

COMING CLEAN

Melody Moezzi

I WAS EATING AN EMPANADA AND WAITING FOR MY CLOTHES TO DRY

at a local laundromat not far from my apartment shortly after the owners of the nearby convenience store had chosen to temporarily shut it down when María, who had worked at the laundromat since I'd been there and with whom I'd developed a camaraderie, started talking about how happy she was that the two brothers who owned that convenience store had been forced to shut down. She told me that she should have known better than to have ever bought even a stick of gum from those disgusting Arabs. Then she told me that we were lucky that we had a glorious, civilized, Catholic culture that helped us stick together and succeed. I told her that I liked the brothers and that I used to watch soccer games in the back of the store with them because they had satellite. Then she asked me why the hell I did that given all they ever watched were all the Middle Eastern countries' matches. I had told her twice before that I was Iranian, and it now became clear to me that she either had no idea where Iran was or that she wasn't listening to me. "María," I told her, with tears running down my face by that point, "Soy iraní. Soy casi árabe, y soy musulmana." I threw the remainder of my empanada at her and I ran home, leaving my laundry to fend for itself.

After talking to Michael about it and crying some more, I went back that night when I knew María would no longer be working. But she was still there, sitting in a lawn chair on the sidewalk in front of the store watching traffic. I walked straight passed her without saying a word, and she followed me in. When I asked her why she was still there, she told me that her shift ended over an hour ago, but that she had stayed to wait for me. At this point I noticed that someone else's clothes were in my dryer and mine were nowhere in sight. "Damn it! Where the hell are my clothes?" That was the first time I had ever spoken to her in English.

She took my hand and led me to the back of the store, where she had neatly folded and wrapped all of my clothes in tissue paper. She apologized and told me that she was embarrassed and ashamed. She then thanked me for being honest and debunking her prejudice and stereotypes through my example. I have no idea where María is today or what she is doing or even her last name. Still, I am grateful for her example as well, for she gave me hope in the persistent power of friendship and human interaction, no matter how brief or minimal, to impact our lives and attitudes. Without this hope, I could have never even begun to write this book. I am a product of my experiences memories, and relations, and so is each one of the individuals around



CHELSEA LAUNDROMAT
NEW YORK CITY
2005

whom the following chapters revolve. These individuals are not case studies, not literary devices. They are all real, and they are all awake and dynamic. As such, each of them has given me an education for which there is no worthy or appropriate degree, and I thank them. ||

From **WAR ON ERROR**
by Melody Moezzi