

~~DECLINE~~ / ACCEPT

Mehdi M. Kashani

STRAY DANDELIONS

We declined it. They accepted it. We invite comments from the author, *Carve's* reading committee, and the publisher that accepted it to find out why.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I CAME TO KNOW AN IRANIAN GIRL THROUGH her brother—who happened to be my friend—and began dating her. Later, she confided in me that back in Iran she was stuck in an unhealthy relationship and her brother saved her from those miserable circumstances by facilitating her relocation to Canada. At the same time, she felt he was exerting his authority more than he was entitled to and continued to do so even after her arrival in Canada. The mixed package of this duality—her feeling of respect and gratitude next to anger at his inappropriate trespasses—planted a seed for “Stray Dandelions.”

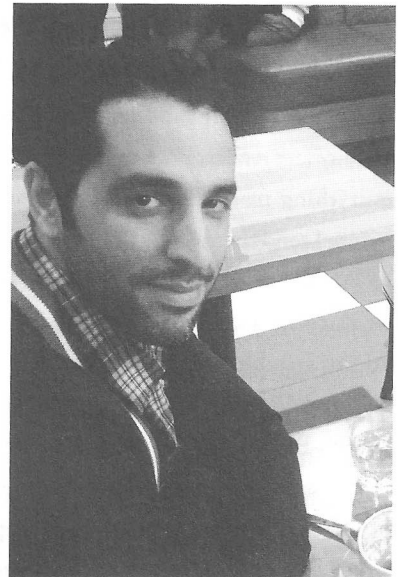
In many aspects it's not a unique situation. I've known many immigrant families in which every family member has a varying sense of belonging to their destination country. There are parents who put up with the hardship of immigration for their children's sake; there are kids who are dragged to North America, terribly missing their friends and adventures. While the story of my then-girlfriend and her brother was essential to “Stray Dandelions,” it was also a point of departure.

It took me a decade to find the right voice. The sibling dynamic in my story is narrated from a close outsider's POV: Athena, the brother's wife. I always cherish first-person narrators when they aren't the main protagonists—they offer a subtle balance between intimacy and distance. In the case of “Stray Dandelions,” it provided me with the opportunity to *also* explore Nima and Athena's marriage, which was inevitably mirrored in the Niloo/Nima conflict. Partly inspired by the Iranian filmmaker, Asghar Farhadi, whose signature on moral ambivalence is internationally recognized, I made the risky move of leaving the ending with lots of unanswered questions.

It wasn't the first time I received personal notes from *Carve*. Obviously, my knee-jerk reaction to such rejections is disappointment, to know your story was good enough to stand out in the blinding heap of the slush pile, yet not perfect to be selected for publication. But once the initial letdown subsides, I always appreciate any sort of feedback. Even the ones with which I don't agree are precious, as they help me understand how some readers react to certain elements in the story.

In the case of “Stray Dandelions,” however, I didn't accommodate any of the input, as the same draft was still circulating in other venues. Like many other writers, I take the tiered approach to submitting. I revisit drafts once they don't find a home in the earlier batch. For “Stray Dandelions” I was lucky enough to have *The New Quarterly* pick up the piece for its issue 159.

The New Quarterly is an established Canadian literary magazine, as old as me—both born in 1981. The editors allow the writers one submission per year, which in the short span of my writing career means I've only had four shots so far. The editors of *TNQ* sent me a list of inline suggestions, mostly for tightening and clarity purposes, but nothing fundamental. So, the final work is pretty much like the one evaluated by *Carve*. 📧



Declined by *Carve* - January 2020

Nima's video calls with his family take forever, ending only by network glitches or some previously announced arrangement. I would sit with him for the first few minutes, in an appropriate outfit and with faint traces of makeup. I would wave at my parents-in-law and grin at Niloo, Nima's sister—or baby sister as he still tends to use, with an affected voice. At some point, the generic conversation about weather and whatnot veers into some specific familial topic. A hint that I should excuse myself. I shuffle out of frame, still hear random fragments while busying myself with some chore.

I don't mind if my Saturday mornings pass like this, a ritual. In fact, I secretly admire my husband's bond with his family, his patient ear for their updates on a distant aunt's knee surgery or a neighbor's daughter procuring her dowry.

COMMENTS FROM *CARVE*

"What I most enjoyed about this story were its moments of introspection—from the wife. This story is about the wife finally confronting her husband's incessant control over herself and his sister. It is trying to make a cultural and social comment and I like that, however, it ends up using the sister's suicide attempt as a means to an end, by showing the wife being less endangered by her husband. For that reason, and for the fact that the prose still needs to be polished, the story didn't ultimately resonate as well as it could have."

To read the full published story, visit <https://tnq.ca/issues/issue-159>

Accepted by *The New Quarterly* - Summer 2021

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Recently, Niloo's imminent graduation from the University of Tehran with a degree in chemistry has taken center stage. Her stellar GPA has brought about her family's adoration and pride, but this milestone has also unleashed a breadth of hot debates. Everyone comments on what should be next for her, my husband being the most vocal.

It's been three years since I joined Nima in Canada, himself having just celebrated his first anniversary living abroad. It feels like Niloo has been with us since day one, even though she's never crossed Iran's borders. The first time I sipped the watery coffee in Tim Horton's, Nima said, "Niloo will love the warm colors here" or when I bought my Canada Goose's lightweight down parka, he chortled, "She'll wait out winters at home."