

SHAHEIR BEIRUT

## IMPOSTER SYNDROME

THE DAY MY MOTHER FOUND OUT SHE WAS HAVING TWIN GIRLS, she drove down to St. Rita's chapel, knelt on the pew closest to the patroness' porcelain statue, and cried. It was the happiest day of her life. She was there to give her thanks: just the previous week the Virgin Mary had kissed her swollen belly in a dream before whispering to her that she was going to have twins. This was the fulfilment of that prophecy.

Being pregnant with girls meant that my mother would be denied some traditional customs, but she didn't care. From the moment she learned that she'd one day be able to have children of her own, she knew that she wanted daughters. She always loved dolls as a child, and what's better than dolls that actually breathe, burp, cry, and shit all over the place?

My father wasn't as happy but was good enough of a man never to admit that. He was only ever concerned about who would inherit the family name and the family business, which had been passed down from generation to generation since 1934 and had become one of Cairo's staples in menswear. But gender wasn't that big of a deal, really.

However, that didn't dilute his excitement when the two girls were in fact revealed to be two boys. He cried, which he'd only do again when his father died years later. When the anaesthesia dissipated from my mother's system, and my brother and I were shoved into her face, she was convinced that we were someone else's—that her girls had been swapped in their bassinets with these imposters, like in a movie. After she was persuaded that the imposters were actually her children, she calmed down and held us like all mothers do. And although I'm sure she loved us from the moment our skin touched, I also know that she was mentally calculating the losses and inconveniences the switcheroo would cost her. She'd already bought the silver earrings and miniature dresses. After deciding they weren't wasting the matching pyjama set—an inescapable fate for all twins—I was put into the pink one, my brother in the yellow, and we left the hospital.

Our entire family rejoiced. Boys! We were suddenly getting a proper baby shower and being gifted copious amounts of gold coins. As expected, the story garnered critical acclaim at dinner parties and holiday gatherings. But how did the sonographer not know they were boys? My parents would shrug, laugh with the others, and say that a misreading of a sonogram is rare but not impossible. Since we lived in a third world country, this kind of thing was expected to happen with no need for further explanation.

We're a comedic people—Egyptian cinema is practically dominated by the genre—and so it was easy to see the story for what it was: comedy gold. It became my own party trick when I was old enough. I didn't realize that by telling my friends, expecting cheap dick-size jokes that would make us all laugh, I'd be giving them ammunition for when they'd eventually have no choice but to question far more alarming things about my interests.

I'm fourteen when my mother wakes me up in the middle of the night. "What is it?" I ask, confused.

She's sitting on the side of my race car-shaped bed, which I'd outgrown years before but never changed for nostalgic reasons, and is holding my iPad Air. She looks as sad as she did when her father died in January, as if all the life has been sucked from her face. She speaks and opens my iPad simultaneously. I already know what this is about when she taps on Instagram, and my chest constricts. "I was updating my phone's software and wanted to look up Dina's profile to see some post with a blouse I liked, and I was typing her name in and . . ." Her sentence trails off as she presses on the "d" and "i" keys, and the account "dicksgays3xx98" automatically appears with a circular icon depicting two scruffy white men making out.

"What's that? I don't know what . . ." I can't even finish. All I can think about is that she only found out because of her best friend's name—that this was my slip up after a year of sidesteps and deleted histories. I start crying. I don't want to cry.

"Don't lie."

"I'm not. I don't know who did this. Maybe I'm hacked. I don't know."

"It doesn't look like you're hacked."

"I don't know. I promise, Mom. I don't know."

"If it's not you, then it's your brother." She starts rising from my bed to wake him from down the hall.

She's already won, and I can't afford anyone else knowing. I confess. I

was only experimenting. I'm not gay, I swear. I was just curious. You promise? Yes, I promise. She looks slightly relieved but even more heartbroken. She leaves before I can see her cry.

The man sitting across from me is middle-aged and round. It feels strange to already decide that I hate a person before they've even spoken. I used to love before anything else. There are a lot of books about complex things and intricate concepts in his office, and I hate feeling overpowered, both intellectually and physically. He asks me things about myself, and I reply dryly. The process pains us both.

"What do you like to do in your free time?"

"I listen to music, watch movies, read."

"About what?"

I shrug.

"Are you reading something right now?"

"Yes."

"What's it about?"

"A skilled assassin who's recruited by the king to fight in some fantastical competition."

The man nods thoughtfully. "A boy assassin?"

"A girl."

He affects an "aha" expression, like he won this odd competition between him and a fifteen-year-old. He adjusts his glasses over his nose, and I know he's about to tell me some complex things. "Listen, I'll tell you the same thing I tell everyone. There's a reason you like men. It's very simple. And you can be treated." He lists off some examples of men who have been treated from my affliction. "The reason you are the way you are—all of you—has to do with your upbringing. Your father was probably absent or not as invested in raising you, and your mother was way too overprotective." I nod in defeat, succumbing to these generalized predictors, and my self-hatred becomes annihilating.

At home, I cry in my mom's bedroom, as I've been doing for the past year, and I tell her that I don't want to go again. This is the third therapist, and they're all useless. I tell her that I'm cured. I tell her that I requested to see him and that I think I'm actually good now. I just needed to make sure.

She cries, scared to trust me and be disappointed again, following the same pattern we've upheld since that night in my room. "You promise?"

“I promise.”

We remain in each other’s embrace until our clothes stick together. Relieved that our year of struggle has finally reached its end, she whispers softly, “Every night, I prayed school would call because they found you with a girl in the stall.”

I lick my salty lips and say, “Me too.”

It’s 2019, and the speaker under each beach umbrella is playing “Señorita” by Shawn Mendes and Camila Cabello. I stumble forward with my arm around him and his around me. I’m seventeen and don’t know that I’ll never be seventeen again. We laugh as we make our way through the maze of umbrellas poking out of the sand until we reach our friends, who are sitting on the row nearest to the water. By then, the Mediterranean had become the main witness to my most formative memories.

“Play it cool,” he whispers, already blowing our cover with the smile on his face as he sits next to Dani.

Even in this ruined state, there’s nothing in the world he’d ask of me that I wouldn’t do. I lower myself on a random seat and scroll through my phone while kicking sand. When I look back up, three or four people have flocked around him—friends of friends of friends. Everyone loves him.

She calls my name, smothered by the wind, and a childhood feeling roils up. I debate whether or not I should pretend not to hear it before finally turning. She waves at me to come. I rise from the white plastic chair and walk over, mindful of my steps, maintaining a straight line like in a DUI test.

“What’s up?” I ask once I reach her farther down the shore, closer to where the adults are sitting.

Her stare is rigid. “You’re drunk.”

“No, I’m not.”

She shakes her head in disbelief or even disgust. “I saw you and Fadi walk out of the restroom hugging each other. You’re either drunk or you’re gay.”

At this point, I’m not entirely sure if I’m gay because I have found some interest in girls. I am, however, definitely drunk. “I was hugging him because we’re friends.”

We engage in a staring contest. I’m suddenly fourteen and scared again, hoping she’ll believe me. But she won’t—not after what happened a few

nights ago, when she found me crying in bed because Fadi had told me that he was in love with Alexia. She knew then, and somehow that's when I knew too. I told her the reason I was upset was because he told everyone before me when I should've been the first to know. "Are you sure that's it?" she kept asking. She was kind. I said yeah.

We've hated each other for years, and now I've made her hate her best friend, too, because I fell for her son.

I wake up in the car, and there's smoke coming out of the hood. A mob is gathered around me and the bus I've driven into. "Are you okay?" a man in a striped shirt asks, and I pull the handle open and step out, unable to fully take in my surroundings. Someone says there's blood coming from my face, and I reach with my fingers like they do in films to find that there is. I'm too preoccupied with the wreckage, half of my car compressed like a soda can. I panic.

The phone becomes covered in blood when I hold it up to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hey."

"I crashed the car."

She thinks I'm bluffing because I usually am, taking advantage of her love for me for a quick laugh. After convincing her that I've actually crashed the car, her tone shifts, and she panics too. "Are you okay? What happened?" She starts crying.

"I'm fine. Just please come. Please." I hang up after giving her the address. The people around me say things I don't understand. I reach for the backpack in the backseat and run toward the nearest trashcan, leaving the entire wreckage behind. I pull out the half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's and deposit it gently at the base.

I don't realize that someone is following me and pulling it back out to film the whole thing.

At home, the first thing she says after my father bribes the men into silence is, "You were with him."

"No." I was. I'd just dropped him off. He told me about the new girl he was in love with, and we made out. This was after many failed attempts at getting drunk in vehicles where the furthest we'd gone was kisses on the cheek. I have no idea how she knows that.

“Yes, you were.”

“No.” I’m still quite drunk, and I tell her that I hate her. All I can scream from that point on is that I hate her, I hate her, I hate her. What I mean is that I hate feeling so much shame because of the person I love, that she’s made it impossible to not be scared to death of getting caught, that I have to get drunk to hold him, that I’m stupid enough to think I won’t crash while drinking and driving, and that I’ve just had my first kiss and all I’ll remember is this—us screaming at each other.

It eventually infuriates me enough that I push her to the ground. When my brother and father get involved, I hit them too. The alcohol makes me superhuman, unable to feel their punches, which leave marks that will linger for days to come. I open the front door and run out, screaming that I hate her.

Years later, somewhere on the internet, I happen on the phrase “your parents are just people going through life for the first time.” I almost throw my phone across the room because it’s true. At this point, I’m obsessed with a story from my past—an urban legend in our family lore. When I tell it in front of her at dinner parties, she goes quiet. Like me, she also thinks about all the ifs: if I’m not her actual son, if the sonographer not seeing my penis was somehow predictive of my femininity, if the Virgin Mary kissing her belly was a sign of the resilience she’d need in the future, if the pink pyjamas are to blame, if this woman I’ve tormented is just some innocent stranger and my actual mother is somewhere out there, if there’s some other answer I’ve overlooked—something that would finally crack the code and make my life make sense.

By then, I’ve had my heart broken for the first time. I’ve been betrayed and humiliated. I’ve started university. I’ve cried every night before falling asleep. She calls me. She buys a plane ticket to surprise me, even though our currency’s fucked and we’re losing all our money. She’s forgiven me for hitting her and crashing our car. She hasn’t kicked me out. She tells me she was terrified that I was going to get killed for liking men, like so many Egyptians before me. She’s never been through this before.

Neither have I.