

This is a Secular Space

by

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“Ma’am.” The passport control agent signalled. “Ma’am?” She sighed heavily and, shortly this time, called, “Ma’am!”

A woman standing behind him poked Hakim. He had been thumbing through the visa pages of his passport, reminiscing of his work done in North America, Western Europe, and the seldom but celebrated trek through Central or South America; but his first trip to Greece had taken longer than he’d expected. Stealing his attention, the woman silently pointed past him, guiding his line of sight to the frustrated agent. He smiled politely as he stepped forward and dropped his navy blue passport on the marble counter, placing his duffel by his feet. The agent coldly opened to his identification page and realized her mistake.

“Sorry, Mr...” she furrowed her brow, stumbling over her mistake, “Hack-im.” She slipped on a pair of glasses.

“No worries, love.” He said, his polite smile twisting into one of sinister satisfaction, as he pushed his long wavy hair behind his ears. The agent grimaced and glanced between the passport photo and the man standing before her.

“What brings you to Athens?”

“I’ll be staying in Syntagma and meeting someone in Pangrati for a little business.” The agent cringed at his pronunciations. “I sell rare and specialty hookahs.”

Unimpressed, she flipped through the visa pages, searched for an empty corner, and brought down her stamp. Hakim lifted his duffel onto his shoulder and, taking his

passport from her outstretched hand, said, “and it’s pronounced Hah-keem,” before rounding the corner and disappearing towards the exit. Waiting for a cab, he rubbed his thumb across his most recent badge of travel, smearing the word “ATHINA” across itself.

The two of them sat cross-legged on the floor, the hookah standing between them. Erifili held a small box with in her left hand, a pair of apples on the label hiding behind one another like children. Her right hand worked the contents. Hakim was watching her mix apple and pan raas shisha into the same container. The sweetness of the apple, a flavor he historically found too rich for his liking, stung his nostrils until it was gradually reined in by the earthy scent of the pan raas. Satisfied with the blend, Erifili put down the box and retrieved the bowl from the top of the hookah’s body.

It caught around the rubber washer, indicating a strong seal, despite the age at which she’d advertised it. She needed both hands to remove it, leaving red syrup marks on the neck of the body. Hakim recalled making the same mistake when he was first packing hookahs; thankfully, the syrup should wash off fairly easily from the brass. She placed the mixed tobacco into the top of the bowl, which was wide and spilled over itself.

She used the flat of her hand to pack it down with the force of someone tamping espresso grounds, much too tightly. In doing so, she released some of the tobacco’s juices and a rivulet bled down the length of the clay. It traced the glaze from its seafoam green through turquoise and pooled against the seal created by her fingers, which

concealed the midnight blue where the bowl would swallow the hookah's neck. Erifili replaced the bowl and, after confirming the seal between head and body, wiped her hands, then the bowl, then the neck, with a soft damp cloth. She blanketed the bowl with aluminum foil, tucking it under the edge of the body's mushroom head. With an unfolded safety pin, she sporadically punctured the foil, letting the needle sink through the tobacco until it hit clay. She retrieved the coals, which had been warming in the open flame of the gas stove.

Erifili pulled on the hose, the perspiration on her forehead glowing in the light of the coals. Hakim sat across from her, watching patiently as she fumbled to get the hookah going. Her left elbow dug into her knee, her hand clutching the plastic mouthpiece to her narrow, chapped lips. The thin smoke she was able to coax from the hookah snaked through the opening formed between her arm, the hose, and her body, before sinking to the floor and dissipating. In her right hand, hovering inches from her face, she held a pair of kitchen tongs. They were so long she was forced to kick her shoulder back. She was therefore limited to the motions of her wrist to stoke the coals. Hakim thought she looked stiff and wondered why she didn't simply sit further away, the hose being long enough to accommodate the mismatched tongs. Concluding she was new to this, he decided to offer a hand. He cleared his throat, breaking her concentration. Her eyes, now wide, jumped from the end of the tongs to Hakim.

"May I?" He motioned towards the tongs. She passed the tongs to Hakim bringing her hands down to tangle with one another, allowing her to cradle the hose in

her lap. The handle, which stood as stiff and straight as her spine, at the end of the hose was long enough to where she didn't have to lift her hands to kiss the mouthpiece. She looked at peace. Hakim paused, tongs in hand, and watched her. The weak orange of the failing coals danced in her eyes, a furious movement in an otherwise frozen moment.

Finally able to get the hookah going, Erifili and Hakim were passing the single hose around, pausing periodically to unwrap it from the body. Watching her shift the coals, Hakim caught hairline cracks running along the bowl's glaze. He would normally call on such a cosmetic error to ultimately drive the price down in negotiations, but the fissures lent the bowl a certain charm, the assumed wisdom of age. Erifili was now stoking the coals with an inexplicable comfort and ease. Dissatisfied with the weight of her last pull, she pulled one coal off with the kitchen tongs and tapped it against the plate, which was suspended along the body just below the bowl. This knocked the ash and released the coal trapped within. She replaced the coal, alongside its brother, and pulled again on the hose. They both watched, transfixed, as the coals burned bright, glowing strongest where they touched and became one.

The cyclopic embers winked at Hakim, he was feeling the effects now. His gaze followed the slender brass neck and down the body, tracing the intricate designs that had been cast into it. They were darker, more discolored than their unsunken counterparts, which maintained a steady polish from simply being handled. The body stabbed into the stout crimson basin, bloated by the smoke caught therein. The cloud

beckoned to him. Leaning forward in awe, he observed a countryside consumed by bloodshed.

Trees bent their backs under the crushing weight of their sorrow, their leaves turned to ash and consuming the sky overhead. Flames gnawed at their ankles, bringing them to their knees at the whim of a tyrannical god. They hung upon one another, crying for the water below to come save them. Their pleas went unanswered as their legs caught in the bones of their comrades and tumbled to the ground. They tore downhill, angering unsuspecting neighbors. Some of them, the lucky few, were able to make it to the reservoir. Drinking deeply as the water screamed, stirring from its slumber, they sat on their haunches. Finally, those that could muster such strength, such courage, stood in the shallows. The water rose, wrapping its tender arms around them. They were only able to watch as the flames spread, indiscriminately consuming livelihoods, generations, histories.

“Tell me your thoughts,” Erifili tore him from his reverie, smoke billowing from her mouth with each word.

“I don’t normally like apple... I find it too sweet.” Hakim muttered, mechanically accepting the hose from her. “But it pairs well with the pan raas.”

“This was my pappou’s favorite.” She was clearly satisfied with herself. “My yiayia packed it for him,” her tone soured. “Although he would never tell his friends that.”

“My parents did something similar,” Erifili offered a polite smile. “I always thought it was endearing.” Trapped somewhere between the smoke and the

conversation, he didn't see her withdraw her offering. "But with my mom's paan."

Hakim chuckled softly, thinking of his own parents. "The same leaves that flavor this shisha. She had a way of folding them very tight, very secure, even though she would pack mukhwas into it." Hakim let the hose fall across his lap, folding a phantom serving of paan as he spoke, "My parents always shared some after dinner." Erifili's smile was returning. "Growing up, I would only be allowed some on weekends."

Hakim smiled, the border between his lips and cheeks collapsing over one another to form rolling hills. He looked like a child again, beaming at the sight of his first snow. "But my father would sneak me a bite if my mom wasn't looking. That small, it was a particularly heady experience. Everything would start turning sideways," he furrowed his brow, the hills now sunken, "but never make it all the way there." The last notes of his story mingled with the smoke, each drifting away before they could overstay their respective welcomes.

Hakim realized he'd commandeered the hookah. "So this belonged to your father?" He asked, returning the hose to her.

"No, my grandfather!" It was Erifili's turn to laugh. "Pappou means grandfather. Babá is what we call our fathers." She took a long pull from the hookah.

"Your grandfather? Your father never..." he trailed off as Erifili passed him the hose.

"He didn't know how. When he was little, he would ask his mamá to show him. He wanted to keep his babá happy, like she did. But she would always brush him off, promising to show him when he was older." She released the last of the smoke she'd

hidden away with a deep sigh, a blend of warm reminiscence and cold disappointment. It danced around Hakim before fading into nothing. Erifili had fallen silent.

“Your grandmother?” Hakim was curious. For the right collector, the story was more important than the piece itself. “She never showed him?” He passed her the hose, hoping the smoke would help him tease the information out.

“She died when he was young.” Erifili’s face sank. Hakim exhaled sharply. “My pappou put this away after that, not wanting my babá using it. He said that the hookah came with my yiayia,” she sank back, letting her posture drop, “and so it should die with her, too.” She passed him the hose, and it was only then that Hakim noticed that he’d stopped breathing.

“Do you know how your yiayia came across it?” He pressed, not realizing he was mispronouncing the word. But Erifili was drained. Her right hand had sunk to her knee, where it rested palm-up, the ghost of the gluggy syrup toying with her. She held the left hand up, palm towards him, deferring his question. Hakim nodded. He placed the hose beside the hookah and let stillness fall between them.

Hakim woke as his plane touched down at London City Airport. Coming from a fellow EU country, he was able to go directly to baggage claim. He preferred transporting his hookahs as carry-ons, harboring a distrust for baggage handlers he had inherited from his immigrant parents, but was forced to check his duffel in Athens due to size restrictions. Strangers bumped past him, crowding around the now-moving

carousel, unapologetically blocking his view of the outpouring of bags. Hakim normally wouldn't mind, he understood the value of being patient.

His baggage was distinct, packed in the style he had picked up from his parents during their trips back home, a luxury they didn't share with him as he grew older. The crowd had thinned, returning natives and tourist families reclaiming their luggage and leaving in a huff. He stood in earnest, eyes peeled for a teal duffel bag patterned with brown tape wrapped along its circumference. The bag bulged out where it could, displaced by the strips of tape. The often false "FRAGILE" handwritten in fading marker on the tape, a tell-tale sign of a nomadic Indian upbringing.

The carousel stopped moving and Hakim was still standing there, empty-handed. The sun had set while he'd waited. Refusing defeat, he went to the Swiss service desk, where there was no line. He locked eyes with the man behind the low desk as he approached. The man noted Hakim's wardrobe: a grey Lacoste polo tucked into a pair of tapered pleated pants with no belt. The pants led to a pair of paper-thin thonged brown leather sandals which were adorned with a bright red poof, contrasting with the burgundy of his pants. The man rolled his eyes and made a show of settling into his chair, picking up a book, and putting his feet up on the desk, revealing a pair of garish orange shoes.

Hakim cleared his throat, hoping to catch the man's attention. The man was reading *The Graves of the Fallen*. Hakim leaned forward, over the desk, and as gently as he could muster said, "Excuse me?" The man turned a page in his book.

A bit more stern this time, "Excuse me."

Hakim felt his patience waning. He stood, “Excuse me!” The man held up a finger as he scanned through the book, searching for a paragraph break. He placed it facedown on the desk and lazily turned his attention to Hakim. The man had a nametag pinned to the breast pocket of a tight-fitting button down, it read “Fabian W.” Hakim smiled politely, “Mr Fah-be-in.”

“Fey-be-an,” he corrected.

“Oh.” Hakim seemed uncertain, “Mr Fey-be-an—”

“Mr William,” he interrupted Hakim. “What can I do for you,” he looked Hakim up-and-down, “sir.”

“My luggage is missing.” Hakim was growing increasingly frustrated. It was one thing that his luggage was missing; on top of that, this native, this Englishman, was toying with him.

“It could have been misplaced during a layover, where did you stop?” Mr William said with an impatient sigh.

“I didn’t. I flew directly from Athens.” He saw the mistake in his confession by the shift in Fabian’s expression.

“Maybe you could use it to help pay off the debt.”

“I was just passing through, which I was hoping to do here.” Hakim was growing rattled. “I’m not Athenian. I’m not Greek.”

“So what are you?” Fabian teased. Hakim stood upright, pushed his hips forward, and dropped his shoulders, lengthening his neck and inviting attention to his clenched, tapered jaw: a tree, rooted with conviction.

“I’m just trying to find my luggage.” He willed his voice to hold steady, but he felt it falter. Fabian was bored of his new toy.

“Leave a description of the luggage, its contents, as well as your contact information and place of residence while in London.” He said, standing to access a file cabinet behind him. As he was turned, Hakim noted that Fabian was at least a head shorter than him. Satisfied with this, he unclenched his jaw, resting easier. Fabian turned back, placing a form and a pen on the desk, and offered Hakim a knowing smirk. Hakim’s face soured as he was forced to stoop, locking eyes with Kipling from beyond the grave. Fabian remained standing.

“You’ve lost it?” Park was turning red, starting where his cheekbones were buried and radiating outward. “Hack-im, how did you manage that!” Hakim ignored the mispronunciation, choosing instead to relish the thought that it was the most color Park had seen for some time.

“The airline misplaced my luggage.” He was doing his best to remain calm, taking deep controlled breaths and focusing on the details of the space around him. “It shouldn’t take more than a few days.” Hakim was surprised to find himself in the library of a house in Belgravia, Lowndes Square, no less. Facing south was a series of windows, allowing natural light to fill the room from sunrise to sunset. Presently, they were shrouded by heavy curtains. The remaining walls herein were lined with wooden shelves, the color of dried blood. The cloth bindings of their books formed a muted, misordered rainbow. He refused to get any closer, worried what they might tell him

about Park, the mononym he had been provided. Based on the pungent must of yellowed paper with undertones of eucalyptus coming from the shelves and the age of the building, let alone the age of the buyer himself, Hakim was right to be nervous.

“It had best not,” Park’s breathing was beginning to catch, he turned away, “excuse me.” Hakim swung his head in a tilting motion, obliging. Park undid the button on his starched collar, releasing the flesh that had been spilling over it. Choking back a wet cough, he turned back to Hakim, “Needless to say, you will be staying here until our business is concluded.” Park had remembered the power he carried, confirming Hakim’s fears.

“Oh.” Hakim had never before been so grateful for his inability to blush, “I don’t think that’s necessary. I don’t want to impose—”

“Nonsense,” Park moved towards Hakim, “I’ll have one of the spare rooms done up.” He stared at Hakim, it was only when they were standing this close that their height difference became apparent. Park, always one to have the last word, said “we’ll be flatmates,” before excusing himself to confer with his staff.

Hakim proceeded to the depths of the library, curious to find the fourth wall and completely visualize his surroundings. He blindly fumbled forward, his arms stretched before him, one sprouting forward from his chest, the other sunk closer to his waist, both of them crooked slightly at the elbow. Bent slightly at the knee and inching forward, the left leg led, forcing his body to twist at the hips. His weight sat on his right leg, which was stiff and dragged behind his left, to make sure he broke nothing, especially nothing of value.

He imagined how ridiculous he must look. How did the man who had stared down Fabian William and Rudyard Kipling find himself, reduced to a sapling, in the thick clammy palm of this colonial relic? He reminded himself that he'd had no way of knowing what was on the other side of the hill. That's why he was doing this. He had seen farther and traveled more than his parents combined; and where they had traveled for survival, he had done so, more-or-less, for pleasure.

Taking a breath in through his nose, he realigned his left leg with his right, locking his knees, and lowered his arms, holding them so taut to his sides that his elbow threatened to bend inward. He held the breath until he had willed his heart rate to steady. He was once more a redwood, immovable save for the will of his ancestors. Hakim released the stale breath through his mouth to the count of nine, one for each stamp in his passport. He knew where he was. He knew who he was dealing with. He knew what books his host kept in this room.

Hakim opened his eyes. The glow of the light from the shallows of the library throbbed along the periphery of his vision, vying for dominance against the darkness before him. Refusing to close his eyes, he pared away the tendrils of white and yellow that had broken. Considering himself successful, Hakim let himself rest. As his hips slid back into their resting position, his lower back cracked like thunder. He released a satisfied groan, as his father might have when taking the first bite of homemade paan after a long day.

The lightning, drawn by the thunder, came a moment later, when Park returned and switched on the lights for the rear of the library. Hakim's groan quickly twisted into

a snarl. It had entered his eyes and set him ablaze, from the inside-out. He slammed his eyes shut and threw his head, reflexively trying to choke out the flames. Behind him, Park's heavy footfalls grew louder. A weighty arm landed across Hakim's shoulders, forcing his posture to give. Park was pulling him down so they would match statures.

"All will be settled soon. Shall we smoke before we retire?" Park motioned to the back wall, not far from where Hakim had rooted himself. While it carried the same shelving, these were occupied by a collection of hookahs. The rarest were disassembled and displayed across an entire shelf of their own. Some of these included pieces believed to have gone extinct with their respective cultures. Others, while antique, were less rare and therefore replaceable — for the right price, of course. Hakim stepped slowly but deliberately. As he moved, Park followed. He had withdrawn his arm but insisted on making his presence known.

Hakim froze in front of one, sprawled across a shelf towards the center of the display. The body and the basin were a matching off-white, the color of aged bone. His hand reached forward, quivering. It was stopped by a set of glass doors, the only element of modernity in the room. Hakim resembled a tall child, his hand pressed against the glass, mouth agape.

"Careful," Park said gravely, "you'll leave prints."

"I thought these were all lost."

"Not all. As you can see." Park separated from Hakim, frozen in awe. "Look, here is where I'll be putting yours." He peeled Hakim away and pulled him to an empty shelf.

The pieces around it were not as valuable as the one Hakim had marked with his handprint, their families not yet lost to the past. “Hoc-kim.”

“Yes?” He spoke with less fervor.

“Let me make you an offer.” Hakim rotated his entire body to face Park. “If you can get me your Ottoman hookah, we can celebrate with a smoke from my *pièce de résistance*. How does that sound?”

“I’ll make some calls tomorrow.” Hakim couldn’t keep the corners of his mouth from teasing upwards, crossing the partition formed by the thrust of his chin.

With his duffel hung across his body and clutched to his hips, Hakim returned to Park’s stucco walls to find him sitting down for breakfast. He was able to let himself in, not knowing how to lock it when he left in the morning. Caught between his own impatience and Park’s incessant snoring, Hakim had risen with the sun.

“Ah, Huh-keem!” Park said through a mouthful of blood pudding, “I see you’ve recovered your bag. Sit down, we’ll retire to the library once we’ve eaten.”

“Right.” Hakim did his best to mask his disappointment. He sat at the table and placed his bag on the floor. An elderly woman dressed in black and white, who Hakim could only assume had been the one to make up his room the night before, sat a plate before him. A steaming assortment of eggs and bread, fried in the vestiges of the bacon and sausage, accompanied with a slice of blood pudding on a bed of baked beans invaded each of Hakim’s senses. Taking this all in, he didn’t notice Park motion for the woman to remove his bag.

She returned and placed a steaming cup of tea by his plate as he stabbed his eggs. The freed yolk flooded the plate, occupying the empty space between the foods. Everything sat in its place, waiting patiently for Hakim to erase the borders with his fried bread. At the end of the meal, he lapped up the last of his tea and stood.

“Shall we?” He turned once more to Park, who was consumed by his second helping.

“Oh.” Park looked at Hakim’s plate. “Not hungry?” He motioned to Hakim’s untouched bacon, sausage, and pudding. Not satisfied with his guest’s silence, he spat, “Or are you a Moslem.”

“Too excited to be hungry,” he lied, his anticipation giving way to a too-familiar anxiety. All that broke the ensuing silence was Hakim’s heartbeat, which had jumped to his throat and doubled in pace.

“Let’s get to it then!” Park’s bellowing laughter almost stopped the beating entirely.

Starting with the basin, Park carefully removed his prize hookah from its sanctuary and placed it on a table a few meters away. The wood of the table matched that of the shelves perfectly; while the pallid leather upholstery of the twin high-backed armchairs caught the light pouring in from the windows, which the woman was in the process of uncurtaining.

Hakim lifted his bag onto one of the seats, which sat on opposite sides of the round table, and snapped the striped tape. He buried his arm deep into the cavernous maw of the duffel, fishing for the various parts of his own hookah.

“AH!” He jumped backwards, his duffel rolled off of the chair and crashed to the floor.

“Careful!” Park, frozen by the shelf where he’d just retrieved the stone bowl, saw that Hakim now had a gash running along his right forearm and edging onto his palm. Blood ran along his fingers and dripped onto the paisley rug. Hakim tried to look to Park for help but he, along with his vision, wavered. He stumbled sideways towards the table.

“No!” Park started. He instinctively released the stone bowl and threw his arms forward, swimming through nothing towards Hakim.

Hakim’s left hand barely wrapped around the edge of the table while his right fell across the top, slapping his palm against the hookah’s basin. He sank to the floor. His vision clearing long enough for him to watch the stone bowl shatter against the marble floor, just missing the edge of the rug, before he blacked out.

Park leaned against the table. He was spent from his short sprint. He swallowed air and heaved over the table, unsure if his nausea was from his unprecedented burst of exercise or from the bloody handprint that Hakim had left on the hookah.