was asking me about the drapes. He wanted to know what color I thought they should be. I've had precognitive dreams before. It's a good sign. It also says he's someone who will reach out."

Silence again, then: "I'll be out in a moment."

I instantly feel like an idiot for having told her about the dream. (Drapes, for chrissakes.) I hardly know the woman. The wife of Soha's colleague at work. We've chatted. We've made small talk when we've had to, when we've been left alone unexpectedly, when her husband has had to take a call, and Soha ducks out for a cigarette. We have little in common, apart from some overlap when it comes to politics. And even then, Candice had that flabby liberal thing going on which irritated. The do-gooder impulse that won't look something in the eye for fear it might offend, and will steer a conversation in a direction where flare-ups can be avoided. It had happened a month ago, when conversation had drifted towards the Middle East and Mark had started in on the Arabs, surprisingly, surprising both me and Soha, until Candice had chimed in and changed the subject and Mark had quickly apologized and we had all moved on.

(Soha and I both dismissed the incident with a shrug: “what do you expect, with the information out there.”)

“Okay. See you downstairs,” I say.

You don’t admit to precognitive dreams unless you’ve known someone for a while. Oh well. When Kerry wins, I’ll bring it up again and make a joke about it. “See, I was right. Maybe I’ll be invited to the Oval office after all.”

I head for the basement and see their dog outside the kitchen door wagging its tail at me. Ever since Mark had developed severe allergies, the dog had been relegated to permanent outdoor life. I had mentioned something about that being a little harsh. Candice had agreed and said they were considering finding him a new home.

“The dog or Mark,” I had joked.

“The dog,” Candice had replied as if I had asked a serious question, and added that Mark’s throat had swelled up one time and so this wasn’t just about sneezing.

“Jeez. What are you even doing with it outside?”

“It was his father’s dog before he died. It’s hard for him to give her up.”

I tapped the window and the dog shook with excitement at the thought of human contact and food favors. I thought, this dog would vote for Kerry. It had Democratic eyes. And then imagined some Republican pundit saying, “well of course it would vote that way. It’s waiting for handouts.”

On impulse, I open the door and allow the dog to jump all over me. I give it a hug and lose myself for a few inebriated moments in the hugging of this dumb animal that doesn’t give a damn who gets elected tonight. I want to be you, I think. I want to share

your excitement in something this simple. And then think: if you could talk, this innocent pleasure would dissolve in the thousand ways it does when you have words to deal with. We get to enjoy this because you can't talk. Thank God you can't talk.

I give it another hug and pick up my beer and bowl, now drizzled with the dog's saliva.

I head for the basement and as I approach the bottom steps, I first see my wife's skirt slightly hitched up from her slumped position on the bean bag. Her legs are a little parted and Mark is looking straight at her crotch. She appears to be smiling at Mark's interest, and Mark is smiling back at her acknowledgement of his interest.

I experience a momentary jolt at the realization of something I had never considered, and look away, at the television. I see most of America washed in red, and think, that's it, we're done for. Then look back at Mark and Soha sitting upright; both of them now staring intently at the TV, without a hint of what I'd thought I'd seen.

"What's happened?"

"Florida," Soha says.

"No," I say.

"Yup."

"No wonder Candice is upset." And then add, "shit." But neither of them say anything; which feels odd on a night which feels partly like a sports event, with fan response expected. Actually, more like ancient Roman blood sport where crowd response is lustier, with more at stake.

I put the grapes and beer down, then pick up the beer feeling I need something to hold. Then take another swig feeling I need something to drink. I say, “Well, crap. Now I feel like doing shots.”

Mark says he has tequila liqueur.

“Liqueur, huh?”

“Goes down very smoothly.”

I think: they have adjoining offices at work. I think: I’m seeing red. Then: I bet it goes down very smoothly.

I meet Soha’s gaze and believe I read the whole story but sense I’m too drunk to know if I’m reading anything correctly.

“Want me to get it?” Mark says.

“I’d love to try it.”

“Coming up. Can I get you anything?” he says, turning to Soha. Soha stares intently at the map and says no.

He bounds up the stairs. Maybe it wasn’t the Florida loss that got Candice so upset. I ask, “Is that why Candice got upset?”

“Mark is a Republican. He just came out,” Soha says.

“No.”

“When Florida went red, he pumped the air, let out a little ‘yes’. He didn’t mean to. It just came out.”

“No.”

“Can you pass the grapes?”

I hand her the bowl.

“He’s a Republican?”

“I always thought he was.”

“When? He never said anything.” Then: “It just came out? She didn’t know?”

“Candice isn’t one for facing anything.”

Yes, but still: “You’d think she’d know.”

Soha shrugs, says: “Maybe. But he’d never celebrated the fact before. He is now. He’s gloating.”

“Wow. Well there you go. There’s always one you didn’t know about.”

She stares at a grape and I consider telling her about the dog but don’t. She pops it into her mouth. Pops several. I think: maybe she’ll have dog breath now. Which gets me thinking about the last time we’d kissed and made love, and how little we seemed to enjoy it. We’d discussed it afterwards. I’d asked her if there was something she’d like me to try; something different. She said, no, not really, like there was, but it was too much trouble to pursue it. I probed, but her assertions that everything was just fine began to sound more and more accusatory until I felt she was about to tell me what was wrong after all, and at that point, I didn’t want to know, because what I really wanted to say was, “well then, *you* may want to try something more than just lying there like I’m practicing CPR on you. At least with a dummy I would hear the plastic squeaking.”

We’d dropped the subject.

That was three weeks ago. That’s when we’d both seriously started campaigning for Kerry.

“You don’t seem upset,” I tell her.

Soha shrugs. “Why would I care? When it comes to Arabs, they’re all right wing jerks. Especially the Democrats. At least Mark’s being honest now.”

“Wow. There goes the pretense,” I say. We’d both done some heavy compartmentalizing with the Democrats, telling ourselves, well, they may express some contempt for Arabs now and again, and refer to Muslims positively about as many times as a Muslim might speak of pork positively, but at least we agreed with everything else. (Just about.) So...we’d just swallow that proviso to our support and put it down to the perils of politicking and pretend that perhaps, secretly, they thought differently.

And besides, the alternative was unthinkable. Contempt is one thing, Crusades are another thing altogether.

“So you’re with the other side now?” I half joke.

“I didn’t say that.” Then, facing me and staring at me like I’d spat something at her, she repeats: “I didn’t say that.”

I look at her skirt riding up her thighs again. I hear the sound of kitchen cabinets being opened above. I think: the ballot box is fraught tonight, fraught; stuffed with our worst impulses. It’s a sewer. It’s a sewer running red and we’re all going to drown tonight. Precognitive baloney. It’s curtains alright. Mark is going to win tonight. He’s going to score.

And then I flash on Mark’s good looks. His all-American good looks. And I imagine him feeling more entitled to be a voter than us, better equipped by birthright, by accent. We’re latecomers. We’re latching on to his inheritance. We’re a bunch of

immigrant hucksters sliming in with our oily, greasy old country babble; pretending to be in on something that's not ours. I think: I bet that's just what he thinks. I bet it is. The Republican rat. That turncoat. I should have known. It was plain to see, the few times I'd met him. The looks he gave me. The looks he gives Soha. His little houri. His office coffee break. His exotic sorbet between the heavy goings of his marriage.

The bastard. The sleazy, goddamned bastard.

How could you let him? (I think, looking at Soha.) You, the politically conscious, the woman who goaded me to get more involved politically, how could you allow this, this supporter of all things preemptive, and colonial, to even look at you that way. (Have they slept together? No; not yet. I'd know. I'd feel it. But they're on the verge. He will celebrate his victory. She will concede defeat, with a smile. They'll laugh. I'll see their laugh on her face the day they do it. And then she'll bring that face home, and she'll kiss me with it. )

"And they want to export this, this fucking *democracy*? This Mickey Mouse crapshoot to the rest of us? We're supposed to bow down before this big, fucking *rat*?" Then I realize I've said that out loud and I clamp up.

"Look at you," she says. "You're drunk. You're pathetic."

No. I'm imagining things. He's a nice guy. You're in his house. He's bringing down liqueur. Affairs aren't Soha's style. She's too fastidious for something that messy.

I lean down to kiss her and almost fall over.

She hisses: "Don't embarrass me."

Mark comes bounding the stairs with three shot glasses and a bottle. “Have they called Ohio?” he asks.

I raise my beer, ready to salute him with a “all hail Republicans,” but suddenly feel it’s uncalled for. He’s a decent guy who just happens to have differing views. And so what if he’s ogling Soha? She’s an attractive woman. Let him ogle. I’m flattered. I get to go home with her after all.

Soha says, “not yet.”

I say to Mark, “I have no problem with you being a Republican.”

Mark laughs. “So it’s out now, is it?”

I say, “I saw signs. I was prepared.”

“Oh really.”

“We liberals welcome all under the tent. Even those who may have lost their minds.”

“Is that so?” he says.

“Even idiots.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Just don’t fuck my wife.”

Silence in the room; apart from the newsanchor telling us that they’re not going to call Ohio. They will not call Ohio. Not until they’re sure.

I blink. I blink several times, like I’ve just broken the surface of sea water, and am trying to get my bearings. I say: “I’m sorry.” And then: “I need to use the rest room.”

“There’s another one next to the bedroom.”

I leave the room quickly without looking at Soha. I'll apologize to them again later, I think. I just need to stop this free fall. I have no traction on anything. Even these steps feel like marshmallows. I'm sinking. I'll never make it up the steps.

"Need any help?" I hear from Mark.

"Thank you. I'm fine."

I walk through the kitchen on the way to the upstairs bathroom, but stop at the one still occupied by Candice. I knock. "Candice?"

The lock turns and the door opens. She looks at me with a mixture of fear and pity, and opens the door wider. I step in, like my entrance was prearranged, like this was my next move.

"Ohio is still up in the air," I say.

"The asshole's going to pull it off," she says.

Which one? I think.

"I'm so embarrassed. The world's going to think we've gone mad. I don't know what to do. There feels like there's something I can still do." Then: "No; like there's nothing more to be done. That's what's so terrible; to feel this helpless. Like I'm watching a house burn down and I can't stop it. Like there's no water anywhere."

"It's not over yet."

"You think so?"

"He could still win."

We look at each other like we're both locked in that burning house, knowing that rescue is a long shot at this point. Tears start streaming down her face.

“I’m so sorry,” she says.

“What for?”

“I don’t know....I just feel somehow responsible.”

“That’s very liberal of you. Stop it.”

“This is a horrible night.”

“Yes it is.”

“I’m so sorry,” she repeats; and I feel I should answer with something equally empathetic, and so I—strangely for me—open my arms, because hugging at odd moments is a strangely American thing, and doing something that American feels appropriate on this night.

She steps into my arms and we hug. Somewhat clinically at first, as if we both recognized this as the oddly suitable gesture for the moment, the equivalent of sending each other get-well cards, and so, here we were, hugging, without really using our bodies. But then I feel her cheek against the opened portion of my shirt, and her cheek feels hot, and I wonder if I should bring up the surprise coming out of her husband, but feel that’s probably a sore point and why add to her misery. But then she says:

“My husband is a motherfucker.”

We break and she looks at me. “A real motherfucker.” There’s fury now. Still tethered to all those liberal qualifiers coursing through her and that were probably forgiving her husband even as she was damning him, and wishing his balls would drop off; but fury nonetheless.

“Yes,” I say, without meaning to sound too much in agreement. “I imagine things will be difficult... They say couples who remain together usually share similar values.” But then realize that sounds like I’m prognosticating about the future of their marriage, which wasn’t what I intended.

She puts her face in her hand and it’s not clear if she’s sobbing. I step in and pat her shoulders, feeling another embrace would be too much, but she comes in for another hug anyway.

We stand there quietly, until I become aware that I’m experiencing more excitement than I should and she breaks from me again. This time she looks at me hard and says: “Mark and Soha seem very close.” Like I know exactly what she means, and that I may be responsible in some way. But I refuse to acknowledge the implications. Not my wife, I think. We may have our differences, but she’s not going to switch parties or partners on me. Your sow of a husband might, but not my Soha.

And then I’m furious again, and so is she, and I realize we’re both flashing on the same adulterous thought, knowing that neither of us really had the gumption to go through with it, but sensing that the unexpected could happen nonetheless. With a word, a look, a poll result. And me flashing on the statistic that Republicans had more sex than Democrats, and getting angry at the hypocrisy of it all. Values? *Morals?* *They’re* the party who represent that? The frauds! The liars! The lechers! They get to eat their cake and be *voted into office too?*

I feel my face contort in anger and in defiance to her and everything else, I say, “I voted for Nader last time. And I damn well near did it again this time.”

She says, “so did I. I voted for him in the last election.”

I suddenly feel nauseous at this sudden, deep, intimate meeting of political minds. I think: I want to have sex with this woman. At the very least I want to be naked with her. I want to tell her we’ll get through this and come out victorious again. We’ll just go back to the trenches. We’ll figure it out. We’ll come out ahead next time. Or the time after that. We’ll just keep at it until people snap out of this thralldom they’re in. We’ll win. We’re bound to win eventually.

And then I throw up, missing the toilet bowl by a good foot. In the house next door I hear a cheer, and try to recall which sign they had stuck in their front yard. She hears it too, and for a second it’s as if I hadn’t vomited, as we both listen intently for any follow-up sounds from the neighbor.

She says, “I have something for that stomach. I’ll get it. Don’t worry about the mess. I’ll clean it up later.”

She opens the door, and for a beat it looks like she might shout down to the basement for results. But instead, she runs up to her bedroom.

I wash my mouth out, look at my face; then my mess; then head out to the kitchen. I lean on the table, trying to steady myself. The dog is still valiantly excited, in spite of her permanent banishment. Poor mutt. What the hell did you do to deserve that?

I go to the back door and open it. The dog enters and leaps on me once in a big dog thank you and then goes rushing down to the basement to find its master. I think: “Ohio?...What’s in Ohio?” I try to think of all I know about the state, but can recall nothing.

\*Yussef El Guindi is mostly a playwright. His most recent productions include Language Rooms (Wilma Theater), Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes (Golden Thread Productions/ InterAct Theater/ Kitchen Dog Theater) and Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat (Silk Road Theatre Project). His plays, Back of the Throat, as well as Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda's and Karima's City, have been published by Dramatists Play Service. The latter one-acts have also been included in THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT PLAYS: 2004-2005, published by Applause Books in 2008. His play Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith is included in SALAAM/PEACE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF MIDDLE-EASTERN AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS, published by TCG, 2009.