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**OF FEAR  
AND  
STRANGERS**

**A HISTORY OF XENOPHOBIA**

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**IT MAY SEEM LAUGHABLE**, but for the longest time I didn't realize how much this story entwined with my own. I don't think of myself as assimilated, because I suppose I am. I have never uttered, "I am the child of immigrants." Even writing those words is jarring. It reeks of need and feels false, for I rarely see myself that way anymore. Foreigners' kid? After such an admission, well-oiled reflexes urge me to rattle off a list of my hometown allegiances and virtues. My parents, like many immigrants, became experts at such, often mortifying, flag-waving. And yet long after becoming American citizens, they persisted in the unspoken knowledge that all those fancy degrees and citations could, poof, like a broken spell, turn into swirling taunts and mockery, Harvard undone by a funny accent.

All that was far from my mind when I traveled to London in late May of 2016. I had come to promote my new book. Unbeknownst to me, the country was about to vote on leaving the European Union. I was clueless. Nigel Farage? Never heard of him. In a sweater shop near the British Museum, the clerk talked excitedly about protecting Britain from an impending invasion of Turks. Weird, I thought. Something else, however, was much on my mind; I was scheduled to meet with my literary agent who surely would ask about my next project. Fully spent from the last marathon, I had no plan, no ideas, nothing. Sarah asked. A cheerful assistant eagerly readied to take notes. I babbled, mumbling something about the "other mind" problem, how we mistakenly imagine each other. I might have mentioned cyborgs. It was embarrassing. I returned to New York, and soon thereafter the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. A few months later, the United States elected a new presi-

dent, Donald Trump. All at once, a word came to many minds. It was a terrible, somewhat bewildering word, and so many sought to understand it at that same moment that an online dictionary dubbed it the “word of the year.” *Xenophobia*. It sounded vaguely “other mind-y” and psychiatric. A psychiatrist myself, I decided to look into it.

The beginning of the story, I assumed, would be as old as humankind. Ever since our first ancestors emerged on the eastern plains of Africa, humans have been on the move. A migratory species, *Homo sapiens* would settle in one place, then, due to fear, enemies, drought, famine, pestilence, or some wild hope over the horizon, move on. While craving home, a stable and predictable resting place swaddled in memory and meaning, we have always been compelled to go. From Adam and Eve’s expulsion to the defeated warriors of Troy or the lost Hopi tribes far from their mesas, our myths speak of those who voyage forth from a blessed place, unsure of their next resting place. Once dusty layers of forgetting are swept away, who does not descend from such a journey? Whether it was last week in a dinghy or centuries ago alongside a regal army, whether bound in chains or draped in silk, haven’t we all at some point settled as wide-eyed aliens in a swarming, foreign place?

Once these wanderers docked or crossed over those hills, they eventually stumbled upon others who had preceded them. Stranger and stranger came face-to-face. Those who were already established usually had the upper hand. Still, they wondered if these foreigners had come in malice. Will they wrest from us what is ours? Will we become strangers in our own land? Walls were constructed for such fears; barriers of less visible sorts, too.

Such uneasy encounters must be as ancient as our species. And so, when colleagues discovered I was working on a history of xenophobia, they were befuddled. How could I write a history of fears that seemed intrinsic to all time? It seemed Quixotic, Borgesian, like writing a universal chronicle of laughter. Our earliest written records indicate that in many civilizations, strangers were broadly conceived of as objects of fear and mistrust. Some have gone so far as to speculate that, for primal man, all strangers were *de facto* enemies. In a number of languages, the words for stranger and enemy are the same. *Xenophobia*, then, one might conclude, is an everlasting trouble, bred deep in the human heart. As such, any history

of this behavior would need to gather up all the spilled blood and cracked skulls that lay in the earth, an infinite task without beginning or end.

*Of Fear and Strangers* is not that. It does not seek to record all those mistreated, enslaved, or slaughtered in ways we might today call xenophobic. Rather, it is an account of another history that lay hidden in this word. Who, I began to wonder, first deemed such reactions “phobic”—that is, irrational and mistaken? How and where was there an awakening of conscience by which some proclaimed it unreasonable to mistreat strangers? How did those voices create an ethic by which such behavior was gradually deemed worthy of censure? And how did varied concepts emerge to account for such dangerous attitudes?

In 2016 when I typed “x-e-n . . .” into my search engine, nothing popped up that might help with those questions. There was a definition—the fear and hatred of strangers—but, unlike anti-Semitism or racism or homophobia, xenophobia seemed to have no history. Take a look. All you will find are passing, vague references to Greek antiquity, not much else. This erasure led some to conclude that the notion itself was empty, little more than an accusation wrapped around thin air. For policy makers, the word seemed to be an abstract synonym for specific forms of discrimination, each better defined by the target of their hatred, be it based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or class. Since each of these scourges possessed profound histories, there would be no benefit in adding an abstraction like xenophobia to the sorry list.

This dismissal, I have come to believe, is mistaken. Firstly, xenophobia is categorically different. In speaking of anti-Semitism or Islamophobia or homophobia, we name the maligned group, while those who do the discriminating remain otherwise undefined, unknown in and of themselves. “Xenophobia” corrects that imbalance and directs our attention to the source of the trouble, thereby opening up a critical line of inquiry. For, as a century of thinkers from Josiah Royce to James Baldwin have noted, our language has too often unwittingly implied that the nature of the trouble lay within the defining qualities of the “problem group.” What if America’s social strife, Royce asked in 1908, was better defined not by reference to a “black peril” or a “yellow peril” but rather by the presence of a “white peril”? What was it with *them*?

*Of Fear and Strangers* tells of a series of attempts to isolate, define,

investigate, and answer that question. Our story commences with a burst of invention and the term's shocking rise, followed by a radical reorientation, and an expansion that gave the word its post-1945 ethical and political connotations. As we shall see, xenophobia emerged in French and English, tied to formative Western debates over nationalism, globalization, race, and immigration. As such, *Of Fear and Strangers* is rooted in those locales and does not propose to be a global history. It is not my intention to suggest that such forms of discrimination, much less the ethical and political responses to them, took place only in Europe and America. However, I must leave it to others to examine those histories.

In the next section, I turn to the increasingly frantic efforts to find and defuse the causes of this menace. Responding to a series of defining calamities—in particular, the nationalistic slaughters of World War I, the Belgian genocide in the Congo, then especially the Nazi Holocaust—concerted efforts emerged to find the specific source of what was now broadly considered an irrational fear and hatred. Thinkers developed new terms and concepts to comprehend these phobias of minorities, foreigners, and newcomers, tools like the “stereotype,” “projection,” the “Other,” and more. I then propose a tentative, overarching model of xenophobia assembled from these works.

*Of Fear and Strangers* concludes with a consideration of the “new xenophobia” that suddenly seemed to confront us. Global technological and economic integration, the 2008 economic crash, the European migrant crisis from the Middle East and North Africa, and immigration from Central America to the United States: all these have placed Western advocates of globalization on the defensive. Blood-stained rhetoric has targeted Turks, Arabs, Jews, Africans, Blacks, Mexicans, and Muslims, to name a few. With Trump and his white nationalist allies, Brexit, and the rise of an emboldened far right in places like Hungary, Poland, Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, and Sweden, we can no longer ignore the fact that xenophobia, that tribal curse, has returned.

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AS A PSYCHIATRIST and a historian, I usually work behind a screen. However, in this case, that seemed impossible, even deceitful. How could

I write a history of immigrants, sectarian conflicts, borders, and failing empires without openly considering how these matters have shaped me? Consider, for example, my namesake.

Born in a Lebanese fishing village in 1877, my grandfather, George Jacob Makari, was placed on an ocean liner with an uncle, aunt, and cousin. He had no say in the matter, for he was only eight. His parents had given him up in despair over his prospects as a Greek Orthodox Christian living under the increasingly intolerant, flailing Ottomans. After mind-boggling days on an infinite sea, he arrived at Ellis Island and was asked questions in a language he did not comprehend. Officials renamed him George Jacob, a new identity for the New World. His little troupe then made their way to relatives in Austin, Texas. For a while, the boy was a street peddler; toughs chased and tried to torment him. Much later, he told his son heroic tales of cleverly outwitting these brutes. A few years later, his younger brother, Mike Jacob “McCarie”—Ellis Island phonetics at work here—arrived. By 1909, the two founded Jacob Brothers, a store that sold Turkish and Persian rugs. They hung a huge sign and lived upstairs. Five years later, in search of more inventory, George booked his first passage back to his birthplace.

My grandfather’s timing was awful. Just as this thirty-seven-year-old with a penchant for Wild West tales landed in a homeland he could barely remember, a world war commenced. Turkish killing sprees against Christian minorities kicked off, ocean travel became unsafe, and in a twist befitting this biblical setting, locusts descended. Allied blockades ensued, Christians were considered internal enemies, and whatever little food existed was confiscated for Ottoman soldiers. Mass starvation followed. Moaning, skeletal figures around Mount Lebanon picked through garbage for orange peels and old bones. Children gobbled up weeds. Some 200,000, a third of the population, died under their barbaric masters, victims of a crime that at that time had no name. Stranded in this whirlwind, my grandfather stepped in to help his family: he took back his last name, married, and never left again.

Born in the same seaside village, my parents came to consciousness after the Ottoman Empire lingered only as a foul memory. As part of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement that split the region between France, Britain, Italy, and prerevolutionary Russia, their home was now a French



*M. Jacob Turkish & Persian Rugs, circa 1920, Austin, Texas*

protectorate. Lebanon was a multireligious confederation composed of Sunnis, Druze and Shia Muslims, Sephardic Jews, Armenian refugees, and a mix of old Eastern Christians including Syrian and Greek Catholics, Chaldeans, Eastern and Syrian Orthodox, Melkites, and Maronites. By the time this colony wriggled free of France and declared itself independent on November 22, 1943, it was a nation teeming with heretics.

Though the Western imperial powers had let go, they had not gone. Their competition for hearts and minds drew a line right down the center of my family. My mother, Wadad Tamer, attended Les Soeurs de Naz-

areth, where the French nuns rechristened her Odette. She began her school day with a hearty rendition of “La Marseillaise.” Her private diary, her prayers, eventually her dreams came forth in a language her parents did not comprehend. A hundred yards down the road, my father was ushered into another universe. Enrolled in British and American schools, his name morphed from Jacob to Jack. By the time he stepped onto the campus of the American University of Beirut, he was possessed by his father’s yarns about Texan outlaws and was known to recite poems about the Brooklyn Bridge, a marvel he had never seen. His father’s death in a car accident in 1938 made the youth dream of that other home he had heard so much about. In 1945, as a young physician, he was awarded a scholarship to study tropical disease in London, then another to Harvard, which commenced his career in American medicine. In 1955, my parents married and formally moved to the United States. They said goodbye to their homeland made up of minorities so as to settle in another, supposedly tolerant and pluralistic place whose ideology was—users be warned—a dream.

Primed to be pawns in a game played out by old Europe, my forebearers discovered that fate had other plans for them. A great tide had swept them up, spun them about in a swarm of shifting identities and disappearing empires, then tossed them onto this shore. Dazed, they landed with a thud on a half-acre lot in New Jersey. Cross-eyed and confused, my sisters and I were raised as unwitting carriers of British, French, Byzantine, and Lebanese quirks, sayings, slang, habits, and customs. We were Greek Orthodox—that is, Christian Arabs—which made us to many a self-nullifying paradox. At home, we spoke a *mélange* of English, French, and Levantine Arabic. However, outside the doors of our split-level home, Grace, Doris, and I seized our advantage. We had no accents, American first names, and we existed in the then vast middle class. We could make our pasts vanish.

It seemed like the perfect place to blend in. Everyone, save for the decimated indigenous peoples, had come off some boat. Still, my parents remained out of place. Kibbe and za’atar only served to remind them of how far they were from the sensual whorl of that place where they opened their eyes, the one that became their first world, perhaps the only one to be so taken into the body that it could evoke all the safety and ease of

that word “home.” Every new day pushed them further from the sounds, smells, and sights that in the beginning ordered their days. I came to realize that they had never truly left those environs where they first blinked reality into being. Do any of us? Instead, the days came with a low grinding loss of who they once were. They talked incessantly of their imminent return. At parties filled with baseball and business chitchat, my father would whisper, “*una ghareeb ma hal’alum*”: “I am a stranger among these people.” I thought I would become one, too.

It didn’t work out that way. Early on, I was forced to choose. As a young boy, my mother advised me to turn the other cheek if bothered on the playground, but after a few experiments, I determined this was awful advice. I learned to fight back when bullies mocked my mother’s accent. Meanwhile, into my flickering brain came *The Dating Game*, *The Rifleman*, Newark riots, Mrs. Walsh reading *Charlotte’s Web*, Mark Twain, Thomas Alva Edison, Sly and the Family Stone, CBS News body counts, Nixon, the classical heroism of Muhammad Ali, Apollo 11, miniskirts, Farrah Fawcett, barefoot hippies by the duck pond, the Camaro, and Clyde and the Knicks. Most of all, I fell in love with that magical, universal solvent called rock and roll. I affected all kinds of swagger, let my hair grow, wore my Landlubbers low, refused to go to church, and read as if my life depended on it. My parents watched, bemused, at times bewildered. I was deciding whose side I was on. Painfully for all of us, it was not theirs.

I devoted myself to *E pluribus unum* and harbored a guilt charged by more intimate uncertainties. Of course, I noted the disdain: the Harvard professor who dismissed my father, saying a “little Arab” could never do such big things, or the all-Arabs-are-terrorists logic so rife during A. M. Rosenthal’s stewardship of the *New York Times*. It wasn’t racism; that term was reserved for the brutal struggle that African Americans fought. And while I was technically Semitic, my trouble was not what anyone meant by anti-Semitism. Whatever. I wanted to get away from my family’s strangeness. If that might be called assimilation, it could also be called a small act of self-annihilation.

When confronted with an application or official document, I would hesitate. I would have gladly checked “late-twentieth-century American,” but no such luck. When “Other” was an option, I happily dove into it.

Often, it was not available. Since I was not Black, Hispanic, or Jewish, a confusing array of skin color, language group, and religion, I must be . . . that odd American category, white?

When I left for college, I eagerly shed these tensions. Frozen in time, I can still see my parents on that cobblestone street on College Hill in Providence, waving goodbye as if from across an ocean. In a burst, I began to write, formed deep friendships, played in a rock band, and fell in love. Then, during senior year, my bigger-than-life mentor, the African American poet Michael S. Harper, in one of his terrifying office hours, stared at me with his wide dead-eye and, clutching a swath of my empty, late-twentieth-century American poems, declared like some sphinx, “Makari, where is your history?” I whispered that I really didn’t know what he meant, but of course I did.

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**WE LANDED IN** Beirut in 1974, a year before the shooting started. I was thirteen. Staggering from the Pan Am flight onto the tarmac, we were greeted by waves of heat. We waited in line, presented our passports, gathered our bags, then piled into an old burgundy Mercedes. Night had fallen, so it was easier to breathe. Our taxi rattled up a pitch-black road lit by a string of feeble orange lights. Under them, my parents’ faces shone with anticipation; they loved these long summers, their return to their other home. I began to doze when suddenly, as we rounded a turn, our driver stopped. In the distance, balls of fire leapt up toward the heavens. Far ahead, I could make out a row of burning tires and the reddened faces of long-haired *shebab* with keffiyehs. I didn’t know who they were, but I was sure we were okay. After all, I thought with all the experience of a child, we didn’t *do* anything.

Our driver thought otherwise. He doubled back, turned off his headlights, and snuck down an unlit dirt road. It must have taken us through an olive grove or a farm. I can’t be sure. In the eerie silence, no one spoke. Tree branches whipped the sides of the car. Eventually, we emerged behind the checkpoint. The taxi driver flipped his headlights back on, and we zoomed up the *autostrade*. Nothing more was said. That summer, our relatives warned us not to travel to Sidon or Tyre. I vaguely under-

stood that there we might again encounter roadblocks and armed men. We hadn't done anything, but it was becoming clear to me that innocence alone was not enough.

For two months, I played cards with my sisters, listened to one of our three cassettes of seventies pop, and floated about in the still water of our local cove. At night on the veranda, the adults gathered for arak, gossip, politics, and laughter. Some carried holstered pistols. When August came to an end, we stuffed our bags with souvenirs and, without incident, returned to the airport. I kissed my adoring grandmother goodbye, a bit sickened by the premonition that I would never see her again.

I remember how, eight months later, as my father drove me to school, suddenly Lebanon was on WINS 1010 radio—"you give us twenty-two minutes, we give you the world." For the briefest moment, I felt proud; our little country was on the map! That enthusiasm rapidly dissolved. Over the next weeks at seven o'clock, we gathered around the television and took in shaky clips of streets sprayed with gunfire and concrete buildings that collapsed with thunderous groans. Just as I was seeking to disappear into America, my parents watched in stunned horror as their homeland burst into flames. They were like sailors docked on a teeming, dark shore who awoke to discover that the captain had torched their ships. After years of fantasizing a return, there was no going back.

Months passed. One atrocity led to another. Massacres mounted. The combatants divided and multiplied, until a melee erupted. Referees never stepped in; even more shocking to my childhood imagination, it seemed like there *were* no referees. Over the next years, a drumbeat of terrifying dispatches disrupted our days. At night lying in bed, contemplating the latest outrage, I entertained the thought we all had but never shared. What would have happened, I wondered, if my parents hadn't left? What would have happened to a teenage hothead like me?

Lebanon was once seemingly a tolerant, pluralistic confederation that sheltered many outsiders. War commenced between two parties—Lebanon's Maronites and the exiled Palestine Liberation Organization. It transformed into a battle between Christians and Muslims, then divided into a confusing Rubik's cube of combatants. Religious sects formed militias. Nationalists took up arms for a pan-Arabic state and were rivaled by Socialists and Communists. Syria invaded to save one side, then, when

it was convenient, switched sides. Israel invaded to dismantle the PLO, and in the process radicalized the Shia, who with Iranian aid formed Hezbollah. America sent troops, then left after a terrorist attack on their barracks killed 241 Marines. Along the way, journalists, peacemakers, and prime ministers were assassinated, villages were torched, and the survivors huddled in bomb shelters. From one nation, an endless number of tribes had taken to killing and kidnapping each other in a manner so incessant, it became a metaphor. “Beirut” was now a warning: this is what happens when neighbors transform into strangers, strangers turn into enemies, and a society dissolves in a bath of fear and hatred.

To me, it was bizarre. All these bewildering sects were far more alike than different. All were Levantines who spoke the same dialect; all loved the same punning humor, devoured the same cuisine, abided by strict rules of hospitality, and approached any purchase as a three-act play: bargain, stage a walk-out, then settle. They were quick with proverbs and went agog when Fairuz sang. And yet, subtle distinctions in their identities now meant life or death.

I remember the metallic ringing that woke us in the middle of the night, and how we gathered to pray as all the televised cruelty became real. Tante Evelyn lived on the wrong side of the Green Line, that pop-up border that suddenly cut through Beirut. Since this aged widow was Greek Orthodox, since her apartment was here not there, by that sick logic my aunt was pinned down by militiamen and smothered to death. My parents began to receive letters that described streaks across the sky, the *pop-pop-pop* of nightly artillery, and bombs dropping in a whistling arc of destruction. Two of my favorite cousins slipped away during a nighttime mortar attack; they boarded a boat to Cyprus with dollars sewed into their jeans and made their way across the oceans to our house in New Jersey. A phosphorescent missile incinerated another aunt’s home as she dashed into the street. In the letters we received, there was a refrain, a recurrent dismay. Increasingly, these notes from our family spoke of the pained recognition that their beloved land had transformed into a biblical place, one it was thought impossible for the living to know. Again and again, they spoke of their home as Hell.

After 100,000 were dead and nearly a third of the country displaced, suddenly it was over, though after fifteen years of carnage, who dared trust that? A general amnesty was proclaimed. Enemies, as if waking from a