GEORGE HADDAD

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WINNER OF THE 2016 VIVA LA NOVELLA PRIZE

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POPULATE AND PERISH

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brio BOOKS

Rex's bloodshot blue eyes refocused as he climaxed. They were the same blue as the plane that brought my mum, sister and me to Melbourne twenty years ago.

'Where shall I leave the money, handsome?' Rex asked through loose teeth. My disdain was quickly masked by years of 'customer first' call-centre training. Keep them happy, keep them coming.

'Just on the bedside table, Rex. You know you're my number one client?'

Rex's chest caved in. After dressing, he minced out of my rented granny flat, high. Didn't look back at me, or the three hundred happy dollars. Didn't need to. I buried myself in the bed sheets and held my breath for as long as I could. I tried to vibrate like the yoga instructor said. It didn't work. The image of Rex's elastic dick was burnt into my retina. I tried topping my memory up with pretty things instead, something attractive enough to push Rex's potholed skin into storage until next month.

I thought of Zac. Beautiful, blonde Zac. I sucked air in through the sheets, savouring the smell of thread and fabric softener and aimed for quiet. The image of Zac dissipated into the memory of a rusty photo of my sister Amira and me. Young, barely walking. A headless man stood in the background, his paunch bolstered by a gold belt buckle, grey pleated pants. Mum swore it was my uncle, her brother. But I knew who it was. It was *him*. The man who had deserted her with infant twins. The man she had nothing but ancient village hexes for. When she had to refer to him she called him the *kalb* – dog. '*Nassim, ya eben el kalb*!' – 'Nick, you son of the dog!' she'd yell at me from the kitchen sink, my report card dumped on the mustard lino kitchen bench next to Amira's. All Cs on mine and all As and B+s on hers. 'Why you can't try like your sister?' she'd yell, stamping her feet, elbow-deep in zucchini innards and tomato puree.

'Uma,' I'd say, 'don't worry. I'm gonna make you proud, I swear.' I'd kiss her and all would be forgiven. Amira, or Amy as she preferred back then, would roll her eyes, listening to her Walkman against the door frame.

The memory expelled the thought of Rex and my consciousness returned to bed but the sheets felt

like they were woven with acid, carving through me. I'd forgotten I was holding my breath. I jumped from my horizontal daze to the foot of the bed and stripped the sheets, bundled them into my arms like a sick dog and pushed through the door of the granny flat. Pam, my landlord, was sitting on the back step of her verandah. She was in her nightie smoking a fag, barely visible through the bushfire haze from up north that had settled on Melbourne. She surveyed the garden, her gaze following the vines that ran up along the side of the weatherboard granny flat, until her eyes met the pitched roof and rolled onto me. The smell of ash drowning in a wet ashtray by Pam's side. I walked through the grass toward her in undies that were clinging too high on my waist.

'Put some clothes on, wouldja, Grace is here,' Pam said mid-exhalation. I shoved my face through her smoke and kissed her on the forehead.

'Don't worry, Pam, she loves it.'

The laundry was the builder's afterthought. It hung off the kitchen's external wall, shying away from it on a slant. We often joked that the whole room would end up at the back of the yard one day. I thought about Coburg at the time the house was built and felt something like pride that Australia

had grown a little older since then. I used Pam's washing powder and bleach, double the dosage. Mum's hands always smelt like bleach. She loved the stuff. Splashed it on walls, floors; any surface in her cleaning onslaught. Still, she was never bleached enough to fit in. Always stuck out with her hijab and her nose.

'I hope you're using protection, love, please be safe,' Pam called over her shoulder. Pam was precious. A washed-up Melbourne hippy who had spent her formative years taking drugs and writing sonnets. When she was famous in the literary circle in the seventies, she'd been the toast of the Inner North. Now she pruned the herb patch at the back of her bungalow and played host to her niece, Grace, when Grace's father was in an alcoholic frenzy.

'I am! I swear, I'm using protection, Pam, don't worry.' Lies exchanged for love. I made more cash without protection. I saw how the risk made some of the older clients giddy.

Grace walked through the back threshold. Her morning eyes unravelling like onions, Pam's straw hair, her dad's purple lips. Grace's father had done what he could with her up until she was thirteen. Then he just kind of gave up and into the lure of a

liquid remedy. She never knew her mother. Grace once told me that her mum had tried to pick her up from kindergarten but the teacher refused because she was visibly high. Grace was full of these small stories and I often wondered if she created them in an effort to give herself some history. It was brave and endearing the way she did that. And I was her best listener.

'Nicky boy, what's this?' Grace said. She prodded the fresh tattoo on my rib with her two fingers that clasped a cigarette so tight the filter was bulging. It was a dagger piercing through a heart like sailors used to get in the States. The greens and reds looked comfortable on my brown skin.

'It's for me, for my calamities,' I said as I dramatically flung the back of my hand at my forehead and faked a fall. Grace laughed and kissed me on the cheek.

'Let's smoke a joint around six,' I said. I turned my back on them and made for the granny flat, Pam's tut-tuts bouncing after me.

Inside I sniffed my fingers long and hard. Bleach. Mum was there. I put some clothes on but they felt borrowed. I stuffed the three hundred dollars in my pocket and went to meet my sister.

Amira was in too hyper a mood for my blazed

out bliss. It was becoming a ritual, getting stoned before seeing her. We sat in the window at the Tin Pot in Fitzroy North. It was the kind of café that had been around before the area was entirely gentrified. The tables and chairs were mismatched and it smelt like wilted spinach, too much of it. There were few other patrons but the quiet meant that no conversation was a secret. I ordered a flat white and Amira a kombucha. The waiter gave me the knowing homo gaze. He looked familiar, like I'd pashed him for a cigarette at The Peel. Amira spent the first ten minutes talking about her poetry and the next half hour talking about Gabi. Gabi was a Sudanese refugee that she was dating. He had come here by boat via the Philippines, had been detained, processed and eventually let out to roam among the rest of us refugees. He lived with his uncle in Reservoir. Gabi had enlisted Amira's English teaching services, finding her through an ad she put on a noticeboard in Safeway. I knew Amira didn't care for Gabi; she just needed the accolade, the martyrdom of dating a black man, a refugee. She'd soon tire of him and his conservative ways and move onto the next fad. I nodded and sipped.

'You know, I just really appreciate his willingness to learn and belong. I admire that. I've never

felt that way – that need, to belong and fit in. I guess I just am who I am. Call it intuition. I think I get it from Mum …' She kept talking.

I stared at her eyes. The colour of the scorched eucalypts that were all over the news. Large, whimsical, Arabian. They were my eyes too, as were the lashes and the heavy eyebrows, the lush lips. We looked identical but for her higher cheekbones and my sharper jaw. Her hair was worn in a messy bun atop her head; mine was clipped close to my scalp. I was taller than her; she was slimmer than me. We shared jeans as teens. It was unspoken but agreed that we looked a lot like the *kalb* we couldn't remember.

Amira's conversation carried on until I thought I was melting into the seat. I panicked and jumped back from the table, but remembered I was stoned and sat down again. Amira's scrunched face was staring back at me.

'What the hell is wrong with you?'

'Nothing, electric shock,' I mumbled.

'Nassim, I know you're stoned, I'm not an airhead. You've been sipping out of an empty mug for the past fifteen minutes.'

I looked into the mug, it was empty and the residual froth had crusted around the edges.

I looked up at Amira and we laughed in unison. The same jovial tone and melody. Stopping for a breath at the same time. The same high-pitched ha-has and low-pitched ohs at the end. Panting and regrouping like a well-sung duet. Beaming with adoration at our similarity. The pear-shaped patron in the corner scoffed at our clamour but the waiter snapped a smile from behind the coffee machine.

'Do you remember Waleed?' I asked Amira. Waleed had been Mum's boyfriend, although she denied it for a few years when we were around thirteen. They'd met at Abla's, the Lebanese sweet shop where Mum used to work.

'Jolly Wally,' said Amira. 'Yeah I remember Jolly Wally. He could barely fit in the driver's seat of his taxi.' I smirked at the memory of him clambering out of the car bit by bit, his limbs like well-dressed hams.

'He was a nice man. He was really nice to Mum and to us. I ran into his son Remi the other day outside Melbourne Uni. Studying a masters degree in engineering. He looked happy and healthy, said he's getting married next year. Bought a house in Pasco Vale.'

'Did you ask him about Waleed?' Amira asked.

'Yeah, I did. He died from stomach cancer two years ago.'

Amira shut her eyes quickly at the news. A single tear dropped off her cheek and landed on the table. I was always baffled by how quickly she produced tears.

'Cancer, cancer. All I fucking hear is cancer.' There was a long silence between us as we launched into a telepathic memorial of Mum in her last days. Lying in bed crying like a child saying she didn't want to leave us. Beseeching us to be happy and fruitful. Kissing our hands with parched lips and deliriously asking Allah who would 'take care of my babies?'. We were twenty at the time.

Amira deliberately cracked the contemplative lull with a change of subject.

'This country is cancerous,' she said. 'Why didn't you come to the rally on Saturday?' She asked the question more as a segue into her spiel rather than as a request for information. I knew the drill and said nothing. And so she started her seemingly rehearsed rant. 'Those motherfuckers. That many of them. Who the hell would have thought they'd turn up in red-necked droves? We weren't prepared. Completely outnumbered. And then the scum-bag pigs spraying us with capsicum spray! Of course they would, they're all on that same bloody Reclaim Australia wagon. Fending off boats and

cowering away from burqas. To think they're actually getting somewhere with their whitewashed, fear-mongering stupidity. All these bored suburban bumpkins falling for that crap because their only recreational activity outside methadone is the local fucking shopping plaza. Nah, this country is dead. A premature teenage death at a backyard party. Overdosed on the same black cocaine chipped away from its core and sold off to the monolith in the north. I don't know what we are going to do, Nick.' The eucalypts in her eyes caught fire again, her mouth downturned forcefully. It was a face I was used to but had never seen on Mum. All of our other faces were Mum's: glee, contentment, elation, depression. But this one, this very one that Amira had on wasn't one of the faces we had fashioned together.

'Amira, don't you think you're being a little dramatic?' The stoned haze was wearing off, I was better prepared for a battle I was hardly bothered to fight.

'You would say that wouldn't you, Nick? You would fucking say that because when have you ever been riled up by anything? When have you ever truly felt passionate about something other than what orifice your dick might be wandering into?'

The pear-shaped patron finally decided she'd had enough. She slapped her *Women's Weekly* shut and hobbled out of the café. The air was soup. I asked the waiter for water and traced my name into the table with my finger. N-a-s-s-i-m. Amira shook her head for too long, staring out the window. And then she started back up again.

'Do you think this well-marketed co-existence is sustainable, Nick? Do you really? Do you think the Sudanese in their neatly stacked boxes on Gertrude Street are going to be allowed such prime real estate for much longer? The Aborigines are already homeless, the blonde bombshells and surfie boys you adore all have some sort of inheritance and the Chinese own everything else. It's a fucking disaster. And we are Arab, Nick! We are Arab.' She was whispering now. 'We'll be the first to go when the shit goes down.' I rolled my eyes and then shut them. 'This country was built on exclusion, Nick. Built on choosing and containing what people those snaggle-toothed boarding-schooled freaks deem appropriate. TV-dinner dad and baker's-arms Beryl are shopping at Aldi and refugees that have fought the high seas to flee persecution are being jailed on a tiny island riddled with wet disease. It's the bloody White Australia policy all over again just twisted to

be a little more palatable by battery-powered news anchors. And when we have something to say about it we are being capsicum sprayed. Don't you see how consuming that is? How inadvertently controlling? We demonise Putin for his iron trials but I commend the guy on being honest about his reign. He gets on a fucking horse and he's a man about his decisions. Our wimpy little frog of a leader jogs around Kirribilli with a bodyguard. He's not a man, he's just some guy in a shirt. Doomed. This country is doomed. And boring.'

I tried not to make it obvious but I was considering the things she said. Without thinking much about it, I asked the next question. 'Do you ever think about getting out of here then? Maybe going to Lebanon. Try to find Dad.' The last words came out hysterical, like a tiny, pointless nursery rhyme.

'We don't even know if he is there,' Amira said. 'But yeah. No harm in trying, right? We could just go and see Lebanon. I reckon Mum would have liked that. Us two, going back, I mean.'

The waiter stacked glasses. We were the only ones left in the café. The heat made the walls weep. I ran my finger upwards on the wall closest to me, collected the juices and sucked my finger. It was that weird late-afternoon moment where places of

business were empty or sleepy, when people should have been having a siesta. Instead they battled their wooziness against the strobe-lit spaces that kept them chugging along.

'I'll look into tickets then,' I said. Amira's eyes widened.

'Easy tiger. I haven't even thought about it properly. Plus I have no money even if I were to go.'

I offered to pay for the ticket. Amira was squeamish, like her bum was itchy but she didn't have the courage to itch it.

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The next morning I went with Grace to St Vincent's to collect her father who had fallen over at the pub and broken his ankle. I always marvelled at the mystery of hospitals. People were opened up and prodded and life ended and began in their rooms.

Craig was sitting in a chair beside a bed, his plastered foot propped on another chair. His face was sullen and caved in like a hungry mouse and he wore the standard-issue hospital gown. His greying hair in messy tufts. A half-eaten bowl of cornflakes lubricated with tea instead of milk sat atop the wheelie table. I remembered that Grace too ate

First published in Seizure by Xoum in 2016

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ISBN 978-1-925143-22-5 (print)
ISBN 978-1-925143-23-2 (digital)

Published in Australia and New Zealand by
Brio Books, an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue, Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia

Internal design and typesetting © Brio Books 2022
Cover illustration by Sam Paine, www.sampaine.com
Edited by Alice Grundy

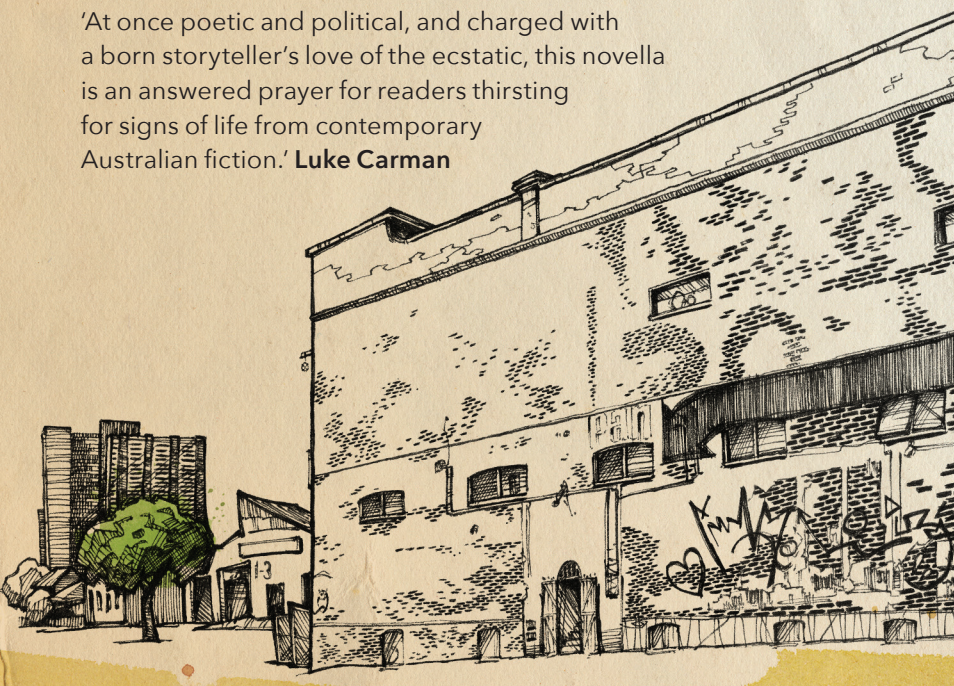
Printed and bound in Australia

booktopia.com.au

Nick is treading water. No boyfriend. No career. Living in a granny flat in Coburg. On a whim he decides to travel with his twin sister, Amira, to Lebanon in search of their estranged father. Their mother, who has passed away a couple of years earlier, only ever referred to their father as the *kalb* – the dog – they know next to nothing about him. In Beirut, Nick and Amira find family, a sense of belonging and surprising answers to questions they hadn't known to ask.

With a razor-sharp wit, incisive social critiques and intensity of feeling, *Populate and Perish* announces George Haddad as an important new player on the Australian literary scene.

'At once poetic and political, and charged with a born storyteller's love of the ecstatic, this novella is an answered prayer for readers thirsting for signs of life from contemporary Australian fiction.' **Luke Carman**



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Cover illustration by Sam Paine