The Road to Hossein*

Lesley-Ann Brown**

Son,

It is a sunny day in Copenhagen when Hossein texts me this poem:

We don't know
Ourselves. We just
Look like our selves.

He often translates Iranian poems and texts them to his friends when he has had too much red wine to drink. Hossein is depressed, which is not good news for me. See, I've been depressed too, in what has been heralded, too many years in a row, the happiest country in the world. Hossein is sixty years old and it doesn't give me too much relief to see him still struggling in his adopted country of residence.

I tell him to meet me in Christiania, the area in Copenhagen that declared itself a free state back when I was a baby still wearing diapers in Brooklyn. Back then, a group of intrepid souls decided to squat an old military base, and where there once was the staccato roar of military drills, there is now the relatively unhindered sale of hashish and weed. I like the diverse crowd that Christiania attracts. I like the multitude of difference and it is not unusual to sit at the Moonfisher, one of its most popular cafés, and spot senior citizens, squares and alternatives passing time drinking coffee and smoking

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joints. I often go there to escape the alienation I tend to feel living here in Denmark, gaining much comfort and relief there. There is so much more to Christiania than the sale of hash — there is a forest where one can walk and find solitude in nature.

It is June. The weather has long begun to thaw from the rigid, asphyxiating cold and darkness of Copenhagen winter. Slowly everything has begun to come alive as the palette of vibrant colours unleashed by the changing of the season; colours that together conjure the word "verdant" are now on display. Buds, timid at first, burst upon the scene in a colourful, dynamic blast that heralds the city's awakening. It reminds me of a congregation of Black women in their Sunday best, spilling out of church on a Sunday afternoon in Brooklyn. Birds sing, and with the coming of the sun and the much longer and more colourful days, our hearts have begun to soften toward one another. The natives become relaxed, smiling more and revealing their solar-deprived Nordic bodies unabashedly to the sun like worshippers of the past.

In this awakening I too am feeling a bit livelier, a rambunctiousness welling up from within. With the advent of spring I feel hopeful again. The small leaves that sprout from once barren limbs remind me of my own possibility. *Maybe there is a place for me here in Denmark, after all.*

I ride past the playground where the neighbourhood children play what the entire world refers to as football. I know these kids. I have been seeing them since I moved into this neighbourhood four years ago. They are a colourful mix whose parents are from Somalia, Palestine, Pakistan and Turkey. Today there are two girls on the basketball court-turned-football pitch who run its expanse undeterred by long skirts and headscarves, appearing as graceful as a pair of sailboats on an open sea.

Many of the streets bear names of countries, and I make a left turn off of Norway and onto Holland. Green spills forth from cracks in the concrete, and there is bird chatter incessantly above our heads. There is witchcraft in some of the small gardens I see. Elderberry trees are coming to life; it is a wood once thought magical by the ancestors of the people whose land I now inhabit.

I bike through my neighbourhood, Amager. The locals still refer to it as "shit island*"* because it was once used as an area for garbage disposal in the 1970s, but Amager is no longer the dumping ground for the city's garbage (although some would beg to differ). Now, like many other Copenhagen neighbourhoods, it is thriving. There seems to be a café of some kind or another on every corner, and whenever I get homesick the local mall lulls me into believing that I landed in some alternate-universe United States suburban experiment where the inhabitants speak an undecipherable English.

The demographic landscape of Amager is under transformation. It is like this all over Copenhagen — metro stations being installed in every likely cultural and commercial hub in town,

with pneumatic drills piercing and penetrating the earth below so that new buildings can grow from the earth, so eager to perform. Property value is going up and construction is non-stop.

Amager has its charm despite what its neighbours think. When I think about it I see it has the same relationship that Manhattanites once displayed — or perhaps in their psychosis still do — toward Brooklyn. It is really just snobbery that imagines, *based on location*, one group of people to be inferior to another. It is the same attitude that those in Copenhagen share for their fellow Jutlanders; that unfortunate soul to be born on the mainland as opposed to on *the devil's island*, as the island Copenhagen is sometimes referred to by the mainlanders. Do you know why there is water surrounding Shetland (the island that Copenhagen is on)? Because, according to those in Jutland, *it was too expensive to erect a fence*.

I bike down Amagerbrogade, past the various shops that adorn this stretch offering shoes, ice-cream, espresso, world-famous Danish pastries, breads, health foods and wine. I go across the road that separates my neighbourhood from the now elite neighbourhood of Christianshavn. It is not unusual to pass a native of Christianshavn lamenting the colonisation of their neighbourhood by new money that is driving up rents and rendering it impossible for the children of the original residents to continue any lineage there. Christianshavn was built as a fortification for Copenhagen in the seventeenth century. There is a metro stop and a bevy of stores and shops to keep its inhabitants content. It is also known as Little Amsterdam. There are canals that reflect the small, quaint yellow- and mauve-painted houses. This is home to the original Layer Cake House — an institution of sorts, whose pastries and cakes are one of this country's specialties. The variety of breads on display resemble sumptuous cartoonish bricks, many of them grainy and jam-packed with seeds. There are the usual regalia of French flutes, croissants and rugbrød (a grainy, dark bread). Then there are the selection of cakes and pastries that glitter like precious gems in the showcases. But as noted in my previous letter to you, this building once imprisoned rebellious women, including Queen Marie, who sought to cleanse the evils of racism and capitalism with fire.

I remember that one morning I went to the Lagerkagehus, and as I stood in line I noticed a girl of about nine years ogling me. Having been here for seventeen years, I've gotten used to kids checking me out. This particular little girl was doing that thing kids do where they try to look like they're talking to the adults they are with, but the direction of their gaze — their eyes — gives them away. She was brown-haired with grey eyes, and her t-shirt was too small for her little round belly, so her navel peeked out like a winking eye. Her pants were too tight for a kid and soon she started looking to me a bit like an elf and I couldn't take it anymore. I broke through her stare and asked her where she was from.

She told me she was from Brooklyn! Meanwhile her accompanying adult let me know through her own glance of suspicion that she was not feeling me. Moments like these make me wish I knew how to get some kind of extra spiritual body protection from *the draft* — that racist glare that Art Blakey so eloquently referred to whenever he felt he was about to perform before a racist crowd. I feel a draft, he'd let his bandmates know. And sometimes I do feel like I need the supernatural in order to survive *the glare*.

I told them that I'm also from Brooklyn. At the declaration of this tiny bit of common information the woman's eyes immediately melted, and she stepped forward in a reconciliatory manner. She told me where exactly they are from in *our* Brooklyn. I'm not sure why she was looking at me so suspiciously before, and there is even a chance she was unaware of her initial posture, but she eased next to me like we were long-lost best friends. I bought my bread and walked out, wondering why telling people I'm from Brooklyn or New York usually elicits a response akin to celebrity. Experiences such as this merely solidify my awareness of the romantic ideas many here have of New York, fed to them through Woody Allen films and Paul Auster books. It is not that I think this is a terribly wrong phenomenon — it is just that I find it naïve and gullible.

As I ride along on my way to Hossein I see the little bistros filled with young professionals dressed in Scandinavian-styled black and grey, intoxicated with the feeling that recently acquired material success imbues. Word has it that there has been a recession for some time, although aside from the growing wave of bottle collectors and homelessness it is difficult to fathom judging solely from the look of many locals. I am told, however, that Denmark has the world's fourth-largest personal debt, although ranking only sixth in terms of world salaries. Not sure how that will unravel. The reality of that fact looms like a harbinger akin to the cold dark winters here in Copenhagen, and I catch myself wondering how it will play itself out in the future. Recently, Denmark has been offering loans with *negative* interest.

I take the scenic route into Christiania on my way to meet Hossein rather than via its main entrance on Princess Street, a path often packed with people coming and going. There's a roasted-peanut vendor there and during the warmer months many hang out in the sidewalks right outside. I ride past the sign that reads, "You are now leaving the EU and entering the free state of Christiania." To avoid the crowd of tourists — and the police — I make a right onto the back road.

The bodies of water that surround this area give it a fairy-tale feeling that conjures up Hans Christian Andersen tales. And if you are familiar at all with his stories as well as Christiania, then you know I do not necessarily mean to conjure enchantment. There is something brutal, too, in Hans Christian Andersen's work — trauma-inducing worlds where the prose is beautiful and the stories

haunting — something embedded that is fatal, perhaps, to one's spirit. Tales that continue the tradition of instilling fear, so that behaviours can be controlled, with lessons full of regret, loss and brutality.

Although many people like to use the term "fairy tale" when they visit wonderful Copenhagen, it ought to be noted that the fairy tales that are most often referred to were created by this odd man who was a failed ballet dancer. Andersen, as most may not know, made his living as a playwright and it is here that my interest swells: for amongst the many plays he wrote for the Danish aristocracy there is one entitled *Mulat* that every Dane should be required to read. To resurrect this side of Andersen will indeed awake even the sleepiest of Danes to their colonial history, a history that has been pushed to the margins, denied and whitewashed. Luckily for us there are artists here, such as Trinidadian Danish artist Jeannette Ehlers, who bring works such as this into the present, allowing us to contemplate these works in the now.

I cannot deny that it fills me with happiness that there is so much nature — even in the centre of the city. This is one of the reasons I decided to stay here. In Copenhagen, it is possible to see sky, unobstructed. But I do remain mindful of shadows.

I bike on the asphalt and the smell of grilled green peppers and sausages envelopes me.

The trees that surround the moat of Christiana are beech, oak and ash. And the smooth asphalt turning into dirt and gravel signal that I have officially entered the free state. The eclectic mix of do-it-yourself houses that occupy this former military base are also a good hint that one is there. The houses all bear signs of home repair, with some residents even installing solar panels. There is an elaborate sculpture made with rustic materials like wood and rocks. Christiania — technically a squat — has only a few hundred inhabitants, and I am curious how the continuation of this free state will fare under the changing times of our world.

As we all know here, Christiania's relationship with the Danish state is also quite tenuous. Because it boasts itself as a "free state," there is the sale of hashish in the open market. However, this is against the laws of the Danish state: and it is this particular issue that many observe rather excitedly, to see how this will unfold. I don't like it when the Danish police, replete with riot and anti-terrorism gear, swarm down Pusher Street, with the pushers fighting back with masked faces, smoke bombs and angry words. Lately, this seems to be a thing of the past since the inhabitants of Christiania decided to kick out the hash dealers from Pusher Street, creating, once again, a more relaxed atmosphere in this free state.

I make a left onto the little wooden bridge that takes me across the moat and I see birds preparing for the continuation of the cycle of their existence, and the tableau feels a bit like something from a storybook. Or as if it has inspired one at least. Mute swans, protected by the crown, are ushering their

young into the world. The wise never walk too near to them and their hiss is usually enough to secure their space both on land and water. I remember that once, when you were little, you asked about the swans and their cygnets, you asked why they were not white like their parents. I answered that it was because they were babies, to which you responded, "Do you mean that when I grow up, I'll be white too?"

People sit all along the body of water on both sides, and green beer bottles reflect the glare of the sun as they are lifted to lips after the perfunctory *skål* (cheers), which supposedly means "skull" because, as some incorrectly say, that was what the Vikings drank out of. Beer here is omnipotent. Even in the neighbourhood of Vesterbro, the Carlsberg sign looms above like the neighbourhood's own, private moon.

I pull up to the Moonfisher and it is teeming with folks who have allowed their usual orderliness and stoicism to melt with the coming of the sun.

I see familiar faces. There is Andrew, the African Celt from Manchester. And Linda, the American writer who has just completed her novel about this very same place. There is Line, the Queen of the Underground, whose huge apartment is jam-packed with taxidermied, dead animals and antique sewing machines. The whole area is alive and the smell of hashish permeates the air. Conversations range from Denmark's political relationship to the US to sports and of course aliens.

I spot Hossein sitting against the white wall and walk over and take a seat next to him. Hossein tells me that his wife of over thirty years has decided to leave him. It is not comforting to me that my older friends still suffer from issues of the heart. To be completely honest, and I know I am being selfish here, I wish he were not here, at sixty years of age, lamenting a failed relationship. I want to say to him, "You are not supposed to be having these kind of relationship problems at your age! If this is the case… there is no hope for me!" But I am old enough now to know that no matter how old you are, life happens.

Hossein is originally from Iran. A son of a lower military official, he was not rich, but he was also certainly not poor. Like so many of his generation in Iran, education became the new religion. A possible ticket into the world of so-called meritocracy. A path to a better life. He managed to study his way from a primary school built on a cemetery (where he has told me of a classmate who once gnawed on human bones in exchange for pennies) to university.

Hossein was "lucky" to get a job in Turkey teaching English, not too long after the "Iranian Revolution" — the moment when Iran, once so potent with promise and hope, found itself hijacked by a US-sponsored religious cleric. But Hossein was clever and managed to escape. Life, he thought, with his young Persian wife and son at his side, held promise.

Until you speak to political refugees here in Denmark, stories of expatriation to Denmark tend to be dull. They run the rather mundane gamut of love, or what my British friend June once quipped was "the Danish gene-pool project." According to her, this project is an age-old ploy that has been used throughout the centuries to spice up Danish genetics (lest things get a little too royal around here).

Sometimes I think to myself that she does have a bit of a point, inasmuch as I can't help but notice, much to my chagrin, how biracial children seem to be sometimes exotified here. I wonder how or if this has impacted you? My hope is that you do not grow up as I have noticed some other biracial Danes here do: thinking that they are better than others. As each generation sprouts its virginal head in Copenhagen, it is the *mulat* — as biracial offspring are so stubbornly referred to here in Denmark — whose melanin shines like gold on skin, who seem to be oft coveted. Despite the fact that the term *mulatto* refers to mules and is in fact a description borne from plantocracy, some Blacks *and* whites insist on using the word. Do you remember that time we were on the train coming back from Berlin and a young lady, a model, insisted on speaking to you to hear of your interest in modelling? "They love your type!" she said, much too loudly for our comfort!

"Oh, don't be so sensitive," is the usual response when you attempt to get many to show a little historical wisdom. "What's all this about being politically correct? You people need to get a sense of humour! You're not going to make us like Sweden!" This usually follows some rendition of Blackface or insult to a people's religion. To be fair, there are many Danes who do not fit this bill. But unfortunately, they don't seem to be the ones who are controlling the media, or at least have influence over any kind of meaningful cultural change.

I haven't failed to see that Copenhagen is peppered with caramel-coloured kids who spend the first part of their lives upset that their parents broke social taboos (or played into them), thereby making their offspring different; and then the other half exploiting the clumsy genius inherent in being interracial. They too, however, will soon realise that in Denmark, no one is special.

Expats are also cajoled here by foreign corporate hire — whether they are private or state. Families are lured by exorbitant tax-free salaries, so that if chosen, there need only be one breadwinner in the family. Mostly, it's the men who command these high salaries, with the wives, usually just as educated if not more so, receiving the luxury of being able to stay at home navigating motherhood in a foreign country. They are the ones who must negotiate this foreign terrain — grocery stores full of foreign-labelled products that hammer in the distance from home. They are the ones who have to figure out how to say "flour" in Danish (*mel*); to make appointments with the variety of state agencies that seem to demand it; and to find such fine American products like as Oreo cookies and Betty Crocker cake mix. Many of these episodes occur in Hellerup, although not exclusively.

These women learn quickly through folding themselves into tight networks how to secure a turkey for Thanksgiving, and that in Denmark you pay for your plastic shopping bags. Many of these families will be visited by some sort of medication-induced calm at some point, and perhaps suffer from an extreme case of xenophobia where Denmark becomes the root of all evil, and one can find oneself spiralling head-first into a depression that sticks to the bones like congealed Crisco and weighs heavily on the soul. Don't get me wrong, one's existence here needn't be so bleak: the natives, as you know all too well, do promote alcoholism, which usually pops you over really good, until you're done!

None of these tales, however, are the ones that can claim Hossein. He left Iran intent on returning. He saw the life of a cultivated intellectual as his for the taking. He read Persian poetry in the moonlight and enjoyed the freedom of red wine. He was a progressive at heart and took pride that he could reconfigure the world through a myriad of literary references, most of them Western, some of them Persian, and none Arabic.

But there was something amiss in Turkey. It is illegal to demonstrate against the government there. Although Hossein had other things to do, it soon became apparent that at least one of his students did not. And unfortunately for Hossein, when a man is arrested in Turkey, so is his phone book.

This was a time when Danes could travel the world with their flags proudly sewn on their backpacks as though they were Canadians, when Danes felt their government was standing up for something, and there was still everyday mundane merchandise, such as t-shirts, made in Denmark. This was a time when Danes could protest in the street relatively unhindered as though it was their *right*. It was the time before the demonstrations against the Maastricht Treaty, in which the police would shoot bullets into the crowd, hurting at least four, and before they rounded up and arrested activists even before they stepped into Denmark, as they did for the G8 conference in 2009. All of this quite legal apparently, due to anti-terror laws.

It was in this great tradition of Danish activism that a group of Danish activists made it their responsibility to get Hossein out of Turkish prison. The hitch? He would have to move to Denmark. This is the part of the story where Hossein, when repeating it, breaks out in hysterical laughter. You know the kind — where your eyes begin to tear up and your emotions get confused about whether it is extreme joy you are experiencing, or the pain inherent in occupying the absolute depths of despair.

People are really happy here. Life here is good. The standard of living is high… but no one seems to mention the high suicide rate — one of the highest in the world at *four* people per day. Or the high rate of happy pills that are dispensed at the mention of a headache. No one talks about the high level of alcoholism. And when you do? "Don't be so negative!" comes the reply.

Yes, it is true the sun shines on Denmark — sometimes.

I ask Hossein if he thinks he's depressed. "Depressed?" he asks, "Oh, Lesley, don't sound so American."

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I know Hossein is lonely.

I have a friend back in New York named Reggie, originally from the Bronx but who now lives in London. Reggie is a gentleman with a dramatic flair about him. My flamingo-pink sequinned hot-pants were inherited from him once he decided to move on to something with a bit more flair. Reggie insists the best therapy for depression is boxes of cheap dinnerware from tacky discount chain stores. He attributes his actual survival to the existence of cheap dinner plates created, his imagination has assured him, with the distinct purpose of allowing modern humans to express through them deep grief, disappointment, anger and fury.

In listening to Reggie tell his story and actually picturing him in my own head acting out his therapeutic rationale, I am sure this is how he survived the intensely cut-throat NYC Black gay scene of the 1990s.

Reggie would walk right into a discount store, the kind where everything is priced at ninety-nine cents, with no less presence or stature than the East Side elite who waltz into Bergdorf's or Saks Fifth Avenue. He'd go over to the housewares department and pick up a box of the always-50%-off dinnerware. Nothing too fancy — just earthenware surface area. I imagine him wearing oversized Jackie O sunglasses, a V-neck t-shirt that feels like silk to the touch, and his signature size-twenty-eight Jordache jeans. He'd pay for the box of plates and continue to his East Village apartment, looking like a caricature of the scale of Justice… a tiny Marc Jacobs bag dangling from one wrist, and the much larger one full of his dinnerware, dangling from the other, both bags equally necessary for the form of balance in his mind. When he reached his apartment building, instead of opening his own front door, he'd continue ceremoniously up the stairs to the rooftop. There, he would unpack the box. Gently. He would remove and unwrap each item, and after a moment of careful study to reflect on how the word China has been reduced to mass produced cobalt blue and lacquer dinnerware, Reggie would methodically toss each plate from the roof of his building. The awaiting asphalt of the Lower East Side has seen much worse. Pieces of shattering white plates, as they formed starbursts, would be a relief for Reggie. Release. A freedom of sorts. From all the anguish. From all the bullshit. Just for a little while. Unsuspecting passers-by would look up. And then they keep moving, even less shocked than the asphalt. Unsuspecting passers-by are only unsuspecting until they recognise the

pattern. This is New York. There are more unusual things in the streets of New York than pieces of broken dinnerware. On the Lower East Side, had they known Reggie — had they been aware of his plans — the audience of humans may very well have joined him. The police, back then, were never called. Reggie, thusly, in specific moments of his own constructed theatre, expressed to the universe his pain. Discount dinner plates at the ninety-nine-cent stores are still for sale.

I think of this memory of Reggie and I look at Hossein. I realise that Hossein is slowly having a breakdown. It's like slow motion because there is no space for him to just safely fall apart. But if there is no space for a breakdown, how can we break through and become whole again, healthy?

When you were younger you'd say to me every Sunday, "We're back on the hamster wheel tomorrow."

Is it just me — or does time accelerate and sometimes slow down without ever really moving at all?

You say to me, "Mom, I don't want to go to school. School is boring." Who are you telling?

I used to work at the same school Hossein ended up working in after Denmark saved him from a Turkish prison. Hossein has been there for fourteen years. I've since left and now teach adults. Hossein, however, is no longer a teacher. Coming to Denmark changed that. Coming to Denmark somehow imprinted on him the idea that he could not fulfil his dreams. Instead, Hossein, still reciting and translating poetry only when drunk, has found himself a kind of *altmuligmand* — doing a little bit of this and that at the school. I call it the *immigrant syndrome*: that of taking jobs you are clearly over-qualified for.

I wonder if I should buy Hossein and myself cheap dinnerware?

Hossein is an artist. And when I say artist, I implore you to reclaim the meaning inherent in the word as our human right. *To create is to exalt life, no?* So said a Catalan guitar-playing landscape artist I once met in this free-state-within-a-state of Christiania, which intermittently receives threats of reclamation from the Danish state. To be fair, there's nothing smart about starting a free state within a country trying to catch up with the cool kids in the cafeteria, and even less smart that you do so on what is obviously prime real estate. It's a challenge to be different in a country like Denmark, where rules and social cues are engraved in stone and its citizens are quick to police each other. Try crossing the street on a red light and soon enough some non-descript Danish person will yell at you, more upset that you have broken the law than the fact that you may have risked your life.

Denmark sometimes can feel like a place where dreams go to die. Remember the Law of Jante: you're not special, you're not as good as we are, you're not smarter than us, you're not better than

us, you're not more important, you're not good at anything, you can't laugh at us, YOU can't teach us anything!

It's been years now since Hossein's wife left him. Since then he has given up drinking and has even returned to Iran a couple of times after discovering that he would not be under any threat. He had been terrified to go before, so terrified that he didn't even risk returning on the death of his parents. But last year, he returned. Iran has changed much since he left, he told me. And as I look at my friend Hossein, I reply, and so have you, my dear friend. And so have you.

The life of exile, my dear son, cannot be an easy one. And while I sometimes speak of my presence here as some sort of exile, let us remember it is a self-imposed one and I have always, although I haven't always acted upon it, been able to go back to the States. I often wonder about all my fellow human beings around the planet, for whom home remains a distant, far-away vision, only to be visited through fading photographs and memories, if that. I wonder about the amazing women I have met here from Eritrea, Somalia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Palestine, Syria — who have been displaced or murdered because of illegal wars and/or occupation, which in the end only leaves the sober-minded to wonder: what is terrorism?