

Hegira

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My father and my stepmother moved to St. Clair Shores after we were grown, leaving behind our old cinderblock house, for this slightly more upscale place near the lake. The blinds are drawn and the house is dusty and full of knickknacks, clocks, photographs, magazines and the accumulation of a life of saving everything. Marie walks through the house, holding on to tables and walls. Her knees are shot and she is overweight, making it even worse.

How do you get down these stairs to the basement?

I take my time, she says.

Do you want me to vacuum?

No, I'm fine. I can take care of it. Don't worry.

She sits back in her recliner watching a station where a woman is selling jewelry, a closeup on a jade stone dangling from a gold chain. Marie has always loved shopping. When I lived in Detroit, I used to take her to Kmart and follow her around for hours. Often she wouldn't buy anything. Now she can't get around the store without a wheelchair. She is cutting a paragraph out of a flier, the clippings falling to the top of a little pile on the floor.

Sometimes Marie looks at me, narrowing her eyes and I can feel the slit of anger that ignited my teenage rebellion—like the time when she wouldn't let me shave my legs and I shaved all the way up to my crotch and bleached my hair blonde. I'm not sure what the exact problem is today, but she definitely doesn't like me to volunteer to clean anything, and it might have something to do with my vacuuming while she was at a meeting. I couldn't help it. The floor was filthy and she has so much trouble moving around. I wanted to help. When I go out to a cafe to pick up the internet, though, and come back later in the evening, she is cheerful again. Even though she's always in pain, she's usually cheerful.

It's midnight, and again we are watching a shopping station.

Did you get that postcard from your friend? It's on the mantle.

All is well, Nawal and Latifah together again. Love, Tamar. There's a picture of Niagara Falls on the Canadian side of the falls.

Who's Tamar? Marie asks.

Don't you remember her? She was at Emily's wedding. You know the tall woman who was very elegantly dressed in a black suit, short grey hair. She was sitting right next to you at the reception. I remember you talked together for quite some time.

Maybe I remember her. I'm not sure.

The last few years, Tamar's been working in Afghanistan as a photographer. Back and forth from New York to there. She's had photos published in *The Times* and *National Geographic*, lots of places. The woman she mentions in the postcard, well, Tamar saved her life, and I'm not exaggerating. Latifah's husband was going to take her daughter away from her. He'd already snatched her son when he was seven years old. She was walking down the street with both children on their way to school when he pulled over to the side of the road and jumped out of his car and grabbed the little boy. Latifah was screaming and crying and she has never seen him since.

She should call the police.

That won't do any good in Afghanistan. A divorced mother can only have her children until they reach the age of seven for a boy and nine for a girl. Then the father has permanent custody. She has no more rights to them. Latifah would have killed herself if she lost her daughter, too, and her husband would have killed her if she resisted.

Do you remember Peggy from the DAV? Her granddaughter had to get an order of protection against her husband. He's terrible. They don't know where he is now... Later I'll show you a photograph and you'll remember her. I'll show you tomorrow. Are your friends in New York now? Marie tears a page out of the middle of a magazine and starts clipping out something.

No, this was in Kabul, a big city in Afghanistan.

I mean, is she in New York *now*? The card says everything is ok. Marie holds up a narrow clipping with a daisy on top and some text underneath. A perfect book mark. She leans over, picks up a romance novel from the stack next to the chair and inserts the clipping. This is the one I'm reading next.

Now I'm not sure if I really want to tell Marie the story. She doesn't seem that interested.

So what happened? Marie sets the novel down in her lap, crosses her arms and leans back in her recliner. You and your father are both such storytellers. I used to sit here all night and listen to him telling jokes and stories. Now I'm alone, so go on, Barbara. What happened?

Well, if you're sure you don't want to read now. I hesitate and then begin. It's a long story. Tamar has a lot of energy for a woman her age.

You have a lot of energy, too, Barbara, driving all over like you do. All that unloading and loading. I can't imagine.

Tamar's a little older than me and way more energetic. I'm just kind of wandering. She's very directed and once she makes up her mind, she can't be stopped.

My friend Isabelle is ninety-one and she still drives. Every week she picks me up to go to bingo.

Ninety-one? I hope she can see well enough.

Isabelle? She's a card, very funny and a good driver, too. She goes very slowly taking the back streets.

In Afghanistan very few women are allowed to drive, and they can put a woman in prison for things like running away from a violent husband or father, refusing to marry someone, whatever, and the young children go to prison with her. Latifah used to volunteer to teach children in one of these prisons, and Tamar was doing a photo shoot there. That's how they met. Sometime later when Tamar came back to the States, Latifah sent her an email, saying she had miraculously gotten a temporary visa to the U.S. to attend a conference and another for her daughter in a program to help with some medical problem. When they got here, the plan was for Tamar to take them to the Canadian border where they would claim political asylum. Canada at the time was very friendly to Afghans who needed asylum, and Latifah had friends in Montreal. Many people come here to the U.S. and Canada to find a safe haven from political repression and violence—but they don't all get it. There was a Salvadorean man the U.S. sent back last month. He was afraid of some gang violence against him, but the U.S. didn't recognize that type of violence as political and so they didn't let him stay here. When he went back to El Salvador, within a week he was murdered.

I keep the doors and windows closed and the curtains drawn. And I don't watch crime shows on television either. They make me nervous. There are a lot of teenagers who hang around Jack's Party Store. If they look across the street and see me passing in the window, I might have trouble like last summer when they broke in and stole my television... Let me get a cup of tea before you go on, dear. Do you want some? Grimacing, she pulls herself out of the chair.

No, I've had enough tea for tonight.

I follow her into the kitchen talking as she methodically moves from the counter to the table, holding on to relieve the pressure in her knees.

Well, we can't let everybody in, she says. What about the terrorists?

Of course, they have to check out those who are crossing the border. If Latifah had stayed in Afghanistan, she would have refused to give her daughter to her husband, and he would have killed her and it would have been ok with the law there. She has scars all over her body. Once he struck her with a hot poker.

Marie shakes her head, sitting down again, groaning and rubbing her right knee.

Did you want to try some arnica cream I have in my suitcase?

No, Zinny is giving me a shot tomorrow.

I go into the bedroom. Maybe this will help for tonight. I toss the tube over to her, and she sets it on the table.

When Latifah arrived in New York, Tamar drove her to Denver to pick up her little girl. On the way back, they got a call from an immigration lawyer in Canada. The Canadians had just recently—only a week before—changed the law, and now Latifah could not go to Canada. They couldn't walk across the border anymore. They had to declare asylum in the country where they first landed, and for Latifah that was the U.S.. So here she and her daughter were in New York City without enough money to live there.

Latifah thought it might be possible to take a boat from Niagara Falls, or an airplane. She was talking to friends in Canada and Afghanistan, and at one point she even considered hiring some guy to hide her and her daughter in a truck for \$12,000, but her parents didn't have that kind of

money, and Tamar tried to tell her how dangerous that would be. She showed her articles in the news about people crossing the border who were tricked and killed. But if she were to stay in the U.S., her future would have been pretty grim. She could have moved in with some friend of Tamar's who lived in rural Pennsylvania, a place where she wouldn't find work, she wouldn't have been able to drive, and she would have had to live there in poverty, with no Afghan friends. Latifah was pretty depressed about this possibility. In Afghanistan, she had had a fairly decent job as a director in a girls' school, with an ok salary. She had never lived with poverty. There was a list of requirements for people to get into Canada, and Latifah didn't fulfill any of them. She didn't have family there. She didn't have a business or money. She couldn't work there. There was absolutely no way to get her in.

I stop talking and look over at Marie. Her eyes are closed. Her tea is untouched. Then she opens her eyes and looks at me.—Go on, dear. I'm awake and I'm listening, I'm just resting my eyes.

The last person who said that to me was driving me from Bangalore to Mysore in a cab. He scared me to death and every time his eyelids drifted closed, I'd scream at him.

Well, I'm just here in my chair and I'm not falling asleep. Go on.

Ok... Well, Tamar thought about trying to find some guy to marry her in the U.S. and that way she'd be a U.S. citizen and qualify for welfare and other assistance.

That's just what I was thinking. Why didn't she marry someone? My cousin was visiting here from Poland and she married this guy who worked at the Chrysler Plant on Jefferson. No problem.

But Latifah was adamant. She *never* wanted to get married again. Once was enough. Then Latifah read something about how gay marriage is recognized in Canada. Maybe she and Tamar should get married, she joked. They both laughed about this. It was a wild idea. But then Tamar thought maybe if they got a marriage license in Vermont—you know women can marry each other in some states—maybe they'd let them into Canada for the wedding. At one point Tamar started thinking that maybe they *should* in fact get married, but then she discovered that even if Vermont recognizes gay

marriages, that still wouldn't make her a U.S. citizen.

Marie squints her eyebrows in a slightly disapproving gesture, but then she shrugs her shoulders and throws out her hands—as if to say, well the world is changing. Then she smiles. You know my family didn't like it when I married your father, a Protestant, but finally, they gave in.

They sort of gave in, right, but continued to be mean to him. Remember how horrible Dad was to Allen just because he was Jewish. He turned his back to him every time he came into the house. That went on for a long time. Don't you remember?

Marie's eyes widen and then narrow. There is a gleam. He had his ways, she says.

Yeah, we all have our ways. Tamar is gay, but Latifah isn't and she probably didn't even know about Tamar. If Latifah were to marry a woman and then return to Afghanistan, if anyone knew about it, she would have been killed. She was concerned about that, but they weren't going to really get married, they were just going to get a license. Perhaps this would be a way to get over the border. They both thought this idea was hilarious. So they drove to Vermont first to get the license and then to upstate New York where they tried to go through a small crossing, telling the border patrol that they had family in Canada and wanted to be married there. But the guy wouldn't hear of it. He left them sitting in the car for a long time, maybe an hour, and then he leaned over and stuck his fat face in the window of the car, and snarled, Don't try this trick again. Or we'll arrest you. I'm alerting all the other border crossings. Latifah was very frightened, but Tamar tried to explain to her that the border was 7000 miles long and he couldn't possibly contact all of them.

Marie shakes her head. But you know she wasn't a Canadian citizen, not really.

Yeah, ok, but you're not a Canadian citizen and you can cross the border into Canada. Do you see what I mean? So they found a motel and Tamar stayed up all night studying the maps of the border and eating donuts. She must have had a sugar high. She told me that little by little she became more and more determined until her mind was finally set. She was going to get Latifah into Canada, one way or the other, no matter what.

The guy at the border had said something odd and Tamar kept playing it over in her mind. He asked if she had a dying relative in Canada. Was he trying to give them a clue? Was it a secret message? They didn't say yes because they didn't know if he would ask for a hospital and a name. And Latifah had given up. She was afraid of losing her daughter so she shut down. Tamar kept telling her to call her friends in Canada and see if anyone was dying in a hospital or even for the name of a hospital. But she refused. She said they wouldn't want to get involved. No. Absolutely not.

While sitting in the office of the motel, drinking coffee, Tamar was pretty sure the two guys at the desk were gay so she approached them and told them the story. Had they ever heard of anyone getting across to get married? Had they ever heard about the dying relative clause? No, but they thought she might be able to get into Canada on a ferry from Maine. But Tamar knew they'd never let Latifah on the ferry without a visa. Tamar called every hospital she could find and asked for patients with common Afghan names—Nawabi, Sherap, Hamibi, Asafe. None, no Afghans in the hospitals with any of the names she could come up with.

In the morning Latifah was crying. She wanted to go back to New York City immediately. She didn't want to take a chance on losing her daughter. She'd go to Pennsylvania, she said. So she'd be poor. But how would she find the \$5,000 to pay a lawyer for her immigration case? Tamar asked. She'd figure something out.

They'll end up sending you back to Afghanistan, Latifah. You'll be an illegal, Tamar insisted. She had been up all night studying maps and now she was determined. No. I'm going to get you through somehow. She started driving over the speed limit.

We're going through a busy checkpoint and you are going to say that you are an American citizen. Hide your papers under the seat. Tell them you were born in Brooklyn at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. And if they ask for ID, start hunting for it and then pretend you've lost it. Maybe they'll just flag us in. It's a busy holiday weekend.

As they drove along, suddenly Tamar changed her mind and started cutting down little roads and heading in the direction she thought was north,

toward the border. After a while, the road curved around so much that she was confused about where she was, north, south, east or west. She stopped in some wooded area and put her cameras and a rubber boat she used for camping on her back. They started hiking through the woods. If she were stopped, her plan was to tell them she was writing a piece about the border and Latifah was her assistant. After a while, they decided to turn around because she wasn't sure if she was near the border and she was afraid they might get lost in the forest. And Latifah was complaining. I can't do this, Tamar. I can't.

Tamar continued driving down one dirt road after another. After a while she looked over to her left and through a lightly wooded area she could see a rail and every so often a car would go by so she started heading toward that rail.

What are you doing? Where are you going? Latifah asked. It was a rural area with very few houses, with fields of dry corn, some abandoned fields now sprouting various weeds, and a few farm houses here and there.

Finally the road ended and there was another dirt road with an old abandoned barn at the end. Tamar pulled the car behind the barn, very tightly wedging it in between the barn and some shacks, hiding it behind some piles of rubbish.

You stay here, lock the door, she told Latifah. And if anyone comes by to ask you what you are doing there, say that your friend is out looking at the property because she's interested in buying it.

Is this a true story or are you making it up as you go along? Marie asks.

Marie, this is exactly as Tamar told me. I stand up and start pacing back and forth behind the cocktail table in the living room.

Tamar was pretty sure no one could see the car unless they were in a low flying plane. She started hiking through the woods and when she got to the other side of the trees, she could hear water rushing. Then there was a deep embankment and down below a narrow river, maybe it was a stream, and on the other side she could see the rail. So she slid down this embankment—she's fairly agile and even if her legs hurt her sometimes, like I said before, when she sets her mind to something, she does it. So she rolled up her jeans,

the water was shallow, not quite up to her shins, but it was extremely slippery. She fell down once and dropped her glasses somewhere and couldn't find them. Her heart was pounding and she was too excited to stop and look. When she got to the other side, she grabbed hold of the branches and pulled herself up. It was about one hundred feet deep. When she got over the top, there was a road, but no cars and in the distance there were a couple of houses, but no one seemed to be at home, no cars anywhere. So she walked along the road, hoping a vehicle would go by so she could see their plates and figure out where she was. Was she in Canada? Or was she still in New York? She didn't know, and she wished she had brought a compass with her. She saw a mailbox in front of one of the houses. What if someone had looked out the window and seen her climb over the embankment? Maybe they were calling the police right then. But everything was quiet so she walked up to the mailbox and opened it. There was no mail, but there were a couple of fliers. She took them out and turned them over. They were in French! She *was* in Canada. She was ecstatically happy. Tamar turned around, hoping no one was watching her, and then she went right back down the embankment and crossed the river. On her way back, she saw a Canadian marker, a granite obelisk with the word *Canada* engraved in it. She stepped cautiously from one rock to the next until she found her glasses on a rock, and then she pulled herself back up to the other side. Running toward the car, she opened the door and flung herself inside. She was panting from running so fast.

Where have you been? Latifah asked.

And she screamed, Canada. I've been in Canada! Latifah, take some money, your jacket and no ID. Leave everything else in the car. Come now. I'm taking you to Canada.

They hiked back through the woods, climbed down the ravine and then Tamar pointed to a globe of shrubs. See those bushes over there. Latifah, you climb in there and stay hidden until I honk. It might take an hour. It might take two hours, but I'll get here.

Then Tamar went back to the car and drove to another busier checkpoint and showed them her driver's license, talking about how she had never been in Canada before and wanted to see the country, to do some sight

seeing. They flagged her in. No problem. After all she had no record and she was a U.S. citizen. At first she couldn't figure out how to get to the place where Latifah was hiding, but after an hour or so, she found the road, pulled up by the bushes and honked. Latifah came running out.

Tamar is really something, isn't she? Marie says. This definitely sounds like a movie. Just a minute I have to go to the bathroom.

I follow her to the door. This really happened, Marie. I'm telling you. You read the postcard, didn't you?

Then she is back in her chair, shuffling her papers.

Tamar drove along until she came to a small convenience store and restaurant and she left Latifah there while she went back across the border and back to the motel to get their luggage. She told the border patrol that she had left her cell phone in the motel and had to go back for it. When she got back to the motel, one of the guys was at the desk and he asked, Where is Latifah? When Tamar told him she was in Canada, waiting for her in a coffee shop, he came around the desk and swept Tamar off her feet. You did it. Hurray, for you. He brought out a bottle of brandy and offered her a drink. And he never asked where or how.

Why didn't he ask?

Probably he knew she had to keep that a secret. Like the underground railroad, the string of secret houses and people who would help slaves escape north to New York and to Canada. They never tell the exact story.

Is this the truth what you are telling me?

The truth that I know.

Tamar had no trouble crossing back into Canada again. She picked up Latifah at the coffee shop a few hours later and they drove straight to Montreal where friends were waiting. When Tamar got back to New York, for six weeks she had to take care of Nawal until she was finally able to bring her legally to her mother in Canada. That's what this postcard was about. She was worried if everything would go smoothly at the border. Or would she have to smuggle Nawal in, too. No problems, I guess. In Canada now they will be safe. Her husband can't come there and take Nawal away. And she'll get some job training so she can find work. In the U.S., this wouldn't have happened.

It's a movie. That's what it sounds like.

I'm thinking about writing a story.

I think it could be a movie. It sounds more like a movie.

Tamar wants the U.S. military to stay in Afghanistan to help protect the women. So the Taliban don't take over again. If that happens she's sure the women will lose all of their rights and many of those who have spoken out and helped each other would then be killed. I think that as long as there is money to be made for the big corporations, like those that provide security and supplies, the U.S. will stay. Still both Tamar and I both wish there was a more peaceful way to help the women, working more with other countries, you know...

I don't know, Marie says, shrugging her shoulders. I only know about my life. I don't know about that. You know so many people, Barbara. Aren't you tired? You must need a glass of water. Are you going to bed?

I guess so. I want to wake up early and do my yoga practice before I leave.

Isabelle is picking me up at eleven tomorrow and we're going to a lunch at the Eagles Club. Then later Zinny's coming over.

I lie down on the blow up bed on the back porch with the windows open. My father used to sleep in the room next door when he became ill and we would have birthday parties on the screened porch where I am now resting. It is swampy hot and the crickets are singing loud and thick, chirping, rubbing their forewings together, traveling in packs, devouring and singing, a mass migration in search of protein and salt. My grandmother and grandfather migrated here for work, for well-being. Like a lot of working class Americans, my father was afraid of people who were different from him, a kind of ignorance, a protect-what's-mine mentality. So we close our borders and police them. He was afraid to visit me when I lived in downtown Detroit. Every car that backfired in his mind was a black man with a gun. As he grew older, he rarely left his neighborhood and community of friends. In 1983, I took my children and moved to New York City *a suitable & preferable environment leading always to a new center the migration which filled America* Just as I'm falling asleep, I notice

in the middle of one stack of books in the corner of the sofa, my high school typing book and an old unread book club collection of Montaigne's essays with prints by Salvador Dali. I wonder how that book got here.

At an outside table at a cafe on 7th Avenue in Brooklyn, I watch Tamar coming down the street. She's wearing a little tweedy blazer over tight jeans, her hair now shoulder length gray. You are looking terrific, I say.

You're looking good, too.

Are you ready to order? the waiter asks.

I want the hummus with one piece of pita and a glass of white wine. What kind of wine do you have? That's fine. I'll have that.

I'd like the hijiki salad with avocado instead of goat cheese. And just a glass of water.

So what's new with you?

I'm in love with my acupuncturist.

Tell me about him. She leans over the table.

Well, one night last summer, I ran into a friend on the street and she gave me his phone number. Just think if I didn't have this cough, I never would have met him. As soon as I walked into his office he started flirting with me. So I flirted back. Then he kept inviting me to invite him. So we started seeing each other. My friend, Kristin, was concerned that he was my doctor and it wasn't ethical, but if we think like that, we'll never meet anyone.

Yeah, that's silly.

I didn't feel as if he had some power over me. No, the thing is we have a lot in common. We're close in age, leftist politics, we're both vegan, he's a healer and he has a spiritual life similar to yoga. He's been involved with an African American group that combines Eastern philosophies with Egyptian mysticism.

So what's the negative? There's always something...

He has a young child a few days out of the week. I thought I was done with that, my children raised already, but I like the boy. I tried to break it off when I found out about his child, but you know, I liked him so much that I couldn't stop seeing him.

You better be careful, Barbara.

Well, what could happen?

You could have your heart broken, that's what. I don't want you to get hurt.

Tamar, this is different. I think I'm going to be with him for the rest of my life.

I hope you're right. After Denise, I'm not interested anymore. It's too draining. She looked straight into my face and straight out lied to me.

Well, I don't think he lies. He talks openly about everything, kind of like I do. Good for you, Barb. I'm so busy that if I meet a woman in the middle of this, well then it will happen. Otherwise I'm happy as a lark.

I wasn't even looking for anyone. It just happened. Have you heard from Latifah and Nawal? That was courageous what you did for them, climbing down that ravine and all at your age. I want to write a story about it.

Well, you just do what's necessary at the time. Right? They're fine. They love Montreal. They have moved out of the shelter and have their own apartment now. Nawal calls me on the telephone and says that she misses me. I'm surprised when she says this, though, because she was so unhappy and difficult when she was with me. I thought I was going to go crazy. She wouldn't get dressed in the morning. I had to physically dress her while she lay stiff like a board on the bed. She hated day camp. She hated everything I cooked for her. It was a nightmare.

She must have been extremely anxious about her mother being in Canada and then being in Brooklyn with you.

Yes, I'm sure that was part of it.

And you've never raised any children. They are difficult for their parents, let alone a babysitter and she's only eight years old. Think of how children treat substitute teachers. You were a substitute mother with no training.

I had to put her in camp so I could get some work done, and every day she came home, she said that she hated it, but the counselor said she was doing fine. I had to get her vaccinations, a health examination, everything. Then she stuck a Q-tip in her ear and she couldn't hear so I took her to the

emergency room. She was ok, but they are still sending astronomical bills. We didn't even see a doctor. It was a physician's assistant and the bill for five minutes was \$600. The total bill was \$2,000. What a scam. And remember when Bush was saying that anyone could go to the emergency room. That's such crap.

I remember when Emily was little and I used to have to get her dressed for school before she went to sleep or she would refuse in the morning and we'd never get there on time. Children go through things like this.

When she first came, I got out my mother's old waffle maker and I made waffles. At first she loved them, but after a week, she refused to eat anything. She liked grilled cheese sandwiches and then she hated grilled cheese.

Maybe she wanted Afghan food.

Well, I couldn't make that food. I'm not much of a cook anyway. I tell you there was only one thing she wanted—McDonald's. And I said you are not going to live on McDonald's for four weeks. That's out of the question. I'll take you there once a week. So I said I'll make you a great hamburger. I bought chopped sirloin and hamburger rolls and the whole business and she wouldn't touch it.

And every night I couldn't get her to go to sleep. I had to go to sleep with her. She would not go in the bedroom unless I was there, so I agreed to do this, but then I was going to bed at 9pm and I wasn't getting any work done. She'd snuggle up with me in bed. Those were the only pleasant moments. I think she was traumatized.

As the weeks passed, I was extremely nervous that the papers wouldn't come through. I was afraid there would be some kind of screw up. But when we got to the border, everything was in order. I almost didn't recognize Latifah. She had on tight jeans and a ski jacket with a little woolen hat. Very stylish, totally different from the woman in Afghanistan. And they were thrilled to see each other.

You did a good thing, Tamar. Where did you get those glasses?

They're the same ones I lost in the river. I was worried when I dropped them, you know why—not because I couldn't see, I had an extra

pair in the glove box—but because they cost me \$400, that's why. Have some wine. Let me buy you a glass of wine.

Ok, red. I guess one little glass won't hurt me.

And then it starts raining, pouring out. Anything can happen here, I say, putting on my sweater. It wasn't supposed to rain and I didn't bring an umbrella. It's a good thing we are under the awning. And then we sit there sipping wine and looking at the rain fill up the street and the gutters. An old man rushes by holding a newspaper over his head.

What's the name of that tree over there, Tamar asks.

It's a gingko. Aren't they beautiful? Brought here from Asia. They are all over the world now. That tree can live to be a thousand years old, well, maybe not here though, with all the pollution. But it will definitely outlive us. It's one of my favorite trees, very sturdy, but it looks delicate, the way the branches curve upward.