

LIFE OF A FOLK DEVIL

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Illustrated by Matt Chun

‘There’s just one kind of folks. Folks.’
—Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*



1986

The midwives are horrified when they see the size of my head on my way out of the birth canal. I am born with a bright olive complexion and a big nose in the public birthing unit of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Mum, a rug-rider who’s been here for the past sixteen years, tells the nurse I am to be named after the prophet, ‘Mohammed’. The nurse, a convict who’s been here for one-hundred-and-ninety-eight years, snorts and replies, ‘That’s no good. Call him Michael.’



1987

Kes emak. Your mum’s cunt. First words. Don’t judge. I learn them from my mother. She is at Coles in Redfern, and I am nestled in her arms like a koala, and this barefoot man with flaky white skin is calling her a towel head and refusing to let us through the doorway. ‘Kes-em-ak!’ my mum spits, punctuating each syllable at him like three

ballistic bullets. Immediately, the man pounces sideways, like he knows Arabic, and my mother struts through the passageway. My gape clamps onto a bloodshot pair of bulging eyeballs, and I’m all, ‘ke-ke-ke’ and ‘es-es-es’ and ‘em-em-em’ and ‘ak-ak-ak’.



1988

One aunt and one uncle on my father’s side die of measles in Tripoli. Australian prime minister Malcolm Fraser agreed to resettle my grandparents and their remaining eight children in the inner-west slums of Erskineville. Sixteen years of go-back-to-where-you-came-from later, my second-oldest uncle, Ibrahim, arrives home with a black eye and a bloodied right hand. My grandmother, Yocheved, whose arms are like plastic bags filled with warm water, and my dad, Jaffar, whose arms are chiselled like concrete, and youngest aunt, Mariam, whose arms are bronzed and thin like a stick insect, are all screaming in Ibrahim’s face, ‘Shu saur?’ which means ‘What happened?’ Ibrahim grinds down on his cracked teeth

and screeches 'scrumble' as my mum places a bundle of ice wrapped in a chequered tablecloth over his throbbing eye. 'Abos and Wogs versus Aussies!' he declares, rising his battered red knuckles into the air as though he's a Black Panther. Waking up and wandering through the living room in the middle of the night, I stick my eye through the keyhole of the door that leads to the back yard. Uncle Ibrahim is standing under a florescent light-bulb, shoulder against the brick wall of the small enclosure, trying to steady his hands as he sucks a spoon of white powder into a syringe. Then he bends over, drops his Adidas tracksuit pants, and injects the needle into his hairy butt-cheek.



1989

Scimitar swinging above his head, Bluto is riding through the desert on a horse, only his skin tone is darker than usual and he calls himself 'Abu Hassan'. Forty thieves ride behind him: starched flesh, spaghetti limbs, bloated torsos, tiny black beards and turbans around their penises and heads like nappies. They mutter in gibberish, but with all the 'khs' it sounds like Arabic, and they kidnap Olive Oil, who shrieks in English, 'Saaaave meeee, Pop-eyeeeee.' Abu Hassan and his forty thieves take her to their cave, where they make her wash their clothes in a barrel full of soap and water, and they call her 'yashi', which means nothing, but sounds like 'jahshi', which means 'donkey', and so I think, *donkey*. Popeye arrives at the entrance to the cave, and commands it to open, not with 'Open Sesame' but with 'Open Says Me'. Abu Hassan and his forty thieves are knocked around as bowling pins against Popeye's can of spinach and bulging forearms. I am so starved for representation; it slaps a broad dim-witted smile across my copper-ridden cheeks.



1990

Arab parents tell me that like all Aussies, Chuck is scum. One night he's roaring 'slut fuck shit' in the street. He has about five of his big Aussie friends with him and his fifteen-year-old daughter Rachel. My third-oldest uncle, Amar, has gone to get Kentucky Fried Chicken for his baby girls and is pulling in to park his car when we hear Chuck walk over and give one of the doors a kick. There's muffled screaming so we run out of our tight inner-west house and see Uncle Amar holding Chuck down and swinging at him with a club lock. Dad, Uncle Ibrahim and their youngest sibling, Uncle Ali, grab on to their short wiry brother and drag him away. Chuck's friends fill the streets of Erskineville and Alexandria and Newtown with drunken laughter, and Rachel, whose shorts are so short I can see the bottom lines of her arse, is shouting that her father was just mucking around after a drink like he always does and us sand people should piss off back to Islamabad. 'We're from the Middle East,' Uncle Ali says as they tug Amar into the house. Rachel pulls down on her shorts and pokes out her flipper-shaped tongue. 'Same shit!'



1991

The first day of kindergarten, there is an assembly on the school quadrangle in which I am introduced to the principal, Mr Whitehead, an old man with a nose like a rotten piece of cauliflower. The sun is strong this morning, but the branches from the trees surrounding the concrete floor provide just enough shade for me to keep my eyes open. 'I am the Arthur Phillip of Alexandria

Public School,' Mr Whitehead declares. Then he talks about being kind to the new kids, especially the five-year-olds; respecting your teachers, especially Mrs Lionheart, who's serving her thirty-ninth year; the importance of honouring our national anthem, especially the 'young and free' part; and loving 'aborigines', especially the Year 6 boy named Dizzy, because he plays the didgeridoo and can throw and catch a boomerang. Finally, as the bell goes for class, Whitehead says, 'We are particularly proud of our multicultural. If you speak a language other than English, stand up.' I spring to my feet like zamzam water, along with my brother, who is in Year 1, and this girl from Year 3 who is skinny and has straight black hair like Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*. From the front of the assembly, I stare back upon a sea of dull pink faces. Mr Whitehead instructs all two hundred of them to applaud for us, and the Aussies put their hands together like a bunch of circus seals. 'Harder,' demands Whitehead, 'clap harder!' Directly above my black curls there is a scuffle in the leaves, and I cock my head to see a white pigeon on the edge of a branch. Flying off, it discharges a thick blotch of bleached shit that spirals straight down towards me and splatters between my eyebrows.



1992

Ya gotta keep rewinding and pausing the VHS tape at the exact right moment, while Van Damme is pulling up his maroon undies, in order to get a good look at his perfectly moulded arse. He plays Frank Dux, an American martial artist who competes against the world's best fighters in the underground full-contact tournament called the Kumite. On the opening day of

the Kumite, Frank Dux's first fight is against a sun-kissed man in a traditional Saudi headdress named Hossein. As soon as the bell rings, Frank takes Hossein down with a few quick punches, breaking the world record for the fastest Kumite knockout in history. But shifty Hossein does not concede defeat, and after Frank is declared victorious, the Arab pounces up and attempts to take a cheap shot at him from behind. Frank pre-empts the attack and delivers a reverse elbow-punch combination that permanently sends Hossein to the canvas. The next time I have a fistfight at school, I will embody the spirit of Frank Dux, especially now that Mum has bought me a pair of maroon undies from K-mart. I'm wearing them—and *only* them—when I practise on my bed, throwing three straight punches, one roundhouse kick and one helicopter fly-kick, which is sure to concuss any foe I'm up against in a few seconds. Tomorrow at lunchtime, an older boy from Year 3 named Thomas Pearce, who has splitting blue eyes, calls me a 'Lebanese shit'. As the other kids in his grade look on, I pick the maroon wedgy from my butt crack, and then I charge, throwing a succession of punches and kicks, each of which misses Thomas by a foot. He stands back, watching me tire myself out, and then he steps in towards me, gives me one hard push, and I am down like a sack of horse manure. Lying on the ground while Thomas and the other kids laugh at me and chant 'Lebanese shit, Lebanese shit', I finally understand: I'm not Frank Dux. I am Hossein.



1993

The talent quest ends with a chubby boy named Gary Forbes attempting a stand-up routine. His first joke is, 'What did the big chimney say to the little chimney?

You're too young to smoke.' The students in the school hall are a plague of canned-corned-beef-fed faces, laughing the way only children do, 'aha aha aha aha', not knowing if they genuinely find it funny or if we're just pretending to find it funny because jokes are supposed to be funny. Gary's second joke goes: 'Why do cows wear bells? Because their horns don't work.' Again, the students laugh the way only children do, 'aha aha aha aha', but this time the teachers join in too, including the principal Mr Whitehead, who chuckles out loud like a genie, 'haaaaa-haaaa!' Two for two, Gary is beaming through an empty mouth of missing baby teeth as he proceeds to tell his third joke: 'Why do Chinese people have sharp eyes? Because when they go to the toilet, they do this ...' and then he uses his two index fingers to pull his eyes to the side, squats in the middle of the stage, and goes, 'eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeegh!' The students begin to laugh out of control, and this time it really does sound for realz, with the exception of that one student who looks like Bruce Lee (only her hair is much longer now), sitting two seats down from me. She has karate-sprung onto her feet and sprinted out of the hall like a fat kid with a free Big Mac voucher. Above the laughter, Mr Whitehead screams out, 'No, no, that's racist, stop, that's racist!' As the school watches on in a silent combination of amusement and confusion, Gary ejects from his squat, hardening into a pillar of granite as his broad translucent cheeks turn bright red. Then there is nothing but the sound of a girl weeping from the corridor outside. That same afternoon, while we are eating vine leaves for dinner, I ask my dad, 'Do you know what racism is?' He swallows hard, Adam's apple convulsing as a mouthful of meat and rice trudges down his throat. 'It's making fun of Chinks,' he explains. 'Speaking of which—do you know why Chinese people have sharp eyes?'



1994

Three frosty-fleshed women with short hair, colourful cotton drape pants and tattoos with Chinese writing on their arms are moving into the yellow-brick house next door—transporting a bundle of cardboard boxes from the boot of a *Ghostbusters*-style station wagon to the concrete patio of the terrace. The lankiest among them says to the other two, 'Let's do dumb shit tonight.' Sitting outside our house on a milk crate, crushing olives on an upside-down silver trash can, my grandmother takes one extended look at all three and whispers a sequence of bismillahs. Then she turns down to me—the twenty-fifth of her thirty-six grandchildren sitting by her swollen brown calves playing with an armless Ninja Turtle—and she says in Arabic: 'This suburb is too expensive for us to live here anymore ...'



1995

Whitey, please accept our deepest condolences: my entire generation, including my grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, all their husbands and wives, my siblings and all my cousins, relocate to a suburb in south-western Sydney named Lakemba. My sister says, 'Pretend we're rich and call it Lake Amber.' My brother says, 'Pretend we're poor and call it Leb-kemba.' On my street alone, there is a Lebanese family in every house except for one, which is occupied by an old skip who owns a pink-nosed pit bull. Each morning my siblings and I walk past his orange terrace on our way to Lakemba Public School, speaking passionately to each other in a mixture of English, Pig Latin and Arabic: 'Wallah um-cay ear-hay you snot!'

The old skip is always sitting on his verandah, massaging his dog's chin as he barks across his lawn, 'I remember when the young fellas around 'ere used to speak Australian!' He dies before he ever sees his suburb return to the days of the Weet-Bix Kids. A Lebanese family buys his house, tears it down, and builds a duplex in its place. The entire street belongs to us now.



1996

The red-haired woman who talks like she has a broomstick up her hole is on prime-time news, her porcelain skin and cold blue eyes stabbing my retinas as she declares that Australia will soon be facing a civil war. My father and his brothers, Ali, Amar, Ibrahim and the oldest among them, Ehud, are huddled around our small flickering television, which has a steel clothes hanger plugged in the back as an antenna. These five Lebanese men all look concerned, their dark rustic jawlines and large Bedouin noses casting a long shadow over our entire living room. Finally, Uncle Ali contracts his broad shoulders, takes in a deep breath and bellows, 'Tha fuck does that bitch know about civil war!' All at once I am running through the concrete alleyways of Tripoli, beige paint on the walls of the buildings decomposing around me, shrapnel clipping my cheekbones, plasma bursting from my fingertips, bullets puncturing the back of my skull. Phuck. Phuck. Phuck.



1997

Shovelling down a halal cheeseburger at Punchbowl Macca's, Dad sits in front of

me with a sad smile across his scorched face—his face, which always looked like it was made of stone; his face, which just now reveals itself to be made of sand, and is withering before me. He says, 'If anyone asks, tell them you're the kind that crosses-your-heart-and-hopes-to-die.' A moment later, we're back on Canterbury Road. There must be a car accident further down because we have been stuck in traffic and moving slowly since we got on from Willeroo Street; right in front of the Halal Red Rooster. After five minutes of us sitting silently in his van, a 1989 Toyota HiAce that has no radio, my father slants his dagger-shaped nose towards me, and then beyond me. His frown bending into a grin, he laughs, 'Hahahaaaaa!' He's spotted a woman standing in front of a car yard. She's wearing baggy beige pants and a bright red jumper. Her hair is long and blonde, but not like the women on television; it's dry and dirty like I only ever saw on the lesbians and hippies when we lived in Newtown. The woman has her fingers through the diamond wires of the car yard's chain-link fence, and standing peacefully before her on the other side is a guard dog, a large rottweiler with shoulders like boulders. I watch her massage the dog's chin, her fingers moving sluggishly back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. I see the dog's face sedated and seduced, receiving with no will to resist, as though he is at the mercy of a slow and oily hand-job. 'Saahib'tou,' my father says in a deep voice. 'She's befriended him.' Then he goes back to laughing, like a small boy, his goatee flickering and arm muscles flexing as he releases the gearstick and the van starts to move. 'What's funny?' I ask. He's staring straight ahead again, his Arabian nose sticking out above the steering wheel like a wooden spear. 'Woman,' he says. 'Woman is funny.'



1998

It begins with the headline 'DIAL-A-GUN', and the subheading 'Lebanese gang says it's easier than buying a pizza'. The photo features a bunch of dark-olive Lebos, standing in front of a bright red wall. Starting from the left, the first Lebo is wearing a black PHB cap, black sunglasses and a puffy red-and-white Fila jacket. A Joker-like grin hides behind his left fingers, which are spread open and crossed in the shape of a W. Tupac will tell you this stands for 'Westside', motherfucker. His right hand is closed, with the exception of two fingers that he's using to make the peace sign. Standing next to him is a Lebo in a white Nike cap with a black brim, and he's wearing a puffy black jacket that has a row of 'Filas' running down the sleeves. This guy's using his left hand to emulate the shape of an uzi, bottom two fingers closed and top two fingers and thumb wide open. He's pulling his jacket collar up over his nose with his right hand, hiding everything except his eyes, which are buried under the shadow of his cap. Next to him is a boy whose entire mutt is exposed; a polished baby face with a smart-arse smile and thick black eyebrows. His eyes are shut, or maybe he was just blinking when the photographer snapped the photo. He's wearing a puffy jacket as well, only this one is Adidas, with its hood over his head. I can't see his left arm, because it's tucked behind his mate, but his right hand is tightly positioned in the shape of a handgun, pointing towards the ground. The final boy standing in this row is the tallest. He too is wearing a black jacket, but I can't make out the brand. He has his collar zipped right up over half his face, so all we see is his wide flaring nose, furrowed eyebrows and short black hair. He's got his hands out in front of his chest, both in the shape of wonkalated Ws, his fingers like the broken roots of a cedar tree. Crouching in front of

these four Lebos are two more Lebs. The one on the left is wearing a dark-blue Puma jacket and a white Nike cap, which he's tilted to conceal his gaze; his hands up on either side of his head, both flashing another pair of crooked Ws; index fingers and pinkie fingers spread open, middle fingers crossed together, thumbs tucked behind his palms. The last Lebo in the photo, crouching to the right, is in a yellow Nike cap with a black brim. He's wearing the same red-and-white Fila jacket as the first boy in the photo, and once again, he's crossed his hands in the shape of Ws, only this time, he's planted both Ws over his entire face like hood camouflage. I saunter from the newsagency at Punchbowl train station, where the front page of the paper is mounted on the display window, and walk right along the outside of the Punchbowl Boys oval, which is surrounded by a twelve-foot fence, barbed wire and CCTV cameras. Walking through the front gates of the school, I am greeted by the principal, Mr Whitechurch. He hits me with a smirk, revealing a long line of overlapping yellow teeth, and says, 'Caught ya on the front page of the *Telegraph* this morn.' All over the corridors where the Lebs congregate, there is only one thought on everyone's tongue: *Today's the day we pick up sluts, bro!*



1999

Two men who look like hippies from Woodstock are standing by the front gates of Punchbowl Boys handing a leaflet to each student that walks out after school—each student, meaning that it's either one of the fifteen Islanders, or one of the two-hundred-and-eighty Lebos who make up our entire population. The leaflet contains a picture of an anthropomorphised peace symbol, which has crossed eyes and a frowning mouth and skinny arms and legs. This cranky little peace

man is swinging an axe at a wooden cross and in a speech bubble he is saying, 'Allah, you're next!' Staring into the peace man's sharp, twisted glare, I am suddenly overcome by one satanic verse after another: *What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt ...* As soon as the hippies who have handed out the leaflet arrive at Punchbowl train station, the Lebs are locked on them like a pack of pit bulls, calculating a strike. I watch as a drug dealer named Bassam Bin Masri throws the first punch, followed by a wave of Year 11s and 12s who swarm the two men, tumbling into them and hurling king hits and fly kicks, knocking them over and stomping on their heads until they are unconscious—masks beneath masks until suddenly bare bloodless souls. I am horrified by the incident, having never seen an extreme act of religious violence before, but I am also proud of the Lebs because I hate that leaflet, which has desecrated the most sacred aspects of my life.



2000

Rumours are spreading down the south-western railway line like herpes: while the flags of five colourful interlaced rings shine from the rooftops of the buildings, thirteen young men who look exactly like me are wilding down below, hunting for the local gangas. I'm standing in the centre of the school common room, staring at a picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger doing a front double biceps pose in his purple undies, when Osama walks up to me and pulls out his phone. He gawks at me with a smirk; doesn't have his glasses on, so his eyes look small and beady. 'No bitch will ever be able to pin shit on me, bro,' he says with a fat tongue, like his mouth is full of Double Quarter Pounder. From his pocket he pulls out one of the new mobile phones that has an FM radio and

built-in recorder. He flicks through his applications and then presses a button. There is a muffle that breaks from the phone speaker followed by the voice of a girl who says, 'Is it recording? Okay. I agree to give Osama and Ali and Mohammed and Ziggy head jobs.' In the background of the recording is the sound of cars driving by and the buzz of a broken streetlight. The girl's voice is gentle and soft, like the way I imagine Lolita might have sounded. 'Lowie,' hisses Osama at the end of the message. That's what we call a woman who is so low she'll suck off one of us. And it reminds me: She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock.



2001

The western suburbs are on fire before the sun has risen. My father says, 'Congrats, you're worse than n-words now.' But he actually uses the n-word. The principal says, 'All this madness for your phony gods.' He's white, but he's no church. The scripture teacher says, 'Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.' Sweat seeps through the contours in her green hijab, dribbling down her forehead, cleansing her freckles. Osama says, 'So I guess I'm gonna have to change my name, right?' The back of his Year 12 jersey reads: *terrorist*. The copper-skinned woman out in front of Lakemba train station with a bindi between her eyebrows is pointing at her forehead and yelling, 'Does this look like a bullseye to you? I'm no Muzlem!' It's kind of confusing, because not one of the hundred Lebos, fifty Pakis, forty Viets, ten Somalis or two Aussies are even staring at her; none of them except *me*. My mother says, 'I froze some barramundi and express-posted it to my parents, you reckon I'll get caught?' Nah, Mum, you're not the one they're hunting. The blackfella says, 'America was asking for it.' He's got a fast jab and a big mouth, but he's no Louisville Lip. My brother

says, 'I feel like a bare arse!' It's the first time he's shaved his beard since he could grow it, back when he was twelve years old and all his nip friends called him 'hairy-mudda-fucka'. Uncle Ibrahim says, 'Lend me forty-five bucks, I'll pay it back tomorrow.' He's dancing on our porch an hour later, high as a kike, chanting 'fuck the Jews and fuck the Jews'. The sun begins to set, and the smoke begins to settle, and the youngest of my four sisters, a three-year-old with bright round cheeks, crawls under our parents' bed, finds me there, and whispers, 'Can I hide with you?' She's afraid of needles and blue genies and tomato sauce. I'm afraid that her childhood is over.



2002

The twenty-third annual sports carnival for schools in the Canterbury-Bankstown district is an excuse for the Punchbowl Boys to get handjobs in the public toilets from the Aussie chicks of East Hills Girls. During the bus ride, fifteen of the boys suddenly flop their dicks out the windows at a bus driving alongside us full of young women from a neighbouring Catholic school. Our driver, an old Irish-looking man with black glasses like a sheriff, abruptly halts the bus; wheels skidding and cars behind us honking instantaneously. He rises to his feet, so tall that his head hits the ceiling, and shouts, 'You're all a bunch of dune coons, no wonder they call you rapists.' Mohammed and Muhammad and Mohammad and Mahmoud and Mustafa and Ahmad all respond with a collective 'Braaaaaaaaaaaa'. The bus driver removes his glasses, revealing a pair of wide black eyes with wide black rings underneath, and says, 'That's it, get the fuck out, all of ya, even the teachers!' Standing on the curb along the Hume Highway, somewhere between Bankstown and Liverpool, the driver takes off without us. Our PE teacher, Mr Romero,

whom we call 'Nose Job' because he has a piece of flesh blocking his left nostril, is squawking about the bad name we're giving Muslims, but I'm not really listening—distracted by a question I've been asking myself ever since I saw that long row of circumcised knobs. I whisper to Hassan al-Husseini, 'Why are all your balls shaved, bro?' Hassan replies, 'The imams say you have to do it every forty days, cuz, it's halal.' As punishment for flopping out their dicks, Mr Romero makes us walk back to school, which takes over an hour. And that's the story of how Punchbowl Boys is banned from all sports carnivals until 2005 and why I start shaving my pubes.



2003

'Banika' sounds exactly like *bedi-neeka*, which means 'I wanna root her' and so whenever a Leb meets my girlfriend, Banika, the first thing he says to her is 'bedi-neeka'. She's fifteen and has dry brown hair, and dry skin, and ocean-blue eyes, and she walks with her legs spread open because her thighs are sunburnt. We meet in front of the ghost train at the Royal Easter Show, and greet one another with a clumsy kiss, teeth cracking against each other as our mouths collide. We hold hands and walk towards the farm animals and out of nowhere she says, 'I'm not saying those guys are innocent, but those girls were the biggest sluts, bro.' I take in a deep sigh—breathing in the stench of sheep shit and fairy floss—and reply, 'You spend too much time with Lebos.' I pull on the collar of her shirt to give her neck a kiss, and staring back at me is a bright pink hickey that looks like a cat's arsehole. Banika's eyes turn grey and vacant as she tries to explain, something about fooling around with the vacuum cleaner last night, but her voice is drowning out; the Lebs are in my head, and they're chanting *bedi-neeka, bedi-neeka, bedi-neeka*.



2004

Apparently, down by The Rocks, you're meant to give way at the give way sign for up to eight seconds, but Bilal only gives way for seven seconds. The two police officers who have pulled us over instruct him and me to get out of the vehicle—an '89 lemon with chrome rims that are more expensive than the car itself. 'Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim,' mutters Bilal, his swollen lower lip dangling from his jaw like it's caught on a fishing hook. The officers flash their black dildo-shaped torches in our faces, light ricocheting off the entrance to the Museum of Contemporary Art. There is a new exhibition being advertised in the front window—a painting of a naked Black man who's been hanged from a tree, his bloated head thrown sideways as the rope tugs at his long neck. Underneath the image it says: *Slavery Downunder*. 'Ya better have your papers!' one of the coppers spits straight at me; the scrawnier of the two, popped pimple on the tip of his thin nose. I begin digging through my jeans pockets to pull out the only forms of identification a boy my age might carry: library card, student card, Justice League of America membership card. Just before any of these come out, a woman who looks like she's in her twenties stops in front of the cops and throws her hands to her hips. She wears high heels and a fitted green dress, has a thin waist, large chest and a head full of long blonde hair. 'No way, you can't harass a boy just b'cause he's Middle Eastern!' she yelps at the officers, her voice tight and shrill. 'People have rights!' The heavier of the two coppers shoots her a scowl, his blunt eyebrows concaving, but he replies in a gentle tone, 'Ma'am, please mind your step.' Meanwhile, the scrawny copper takes Bilal's licence and returns to the police car. The woman locks

her gaze on Bilal, who's still mumbling prayers to himself like a pussy, and she says firmly, 'I'll stay till they leave you alone.' Bilal suddenly swipes his hand through his gelled head of spikey hair. 'Thanks, baby-cakes,' he replies, putting on his Vin Diesel voice. 'Give us ya numba.'



2005

It's been two weeks, two days and about two hours since five thousand crackers 'took back' their shire, chanting 'Fuck off Lebs' and 'No Allah at Cronulla' and physically assaulting anyone who looked like a falafel. Sahara—the Lebanese Christian I met online—has her hand clenched tightly in mine, and she's tugging us both across the beach. The seaweed is chafing between my toes and the waves are shattering upon the shore and the pink seashells are gleaming on the horizon when four topless waxheads, all twice my size, barge through Sahara and me, pulling our hands apart. 'Fucken sand cunts' one of them grunts, his drunken breath in my face. Then, as all four men shove past, the largest and fattest among them, who has an elephant's forehead, turns back and scoffs, 'No more cut cocks on our beach.' My heart drums so loud I can hear it inside my ears as I prepare to charge at them with all my strength, swing as fast and as wild as an ape until they smother and kick the shit out of me, but Sahara grabs me tightly by the hand once again and continues to pull us both forwards. 'Just keep walking, baby, I like your cut cock.' The moon rises high above us—leering into its third quarter, sharpening its edges against a clotted black sky, arching like an ancient dagger. Sahara breaks up with me the following night, but promises it has nothing to do with her views on circumcision.



2006

The Grand Mufti of Australia is standing on the stage inside Lakemba Mosque—hollow of a gargantuan dome looming above him like the breast of Um al-Dunya. He resembles the Ayatollah Khomeini; greenish dark skin, brown turban, long white beard, two deep brown eyes swirling into oblivion. The air in the masjid begins sucking the sweat from my brow as Grand Mufti thrusts his chest and screams: ‘If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden or in the park, or in the back yard without a cover, and the cats come and eat it, whose fault is it, the cats’ or the uncovered meat?’ The hundred boys sitting cross-legged in their socks all around me nod in his direction, hook noses protruding like swords. ‘The uncovered meat is the problem,’ Grand Mufti continues. ‘If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred!’ Then we all stand to pray, and bending over, I count my blessings that I’m wearing pants, otherwise it’d be my fault if the Pakistani behind me decides to fuck me up the arse ...



2007

Lakemba is the ancient souk of Australia—thousands of hijabs and beards moving in and out of the wide-open two-dollar shops and charcoal chicken shops and fruit shops, haggling for tonight’s ingredients to break our fast for Ramadan. Mum points at a box of mandarins, instructing me to pick it up. She pays for it and we begin our walk home, down Halden Street, and then along The Boulevard. My stomach is eating itself

alive and my mouth is naked, and the weight of the box of mandarins is dragging my arms to the ground like I’m in a Jerry Lewis skit. Mum is a meerkat, small and full of frenetic energy, briskly walking in front of me past the sixth manoush shop, where she suddenly finds herself side-stepping a very tall, very dark-skinned man. ‘Yul’amah, shu aswad,’ she gasps at me, which means ‘My god, look how black he is.’ The man quickly snaps his head down towards Mum, gives her a sarcastic grin on a set of ceramic white teeth, and says, ‘Shukraan!’ which means ‘Thank you!’ We land on our street fourteen minutes later, and my mum is still sulking about the incident, blaming me for not warning her that Africans speak Arabic.



2008

A dead potbelly is flumped over the thighs of my godfather, the man whose woman makes him sujuk and lahme bi ajeen and fried kebbe and fried potatoes with eggs every morning, alongside his cigarette and cup of Turkish coffee. Then his wife, who also happens to be his cousin, reads the black residue off his tiny cup, and tells him, ‘After Allah is Muhammad, and after Muhammad is Ali, and after Ali is Hafez Al-Assad, and after Hazef Al-Assad is you.’ Abu Hisham’s living room is freshly painted, a bright white gloss upon his walls with nothing but a photograph of the Syrian president mounted on the picture rail; its gold frame matching his large yellow tiles and wide yellow sofas. The godfather frowns at me, bulbous cheeks inflating, and says, ‘Fuck all the sluts you want, if you can get ‘em, but remember, it’s a sin to marry a white girl.’ The tiles beneath me begin to tremble. Atticus Finch is rolling in his grave.



2009

This Nokia 8850 has a titanium silver casing and a bright blue screen, and right now, it also has Jane's pixelated name flashing in my face. She's crying uncontrollably, forcing her words out between sobbing breaths: 'Hey ... can ... you ... come ... get ... me?' The tyres of my Celica, which Jane calls my 'Silly-car', crackle over a cluster of gumnuts as I pull up to her uncle's house: an old wooden terrace covered in cracked white paint—the site of her small family's annual Christmas party. On the verandah, an Australian flag hangs over the metal railing, only it has a red background instead of a blue one, immediately bringing to my mind the flags of the Confederate States of America. Jane is standing on the nature strip in front of her uncle's white picket fence—the heart of Granville. As soon as I'm standing before her, eyes locked on one another, the white girl digs her face into her hands. She grumbles something about how her dad's brother, an obese alcoholic who votes for Pauline Hanson, is deeply concerned that if she marries me, I'll force her to convert to Al-Qaeda. Jane lifts her head from her hands, flesh pooling around her eyes like ink. She tugs down tightly on the waist of her long floral dress as she recounts her feud with the bogan: 'My uncle said, "He's gonna put you in a hijab." I said, "He won't." He said, "He will." I said, "He won't." He said, "He will." I said, "He won't." He said, "He will." "He won't." "He will." "He won't." "He will." "He won't." "He will." Over and over, over and over.' I take Jane in my rusted arms and kiss her forehead, which feels like recycled paper against my lips. On our wedding day, she wears a white see-through bridal veil that she buys from a second-hand store in Cabramatta. Al-Qaeda is ululating: Leleleleleleleleleeeeeee!



2010

While completing my honours thesis—which argues that not all Lebanese men are sexual predators—I spot a hundred copies of a true crime novel called *Evil in the Suburbs* on a display rack at the entrance to the university co-op bookshop. The cover of the novel features mugshots of two boys who look stoned: sunken black eyes, drooping lips and cheeks, matted black eyebrows, harsh black hair and big crooked noses, just like me. The subtitle reads: 'The Brutal Gang Rapes that Shocked Australia'. Immediately I grab a copy and take it straight to the counter, overcome with the nervous need to piss. A middle-aged woman with dim blue eyes, dehydrated skin, thin brown eyebrows, soft silver hair and a blistered button nose takes the book from me. She scans the barcode as her gape zooms in on my face. 'I cried so much when I read this book,' she says. 'What youse did to those girls was abhorrent.' Next, I'm in the men's toilet, standing between a Fob to the left of me and a Nip to the right of me, urine burning like hellfire as it passes through my loins.



2011

Allahu Akbar weaves its way along the insides of Auburn Mosque. My bare feet float across the soft red carpet until I find myself standing in the centre of the large empty space. I take a quiet breath, inhaling the warm air that sails in from the open arch windows and rises like flour into the inner curve of the dome. I swing my hands to my ears, reciting the Call to Prayer, and then place them in the middle of my chest, right between by ribcage. Just as I'm about to kneel in submission, I am

struck by the bright light of a ghost—shape of a man, but faint enough for me to see straight through him. He is as he was before the throat cancer: bloated whisky gut, head full of dirty brown hair, smug frown as certain as a sunrise. Salaam alaikum to the messiah who declared himself an anti-theist; to the ‘Christopher’ and the ‘Hitchen’ who swore to God he wasn’t Christian. ‘Stop wasting your time,’ he says to me, deep pompous voice rumbling through the masjid, ‘I can assure you there’s no afterlife.’



2012

The prophet made us promise never to depict his image, but we could not stop the infidels from portraying him as a sword-wielding warlord drenched in blood and as a porn star eating out his wife. A thousand coons from the dunes march through George Street, backing up the cement mixers and racking up the cab fares, smashing the bus shelters that lionise starving women in red beach bikinis, kicking a green-eyed police officer in the testicles, sticking signs that say ‘behead those who insult god’s messenger’ in our children’s hands. The premier describes us as the unacceptable face of multiculturalism, and all the while, we’re throwing eggs at the Opera House and laughing back at him—we’re not asking for your acceptance, dumb cunt.



2013

For six months, the opposition leader, Tony Abbott, promises he’ll stop the boats. I am walking down Church Street a week before election day, on my way to buy a new pair of Air Maxes from the Westfield Foot Locker, two-hundred-and-forty bucks in my pocket.

Rexies and Skylines rumble down the road, blasting DMX through their bass speakers. In front of me walks a chink, at least he looks like a chink from behind—slim wiry frame and a head of dead straight dead black dead dangling hair. I trail him for at least another hundred metres, until we pass a bus stop where there sits a slender woman whose shoulder bones bulge like walnuts and whose dry black skin is shedding under the warm sun of spring’s first afternoon. She’s in a tight red singlet and a pair of torn canvas sneakers without any socks. As the chink turns to look at me—almond eyes sussing out the potential drug-dealing gang-raping terrorist—the woman begins to scream at him, ‘Fuck off back to Viet Cong, queue jumper!’ Stumbling in his tracks, the chink snaps back at her in a thick accent, ‘Fuck youse, petrol-sniffers!’ Then he turns to me one more time and says, ‘You wan trouble?’ The woman is on her feet, flat chest cocked and bony arms ready to swing, and I am frozen before the two of them, left hand digging into my pocket, clenching tightly on to my cash, and DMX is roaring from up the road, ‘That’s how ruff ryders roll.’ Seven days later, Tony Abbott becomes prime minister. Observe the porch monkeys caught in this tangle of thorns.



2014

Auzu-billahi mina shaitan nirajeem: Refuge. Allah. Banished. Satan. Morning after the schizophrenic asylum seeker takes hostages in the chocolate café, I am standing in front of the twelve-foot fence of my old high school, pegging rocks at the windows, watching them shatter like the instant death of an ancient sun, cursing my mother for birthing me: ‘kes emak, kes emak, kes emak’. Twenty-nine stones later, I am standing on the far end of the platform of Punchbowl train station

like a sad-case gronk, waiting for the red rattler to take me back to Lakemba. I point my jaw towards the ground, trying to conceal the blood rupturing my eyeballs, but all the same, this Aussie chick with orange braids and bright brown cheeks in tight white pants and a tight white V-neck smiles gently at me and says, 'I'll ride with you.' Before I can respond a fat Lebo in a black Nike cap and a puffy red-and-white Fila jacket scoops in from behind me and says to her, 'How about you ride me instead?'



2015

The midwives are relieved when they see that my son has a perfectly normal-sized head on his way out of the birth canal. He is born with a bright olive complexion and a big nose in the private birthing unit of Westmead Hospital. Jane, a convict who's been here for one-hundred-and-ninety-eight years, tells the nurse that our little white wog is to be named after the poet 'Kahlil'. The nurse, a rug-rider who's been here for the past sixteen years, smiles and replies, 'Let me teach you how to pronounce it in Arabic: Kha-leel.'



2016

November, we meet the immigration minister on the television, thin dirty lips squealing each word: 'Out of the last thirty-three people who have been charged with terrorist-related offences in this country, twenty-two of those people are from second- and third-generation Lebanese-Muslim background.' His nose juts from his face like the snout of a bush pig—typical for an ex-cop. 'The reality is Malcolm Fraser did make mistakes in bringing some people in.' The minister is talking about me,

and talking about my son, who in this very moment happens to be fast asleep in my arms. The living room is calm and vacant; minister's voice reverberating along the white walls and white tiles of our south-western duplex. I stare down at Kahlil's twitching eyelashes, inhale the air wheezing from his nose, place my finger on his whimpering lips, and attempt to sooth him: 'Shhh. Shhh. Shhh.' Kahlil, my half-caste, made from his father's curls and his mother's irises, already knows what no one-year-old should ever know—the universe did not big bang into existence just for him. A tear rolls from my eye, down my wrinkling cheek, off my chin and onto his forehead. 'Please don't take it personally,' I whisper to him. 'All Arabs are someone's mistake ...' December, we meet the immigration minister at the top of the stairs of Lakemba Mosque; green dome looming over his festering scalp, summer sun frying his forehead like a rotting potato skin, earlobes melting into his jaw. He stares down at a swarm of Saracens—fiddling with their beards and the pins on their hijabs, eagerly awaiting the midday prayers—and gives us all a conceited grin. Suddenly he belches, 'I look around me, and I see Australians.' My left rib bone is shanking my left lung, my left lung is smothering my left artery, my left artery is strangling my heart, my heart is drowning in its own blood. As the little scout sleeps soundly against my breastplate, I find my gaze clenching on to the molten face of the minister. There's just one kind of devil. Devil. •

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