

AMERICAN STANDARD

a short story by ALICIA ERIAN



“WHEN I was born, your grandmother unraveled all her sweaters and reknit them into rompers using chopsticks from the neighborhood takeout. Imagine the sacrifice she made for me. And now, in her honor, we, too, must sacrifice. Alastair, pay attention!”

Alastair, who continued to wear headphones despite the fact that his Walkman’s batteries had died just past Trenton, pretended not to hear. From the corner of his eye, he saw his father’s gaze lingering on him until Cedric could no longer drive without looking and turned back to the highway. They bounced in their gray vinyl seats as the Ryder truck hit a patch of asphalt that had erupted like a tiny volcano. Alastair’s grandmother was a Frenchwoman who had come to America poor and pregnant and eventually found lucrative work in translation. Though her early struggles remained compelling to Alastair, he didn’t see what this trip had to do with her.

Cedric, who’d become involved with a lot of social activists through his Unitarian church, had recently been tapped to deliver a truckload of yarn to Fort Bragg; from there it would be shipped to the Kosovar refugees at the Macedonian border. Cedric, as usual, had tapped Alastair to help him. Six months earlier, a family-court judge had ordered Alastair to spend every weekend with his father until he turned eighteen. He’d never been one of those kids who blamed himself for his parents’ breakup, though occasionally he wondered if his father blamed him; weekends with Cedric often felt like being sentenced to community service. High school, where Alastair was a freshman, now served as his down time.

It was a terrible thing to admit, but Alastair was dead sick of charity. In the last month alone, despite all his protests, he and Cedric had marched against police brutality (“But I rarely break the law”), picketed a new garbage dump (“But I recycle”), and attended a fundraiser for a battered-women’s shelter (“But most girls are stronger than me”). “Alastair,” Cedric had finally said one weekend, “does the following quote mean anything to you: ‘They came for the communists, and I was not a communist, so I did nothing?’”

“Yes,” Alastair said.

“Well? What does it mean?”

Alastair was sitting on a beige IKEA couch in Cedric’s bachelor apartment, arms out in front of him and crooked like a robot’s while his father strung a skein of yarn from his right hand to his left. The apartment seemed dingier to Alastair each time he visited, though he couldn’t lay his finger on what, exactly, needed cleaning. He feared his father planned to get away with never washing anything again. Even his jeans were developing a light brown sheen.

“I’m waiting,” Cedric said.

“It means something bad will eventually happen to me, and I’d better be nice if I expect to get help.”

“No,” Cedric said. “It means *nothing* bad will happen to you, so the least you can do is show the world that you know how lucky you are by lending your voice to a few causes.”

“But the world isn’t looking at me,” Alastair murmured, mesmerized by the winding of the soft ocher yarn.

“You’re a white male in a society that prizes that particular gender and color above any other. Not only is the world looking at you, it’s looking *to* you. Set a good example.”

“But then I’m just perpetuating the idea that I’m important. I think I should set a bad example so people will look to someone else.”

Cedric shook his head vehemently. “No matter what you do, they’re always looking.”

SO here they were, carting a truckload of yarn to North Carolina so the Kosovar refugees could knit themselves a bunch of clothes. Having given it a lot of careful thought, Alastair decided the whole idea was pretty rude. If he were a refugee, the last thing he’d want to do is knit himself a sweater. He’d be too depressed. He’d think, *Those mother-fucking Americans couldn’t even bother to send me a sweater already made. Here I am, crapping in the woods, and they want me to do arts and crafts.*

He could have said no to his father, he supposed. And maybe he would someday soon. But for now, as much as he bucked against it, he pitied the man. And he thought of this pity as a stand-in for love; it had taken love’s place, the way professional seat-fillers took the places of movie stars who went to the restroom during award shows. Alastair’s love for his father was in the restroom. Pity had stepped in around the time of the divorce, when Cedric had suddenly developed a mania for charity. In the end, Alastair understood it was his father who was performing community service, to make up for what he had done.

Cedric, a tailor, had carried on a three-year affair with his seamstress, Boots Newkirk. For Alastair, the story of his father and Boots was now inescapable, a terse narrative entered in his mother’s diary on 11-8-98. The day they were discovered, Boots sat at the edge of a rectangular sewing table — pants off, legs up and apart, blouse open — while Cedric stood and pushed himself into her through his unzipped fly. They looked at each other with something like hate as their bodies deflected violently at the groin. “I’m here,” Alastair’s mother, Renee, had said when it was over. And indeed she was, standing stock-still among a crowd of scantily clad mannequins, which Cedric had apparently configured to resemble an audience.

At the sound of his wife’s voice, Cedric withdrew from Boots, a sight Renee would never forget. “His penis!” she wrote. “His frothy penis!”

Renee edited dictionaries and thesauri. She knew many words, could describe things too aptly. Reading her description of his father’s infidelity inevitably drove Alastair to masturbate. He imagined his father as a porn star, a man who made love to women the same way he went to the bathroom. It was his father’s style that offended Alastair more than his infidelity. Only rapists made love through their clothes, Alastair was certain, though Boots herself had not behaved as if she were being raped. Whatever it was that Cedric had done to her, she had liked it. It was this — her impossible pleasure — that led Alastair to touch himself, despite his

indignation. What could it mean, that there was joy in such things?

Neither of his parents knew that he knew. He had contemplated telling Boots's sulky daughter Gemma, a sophomore at his school, but he changed his mind when she started calling him names after Cedric fired her mother. "Firer!" she yelled, which made Alastair think of arson, until he remembered the context. It was this that most horrified him about the whole business — his guilt by association — so he held his tongue. At night he dreamt of Gemma nude, legs spread, perched on the end of a long cafeteria table. He dreamt of standing before her and unzipping himself, as if she were a urinal, and he cried into his pillow when he awoke to the sticky proof of his depravity.

THEY pulled the Ryder truck off the highway just past Wilmington, Delaware, having agreed to eat dinner at Taco Bell. The restaurant was located along a strip of fast-food franchises, gas stations, and inexpensive chain hotels. Alastair found it challenging, the way the close proximity of the businesses caused their tall signs to obliterate one another at the boulevard's edge. To find where you were going, you had to keep an eye out for your destination's colors, which often seeped past whatever sign came before: the red and yellow of McDonald's giving way to the red and white of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and so forth.

"Revolting," Cedric said, looking from left to right. The interstate wind had left his coarse blond hair sticking straight up from his head.

"Don't you like the colors?" Alastair asked.

"The colors?" Cedric said. "You look at a place like this and see color?"

"Yes," Alastair said firmly.

Cedric laughed. "Well, that's not what I see."

Alastair knew his father was waiting for him to ask what he did see, so he said nothing.

"I see corporate hegemony," Cedric said anyway.

"There," Alastair said, pointing up ahead, "purple."

The Ryder was too big for the drive-through, so they parked and went inside to eat. "You do realize they've got you exactly where they want you," Cedric said, after they'd seated themselves by a small window looking out on the yellow truck.

"What?" Alastair said. He was watching the chubby teenagers behind the counter in their matching teal visors, dreaming of the day he could get a job himself. He wondered which position was most coveted: standing at the drive-through window wearing the authoritative headset, preparing the food in the back, or dealing with the customers at the front counter.

"'Purple is for Taco Bell.' See? You've been successfully brainwashed."

Alastair took a bite of his Taco Supreme, causing a dollop of ground meat and sour cream to squeeze out the back end and drip onto the waxy wrapping paper.

"I tell you you've been brainwashed, and you have no



response?"

"I like Taco Bell," Alastair said, taking a sip of his Pepsi. "If I like Taco Bell, and I'm glad to be sitting here having dinner, why would I say something bad about it?"

"We're here for convenience's sake only," Cedric said. "As travelers, we have no choice. Of course we can be critical."

"I appreciate convenience," Alastair said.

"Well," Cedric said, "I guess you have a right to your opinion."

"Thank you."

"However ill informed."

Back on the road again, Alastair replaced his nonworking headphones and bobbed his head occasionally to make it seem as if he were actually listening to music. Once, he even belted out a lyric from a song by a teenage boy group who sang about their deep need for women. He tried to sing it with the same passion and squinty eyes as the boys in the video, and he sensed his father looking at him, then quickly turning away. Cedric was chagrined, Alastair could tell: at his son's nerve, his gusto, his appreciation of mediocre art. In fact, Alastair despised this music, too, but the idea that his father might think otherwise put him briefly over the moon.

Then his pity returned, along with a modicum of guilt. He just wished his father would stop hinting at how disgusted he would be if Alastair turned out to be common, as opposed to the hardy descendent of a French self-starter. Was it so terrible not to live in dire straits? Alastair stopped bobbing his head for a moment and gazed out the window at a sign for a Days Inn hotel. It must have risen three hundred feet in the air. Someone had managed to erect this, he thought. How was that not incredible?

(end of excerpt)