

## **The American Hero Redeemed in Frances Khirallah Noble's *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy***

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### **Abstract:**

The American hero made his literary debut as a rugged individual who exhibited courage, decency, common courtesy to others, but the antihero who lacked most basic values soon stole the stage. Although some consider Kahlil Gibran Hourani, the main character in Noble's novel, an antihero, I argue that Kahlil, a Syrian American man who is abused by men who consider him a terrorist, suffers through the abuse perpetrated against him and emerges from his ordeal with his values intact. After escaping his captors, he embarks on a journey home to his wife, resigned to face her ire; however, during this journey, he finds the courage to stand up for the rights of others, as he does when he helps the illegal aliens being abused by their handler, and he is also still capable of treating other people with courtesy, as he does when he encounters the homeless woman in the Laundromat. Kahlil exhibits courage, empathy, simple human decency, the qualities that define a hero. He is the American hero, redeemed, no longer an antihero.

**Keywords:** Belly dancing, September 11, anti-hero.

Frances Khirallah Noble's *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy* recreates the traditional hero's journey home to his family and to self-awareness. However, because this is a post September 11 novel and because the main character is a fifty-three-year-old Syrian American man, the adventure is an appropriately adult story of seduction that very quickly culminates in betrayal. Perhaps because his wife refuses to believe that he sees the ghost of his grandmother, Kahlil Gibran Hourani feels so lonely that he follows the scent of a woman, Jane Plain, to Santa Vista, California, where Jane is competing in a belly-dancing contest. This trip to Santa Vista is his separation from what he knows as real. At the Palace of Arts where the contest takes place, Kahlil is captured by the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal, taken to a secluded place, and questioned as a terrorist. Being captured by violent men who abuse him tests his character. After he escapes from his captors, Kahlil undertakes a journey home that will further test his character, his sense of decency, and his humanity. Through his ordeal, Kahlil Gibran Hourani proves himself to be an introspective, sensitive man who values other people, a man made of the stuff heroes are made of.

The notion of the American hero has evolved from Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier man to an ordinary literary "every man" like Nick Carraway to bigger-than-life movie action heroes made popular by actors like Bruce Willis and Harrison Ford. Turner's statement that "to the frontier the

American intellect owes its striking characteristics" (9) celebrates the "coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness" that characterized the American frontier man, but it values "that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" (9) that is common to all American heroes, real or fictional ones. Using the qualities identified by Turner, Katie Pretzinger points out that the frontier hero "was an individual who undertook a mission and successfully mastered one or more aspects of an unsettled and often uncertain environment" (37). Pretzinger applies Turner's notion of the frontier hero to men like Charles Lindbergh and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, men who "successfully mastered" their own missions, but she also adds that, during their lives, Lindbergh and Aldrin exhibited courage, the one "basic qualification for the hero role" (39). The point in Pretzinger's essay is that men who master their missions and exhibit courage are in fact American heroes.

The hero in *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy* is an average man, an optician who finds himself caught in the nightmare created by men who hate him, take the law into their own hands, and are themselves defined as heroes by people who share their beliefs. The fire marshal and the man in the brown suit claim to be "keepers of the peace" (*Belly Dancer* 95), but they do not identify themselves as police officers or the FBI; they simply abduct Kahlil, interrogate him for being a terrorist, brutalize him, and threaten that they will "find everything we need to send you away for a long time" (116). Even though they do not appear to be connected to law enforcement, they act as if they are carrying on somebody's orders to detain and interrogate Kahlil. They disrespect him repeatedly by calling him the wrong name or by absurdly made up names like "Huron"; they also simply laugh when Kahlil complains that they cannot do what they are doing because, "I'm a citizen" who has "the right to express my opinions" (94). The man in the brown suit and the fire marshal are themselves ordinary heroes of the far right, a group encouraging "Americans to turn away from liberal misadventures and an emerging multi-cultural America and to embrace a Republican conservatism that privileged the white male, the cult of the individual, and the militarized nation-state" (Graebner 521). To them, Kahlil is the enemy whether he has committed a crime or not.

The man in the brown suit and the fire marshal are the heroes of their own stories. They firmly believe that Kahlil is the enemy, so that justifies taking the law into their own hands and brutalizing him in order to force him to admit that he is a terrorist. Unfortunately, these men are not alone in their fear of Kahlil and others like him, men who can claim their ancestry to Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, or any number of Middle-Eastern countries where the United States is involved in conflict. According to their logic, the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal are heroes because they position themselves as protectors of American values. Jeff House claims that "a culture creates heroes who embody the values it most honors," which is why he adds that for the hero in post World War II America "success isn't found through conformity with social values; it is found through personal integrity, by adherence to one's own morals" (70-71). The problem with this definition of heroism is that it defines both sides of the quarrel in *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy*. When the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal "adhere to [their] own morals," they in fact break the law

and abuse an innocent man. People who agree with their hateful philosophy, however, consider them heroes. Kahlil Gibran Hourani, guilty only of cheating on his wife, becomes the target of these men; his stand against them and escape from their clutches send him on a journey home to self-awareness, the classic journey of ancient literary heroes.

According to Joseph Campbell, the hero is "represented in the rites of the passage: separation-initiation-return" (30). American literature has produced heroes who follow Campbell's scheme for the rites of passage and anti-heroes who tend to break the rules; however, the anti-hero has been the most popular character in American literature since the modernist period, which explains why Carol Fadda-Conrey assumes that Kahlil is an antihero and dismisses *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy* by mentioning in a footnote in one of her articles that the novel is "an antiheroic tale of the middle-aged Syrian American Kahlil Gibran Hourani" (551). Simply defined, the antihero is someone who lacks basic heroic qualities like courage and morality associated with traditional heroes, but this does not define Kahlil. Shadi Neimneh, in "The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction," compares the antihero to the hollow men in T. S. Eliot's poem and adds that "the hollow men are spiritually and culturally lacking in the substance of traditional heroes" (76) like courage, selflessness, humility, moral values. Neimneh's excellent study focuses on characters from the modernist period. She points out that "modern anti-heroes are lacking in largeness, grace, power, and social success" (77) because the conditions of the time create them. She argues that "a fragmented society—torn by war, conflicting values, cultural crisis, and different aspects of modernity—produces its own heroic model: sick, anti-social, and introspective anti-heroes whose salvation is individualistic in the midst of social and cultural disarray" (78).

Neimneh rightly points out that characters who emerge in the early twentieth century are the product of their time because "Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx dealt a heavy blow to man's belief in his dignity, innocence, and secure position" (76) in the world. Modernist writers who had read the work of these thinkers were influenced by their ideas and by what was happening around them. Thus, "the anti-hero became the expected presence in many modernist novels" because "a changing society with a changing cultural climate necessitated a change in the models of heroism" (76). According to Neimneh, a character like Jake Barnes "is the emasculated, anti-heroic narrator" of *The Sun Also Rises* because he is "a product of violent modernity," and the novel's "anti-heroism is symbolically generalized within a moral wasteland of war damage, empty relations, drunkenness, and promiscuity" (82). Jake Barnes is a product of his time. He is a broken man who can only be an anti-hero.

Interestingly, Neimneh goes on to argue that the anti-hero can redeem himself when he exhibits qualities such as empathy and common courtesy. She redefines the anti-hero when she looks at Joyce's Leopold Bloom and posits that, in *Ulysses*, Joyce "explores how we can find the potential for modern heroism in the very anti-heroic" and adds that Leopold Bloom "is not entirely devoid of heroism," but "his heroism stems from the internal effort of his mind to endure betrayal, reconcile his life conflicts and demands, and impose order on the chaotic flux of modern experience" (80). Although the novels in which Leopold Bloom and Jake Barnes appear were published within four

years of each other and *Ulysses* was published first in 1922, Neimneh can see a potential for something other than anti-heroic hedonism in Leopold Bloom's character. For Neimneh, Bloom's "heroism is being a sensitive human and a pacifist in a dehumanized, violent age" (80), which suggests that Neimneh is rewriting what it means to be heroic.

Neimneh uses Bloom's apparent lack of heroism, one of the qualities previously used to define the anti-hero, in order to see the hero differently. She suggests that the modern hero can undergo the same pattern internally "or without the grandeur associated with myth" in order to be considered a hero. For this redefined hero,

The journey without becomes a journey within the mind or within mundane surroundings; the initiation becomes a lesson he learns about his limitations and weaknesses, and the return journey can be a survival in a chaotic world reinvigorated by the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. (78-79)

The point made by this revision of the anti-hero is that "the modernist anti-hero can transcend the ironic to effect some sort of regeneration or salvation" because "in a dehumanized machine age, humanity and honesty, or what remains thereof, can redeem" (78). The new hero does not require the supernatural qualities of a mythological hero. He can simply be the best kind of human that he can be.

The redemption of the American hero is written large in *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy*, a post September 11 novel in which Kahlil Gibran Hourani, an American of Syrian ancestry, is both tempted and tested, lured away from home, and made to suffer before he can embark on a dangerous journey home during which he will prove his courage and decency. At the beginning of the novel, Kahlil does not notice that, "in the weeks, months, and years after 9/11, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially" ("Arabs and Muslims in the Media" 161). Evelyn Alsultany points out that, "according to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001" (161). Kahlil, however, appears to be unconcerned about the anti-Arab fervor raging across his country after the September 11 attacks. His ignorance of the historical moment in which he is living is very disturbing and reminds the reader of Adrienne Rich's call to "Catch if you can your country's moment" ("An Atlas" 12), a call that Kahlil fails to heed.

Kahlil's lack of concern with the anti-Arab feeling in his country may be an allusion to his innocence and reminiscent of R. W. B. Lewis's claim in 1955 that the American hero was "a new kind of hero, the heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes" (5) closely resembling Adamic innocence, something which is hardly possible in contemporary America, but is in fact the reason for Kahlil's "fall." He does drive off to Santa Vista, California, chasing a woman, which is what the bite of that original apple in the Garden of Eden was about. Lewis posits in *The American Adam* that because America was "new" "unlike the Roman myth, too—which envisaged life within a long, dense corridor of meaningful history—the American myth saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted

second chance for the human race "(5). Lewis's argument that American writers were not "burdened" by the European history that they had left behind allows him to claim that American writers create a brand new man in the new world garden, a man "emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (5), a statement that contemporary writers appear to be challenging when they create characters who cannot be "emancipated from history."

Lewis' version of Adamic innocence is not available to contemporary American writers or the heroes whom they create because, as Adrienne Rich reminds us, "history is made of people like us, carriers of the behavior and assumptions of a given time and place" ("*Resisting Amnesia*" 144). Kahlil cannot be "emancipated from history" because the historical fervor happening after the September 11 attacks forces him to come in contact with people who hate him and consider him guilty of a crime that he did not commit. They punish him simply because he is an Arab, which is what the statement about the "inheritance of family and race" refers to. Kahlil's Arab ancestry marks him as dangerous at the post September 11 historical moment, so his innocence does not matter to the men who abduct him. He is at that moment "bereft of ancestry" only because his *Situe*, his connection to his family history and his favorite family member, has died, but he does identify as Syrian, and he will demonstrate throughout the novel his preference for Syrian food and culture. What he does not understand when the novel opens is that his Syrian ancestry has suddenly become a problem for other people.

At the beginning of the novel, Kahlil does not appear to fear that people can harm him simply because he is Syrian, but he is very aware of how he looks to other people. When he goes looking for Jane Plain's apartment so that he can deliver her glasses, he introduces himself to the manager of the complex, a white man who immediately asks him, "What the hell kind of name is that?" Kahlil assumes that the manager is asking about Jane Plain's name. He answers, "Good question. One wonders what her parents had in mind" (*Belly Dancer* 16), but the manager very quickly corrects him, "No, yours." Kahlil is so comfortable as an American that he does not realize that people will judge him because of his ancestry. His inability to judge the motives of others becomes clear when he explains to the man who questions his ethnicity that "my mother named me after our most famous poet," but "when the man looked empty at him," he explains that the poet was "Kahlil Gibran, the famous Lebanese American poet" (17). What the white manager hears in this explanation is that the man standing in front of him has just admitted to being Lebanese.

The manager of the apartment complex knows nothing about poets or how long this particular Lebanese has lived in America, but in his mind Lebanon is associated with Arabs and he could not have missed news reports arguing that Arabs were enemies of the state. Being named after a Lebanese poet makes Kahlil guilty by association; he becomes the dangerous Other who is somehow trespassing on the white man's turf. This man's almost immediate reaction is, "for all I know you could be a terrorist," to which Kahlil responds, "I'm not a terrorist. I'm an optician" (17), but the man has already tagged Kahlil as a terrorist simply because of the way he looks. Interestingly,

Kahlil elicits positive responses from his women customers who tell him that he "reminds [them] of Omar Sharif" or that "he looks like Rossano Brazzi" (5), attractive, foreign-looking men who were usually cast as lovers in Hollywood movies.

Writing about how the perception of Arab Americans radically changes in the United States after September 11, Carol Fadda-Conrey explains that "the post-9/11 backlash against Arabs and Muslims in the US ultimately erases internal differences within the Arab American community, depicting all Arabs in the US (whether they are recent immigrants, second-, third-, or fourth-generation Arab Americans, residents, or students and regardless of their varying political and religious beliefs) as the enemy or at least as a potential enemy" ("Arab American Citizenship" 541). Kahlil is Syrian American, a Christian, and his family has been in the United States since the 1920s when his grandfather arrived. Philip M. Kayal points out that "nearly ninety percent of all Arabic-speaking immigrants arriving [in the United States] before 1924 were Syrian Christians from Mount Lebanon who were either Roman Catholics of Eastern rite or Syrian (Eastern) Orthodox. They were not 'Arabs' in the popular sense of the word. Nor were they Turks or Assyrians classified by the Immigration Department. Rather they were Semitic Christians who were Arab only in culture" (409-410). The man who questions Kahlil's loyalty to the United States by calling him a terrorist does not know the history of Syrian immigration to the United States. He wants to see difference as dangerous, so Kahlil's connection with a Lebanese poet, even if it is in name only, automatically brands him as a terrorist.

What Kahlil does not understand at the beginning of the novel is that the world has changed. As Georgiana Banita points out, "after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as second-rate citizens but also as social hazards" ("Race, Risk, and Fiction" 246). Kahlil is still the same man whom he has always been, but other people now see him differently. When he continues to look for Jane Plain's apartment, Kahlil finds himself "moving quickly through the courtyard with his flashlight on." He is looking for an address through the complex but he is also trying to look inconspicuous, "removing, he hoped, any potential fears that he was a prowler or burglar" (*Belly Dancer* 17). At this point, before he is abducted, brutalized, and questioned by the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal, he simply tries to avoid bringing suspicion to himself, but by the end of the novel, as he makes his journey home in a train car, Kahlil realizes that "he was not merely an illegal passenger, trespasser, hobo—which seemed bad enough—but an *Arabic* illegal passenger, trespasser, hobo" (243). He learns to question his own right to exist, to move freely in a country he had until then considered his own. He tells himself that, "when he got home and had time to reflect, he'd have to rethink his mixture: how many parts Arab, how many parts husband; how many parts father; how many parts optician, church member, voter (not down party lines, usually). Man?" (243). By the end of the novel, Kahlil has been brutally forced to question his place in America.

Kahlil Gibran Hourani begins the story as a businessman, a respectable member of the Hashanian Mutual Aid Society whose members gather in the parish hall of Saints Peter and Paul

Syrian Orthodox Church. This society, however, is barely surviving. At 53 years of age, Khalil is the youngest member in a group of thirteen, and he understands "only a little Arabic" (4), which suggests that his connection to his Syrian past is weak because, as Mohammed Albalawi points out, "Arabs are an ethnic group whose defining characteristic is the language" (201). Unfortunately, "the Arabic language, for the most part, was not passed down from immigrants to children" (149) according to Steven Salaita. Khalil looks Arab enough to be questioned by the manager or targeted by men who hate him, but he neither speaks Arabic nor knows much about his ancestral history. However, after September 11, his racial difference makes him a target, which is why his journey home becomes so significant as it allows him to define himself as an Arab in America, but an Arab who does not give in to hate and retains his values, even as he is brutalized. Kahlil survives his ordeal as a hero, a decent, courageous man who continues to help other people even at his own risk.

In order to ponder the possibility that Kahlil could be an American hero, the author burdens him with impotence, Jake Barnes' problem. The novel opens with Kahlil's admission that he may have fallen sleep on his wife the night before as they were making love. He admits that "he wanted to please her" and "he tried," but "it was no use," so his wife "sent him to the doctor" (1) to discuss his problem. Instead of feeling like a lover, Kahlil feels "like a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders" (4) and, as he tells his psychiatrist about his conversation with his dead grandmother, as "a man without direction crippled in my search for truth" (4). He tells the psychiatrist that "he would have prayed, but he wasn't sure God would approve of what he was asking. Not that he was sure he believed in God anymore." At the ripe old age of 53, Kahlil is approaching "despair" (4). He may not know that people hate him for who he is, but he is painfully aware that the world is in trouble and he is burdened by it. Thus it makes sense that, at Kahlil's lowest point, a woman who claims to be named Jane Plain should enter his store and speak the words, "You're open?" (5), suggesting that perhaps Kahlil is not only open for business but also open to other possibilities.

Even before he learns her name, Kahlil is drawn to Jane. He follows her around the store "in his practiced professional manner—directly behind, just enough distance between them—ready to assist, to accommodate, to guide" and "close enough to notice her tantalizing scent," which "seemed to fill up the room. Pungent. Musky. Distracting" (6). He is so intoxicated by her scent that, even when she sits directly in front of him so that he could "finalize his measurements" and they "could feel each other's breath" (7), he still does not notice that he is in the presence of a temptress, a woman who will lure him away from his home. She tells him that her name is Jane Plain, and she is "a dancer, an actress. Lots of things" (7). When she orders her glasses, he is so taken with her that "he resolutely refused identification when she paid with an out-of-town check" (8) and thereby risked losing money on his most valuable merchandise, something that he would never have done before.

Kahlil's folly in trusting Jane Plain marks the beginning of a journey that will teach him a few things about himself. Her presence in his shop draws him out and makes him behave unlike himself. When Jane Plain's glasses arrive at the shop, he calls her and leaves her several messages to come pick them up, but she does not answer. This once again leads him to behave recklessly as he sees "the box

containing her glasses [sink], like lead, into the top of the display counter," and he claims that "their weight was tipping the store" (14). The fact that Jane Plain neither answers his messages nor comes to pick up the glasses could be part of her plan to lure him to her. Kahlil's need to see her again leads him to imagine that the four pairs of glasses weight so heavily on the counter that "soon the floor would be at a steep angle and all the cabinets and fixtures and inventory, the velvet stool, and the one potted plant, would slide to one side of the room, pile up, break, spill" (14). Something magical, the weight of her glasses sitting on a counter, forces him out of his comfort zone and into the outside world where he will soon be tested. Kahlil's attempt to find Jane Plain begins his journey and culminates with his encounter with the manager of the apartment complex and a very hard and painful fall.

Pursuing Jane Plain leads Kahlil to a great fall, both literally and figuratively. When he reaches her apartment complex, he finds himself tracking "her by the scent of her special perfume," and "just when he thought he sensed a whiff of it, just when he breathed deeply to inhale more, the toe of his left shoe caught in a hole in a stretch of green indoor/outdoor carpeting." Tripping on a carpet causes "a swift, hard fall," a literal "fall that conspired with the force of gravity to inflict as much dull, deep pain as possible" (18). When he hits the ground hard, Kahlil suffers in silence, but he does not change his mind; instead, he alters his narrative in order to "recast himself in his own mind as one of the Knights of the Roundtable: injured, but undeterred. Or as Odysseus, overcoming obstacles in pursuit of his quest" (18). Instead of assuming that perhaps his attempt to find Jane Plain was a little too dangerous, that the fall was a sign that he should go home to his wife, and that his encounter with the racist manager was too clear a sign of what he could expect from others like him, Kahlil returns home even more determined to find Jane Plain and casts himself in the role of a knight in search of his maiden.

Kahlil's pursuit of Jane Plain also causes a figurative fall. Until he goes off in search of Jane Plain, Kahlil has been loyal to his wife, a fact that he admits to the men who question him when he says, "until Jane I was completely faithful" (140). He does not even know how to lie to his wife and sweats profusely when he lies at the airport. After many years of marriage and the birth of two children who are now grown, Kahlil and Sophie are not as invested in their marriage as they once had been because, "in spite of reasonably good intentions, Kali and Sophie had worn each other down to about the same degree" (32). Apparently, his "immersion in unsolvable cosmic problems" pits him against her "focus on inner pains partly induced by her failure to capture her husband's attention" (32), so they do not enjoy a very good relationship, but neither one has strayed. The fact that he falls asleep when they are making love suggests that he is bored, not impotent, which is the problem associated with an anti-hero like Jake Barnes. Kahlil is not a broken man; he is simply a man so distracted by the unsolvable problems of the world that he does not know how to deal with his immediate reality, like his wife. His figurative fall comes when he blatantly lies to Sophie in order to pursue Jane Plain and thereby damages the sense of values by which he has lived up to that point.

In order to pursue Jane Plain, Kahlil tells Sophie that he is going to a conference in Cincinnati. Sophie insists "on driving him to the airport" (35), which complicates his plan for a quick

get away because, at the airport, she also insists on waiting until he boards the plane and, worse, helping him to carry his luggage. He had planned to rent a car to drive out to Santa Vista, but having lied to Sophie he actually has to go to the airport and act as if he were going to board. Already nervous about lying to his wife and about having seen his dead grandmother appear near by, Kahlil explodes when Sophie "reached for the briefcase a second time." He says no "in a voice so loud it carried over the commotion of the check-in line to the X-ray machine" (37), which of course means that he gets noticed by the people around him. Immediately, the not-so-innocent loud statement of a man lying to his wife takes on a darker meaning as "the security guard took note of the anxious expression on a man's red and perspiring face, the man's excessive hold on a briefcase, and the agitation of the woman who accompanied him" (37). Lying to Sophie about the reason for his trip exposes Kahlil to the scrutiny of others.

Kahlil's "agitation" makes him a target because men like him are no longer allowed to display their private emotions in public in the new American landscape. As King Hainsworth points out, after September 11, "many Arab Americans" had to contend with "a loss of personal safety" (201), so a display of emotions at the airport is hardly a good idea. After Sophie finally leaves, Kahlil attempts to rent a car and tells Ruchelle, the trainee behind the counter, that "saving money just doesn't matter." He wants "to rent a car as quickly as possible" (*Belly Dancer* 38) and then commits the colossal blunder of telling the truth when she asks about the purpose of his trip. He tells her that he is going to a "belly dancing contest" (39), information that she uses when she reports him as a "suspicious person" (40) because, according to her, "he'd convicted himself." She provides as evidence of his conviction

that name; the name of his business; the way he brushed off every good point she made in her sales pitch; the way he got impatient when she asked him a question; saying he didn't know where he'd be staying. But the clincher, the most important evidence against him, was that MONEY WAS NO OBJECT. (40)

Everything Kahlil says in response to the trainee's questions marks him as suspicious, and she even adds at the end of her report that "he says he's going belly dancing, but he didn't look like a belly dancer to me" (40). A relatively foolish young woman passes judgment on this man and, thereby, complicates his life forever.

At the Palace of Fine Arts where the belly-dancing contest takes place, Kahlil is confronted with a knowledge that comes to him instinctively, essentially. As he observes the dancers, he asks himself, "Who were these women? Why were they doing this?" (54). From what he can see, the dancers on stage "didn't look like the dancers he remembered. These moved in fits and starts and, heavy or thin, looked angled and pointy and sharp" (54). One of the women on stage is Jane Plain, who tells him when she comes up to him, "I'm trying to look authentic" and follows up with "people have certain visual expectations for a belly dancer" (54). Kahlil answers, "how true" (55), but he has already proven that he also has visual expectations because, when he sees the women belly dancing, he thinks they are not very good at it; however, he recognizes the teacher as someone "from the old days." Kahlil remembers details about his past when he sees the dancers. He notices that the teacher

"did anything she wanted to up there. She had authority. And no desire to please. She teased her students, danced past the steps they knew. In curves they couldn't follow" (54). As far as Kahlil is concerned, the teacher is the real belly dancer, but he does not tell Jane Plain what he is thinking. He has driven across California to spend time with her, so he knows better than to start their time together with an argument about how authentic a belly dancer she really is because this would accentuate the differences in their cultures.

After breaking the law by parking in a no parking zone, getting a ticket from a policeman, and obviously getting noticed once again, Kahlil finally gets to take Jane Plain back to the hotel with him. When she exits the Palace of Fine Arts and sees him waiting in the no parking zone, she simply "opened the back door of the car and tossed in her bag and carefully hung up some plastic-covered clothes on the hook by the window. Then [she] got into the front seat next to him and asked, 'where are we staying?'" (56) as if this had been the plan all along. Jane exhibits no coyness, no subterfuge, no pretense. She sees him in the car and assumes that he has come for her. As she sits next to him, he "recognizes" her almost for the first time because "the car filled with the smell of ginger and citrus and sweat" (56), the very scent that drew him out of his home and into danger; however, the fact that she gets in the car without asking makes him wonder who this woman is. Even though Kahlil likes the intimate connection that he makes with Jane Plain, he asks her what she would have done if he had not come along, "how would [your life] had unfolded if I hadn't come along yesterday? Where would you have stayed?" Her absurd answer is, "Is my Kali jealous?" (60), which does not answer the question. Kahlil wants to know how she could come to another city far from her home without having rented a room for the night or even having the money to rent a room. He thinks that she does not make plans, but the reader begins to suspect that perhaps Jane's plan includes luring Kahlil to Santa Vista. It is also entirely possible that Kahlil asks Jane what she would have done without him because he wants this woman to validate him, to make some statement of appreciation for him.

During their two days together, Kahlil learns very little about Jane, but the one thing that stands out is that she eats well. After they spend their first night together, Kahlil orders breakfast, and she eats so much that he makes a mental note that "he had never seen a woman eat so much: pancakes, bacon, eggs, toast, hashed browns, orange juice, coffee" which "she bit and chewed in ceaseless motion" (61). She eats before and after a performance, and this makes it look suspicious when, the night of the performance, she refuses to eat. When he offers her food, she tells him, "not before a performance" (75), but it later becomes clear to the reader that Jane refuses to eat from the plate that he offers her because she knows that the food has been laced with something that will soon incapacitate him. As soon as she refuses the food, "the man in the brown suit walked around the buffet tables, loading his plate" (75), although he is never seen eating. Shortly thereafter, when the performance begins, "Kali appeared to pass out." This is when "the man in the brown suit grabbed Kali's arm, and the fire marshal moved quickly to assist. Together they pulled Kali out of the row and out of the room to the elevator" (76). The food that Jane Plain refuses weakens Kahlil to such an extent that he cannot protest or defend himself from being dragged into the worst experience of

his life. The men put him "into the back of a dark sedan" (76), a fact that will later become significant when Kahlil escapes from his captors and the men use the dark sedan to chase him. This is the same "brown sedan that had been trailing him since he turned the key in the ignition and left the airport" (42), but Kahlil does not know this.

The man in the brown suit and the fire marshal take Kahlil to "'the basement of an abandoned building'" located "'about fifteen miles north'" (91) of Santa Vista, according to Kahlil's grandmother's ghost who has been carefully monitoring everything from the safety of her invisibility. When he asks her, "who are these people," her wise response is "'the cast varies, but the script remains the same'" because, according to her, "'it's the same everywhere, only the uniforms change'"(92). When they interrogate him, "Kali felt the proportion of fear to courage shifting slightly. More courage. Less fear" (93). Even though he tells them his name, they mock him and call him "Mr. Huron" (93), "Harary" (106), "Harmouni" (119), anything but his name until they start calling him Kali. Kahlil "wondered what they thought they were accomplishing by it" (117). They threaten his family when they tell him, "'We know what Philip is, don't we?'" (123), suggesting that Philip, his son, is gay, but Kahlil's answer is, "I don't care. I never cared." However, to scare him, they add that "'Philip's motorcycle is vulnerable to blowouts'" (123), indicating that they could hurt his son.

Kahlil tries to protect his family, but he does not react the way that the two men expect him to react. He is not afraid of them, and at one point he attacks the man in the brown suit; the next day when the questions begin again, the man's "lips were split top to bottom in several places; there were handprints around his neck" (116). Even though Kahlil realizes that they could kill him, "in spite of this grim possibility, however, Kali stood his ground. He no longer dreaded what might happen, because it seemed to have happened. He had confronted a real calamity, an unavoidably immediate and personal event, and made it through" (117). Kahlil confronts the violence perpetrated by his captors with courage and dignity. He not only defends himself against their abuse but he also refuses to side with them in their hatred of his son's possible homosexuality.

That he fights back against the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal demonstrates Kahlil's courage. The fact that at no point during his ordeal does he ever claim to be the "right" kind of Arab demonstrates that Kahlil is a man of honor. Carol Fadda-Conrey points out in "Arab American Citizenship in Crisis" that "according to the binary logic shaped by post-9/11's 'citizen-patriot' dictum, the good Arabs are those who successfully and consistently distance themselves politically, religiously, and often even physically from the bad Arabs, or those bodies both in the Arab world and in the US purportedly bearing the neo-Orientalist designations of fundamentalism, terrorism, and cultural stagnation" (536). Kahlil does not attempt to paint himself as a "good Arab" in order to escape his ordeal. Instead, he questions his captors, reminds them "'I'm an American citizen! I was born here'" (*Belly Dancer* 79), and remains true to his story, which is the truth. He never denies his ancestry or argues that he is Christian instead of Muslim. He does not give his captors what they want from him, an admission that he is not "one of them."

Through the beatings and the interrogations, Kahlil's story remains the same. He tells them about his attempt to deliver Jane Plain's glasses and finding a note on her door telling him where to go; then, he states, "I honestly don't now [sick] how she knew I was coming, do you?" One of the men quickly answers, "Of course not. How would we know?" (110), but his quick answer and his sense of outrage leave the reader wondering about the connection between these men and Jane Plain. When the fire marshal asks Kahlil, "You expect us to believe that you weren't going down there to get a whiff of Jane again? To inhale those perfumed oils she wears?" the man in the brown suit inadvertently adds, "Citrus and ginger' [ . . . ] 'She mixes it herself" (109). When he hears this, "Kali winced" (110) because he hears what he does not want to hear, that Jane Plain is either connected to this man or that she has already taken up with another man. Either way, Kahlil now has a clearer picture of the woman whose scent lured him to Santa Vista. Eventually, the men change tactics and bring in two "prisoners," Orville and Shadrack, a swindler and a rapist, to get "the truth" out of Kahlil. Orville tells him that their presence in that room is his fault because he and Shadrack "were, conducting our business at the Empire Motor Hotel [ . . . ] and we got scooped up in your net" (130). Orville wants Kahlil to believe that police officers went to the motel to investigate his disappearance but, when they could not find him, arrested him and Shadrack.

The assumption is that, if Kahlil feels responsible for Orville's and Shadrack's arrest, he may be willing to talk. Orville tells Kahlil a few things about himself and then encourages him to "relate everything in detail. From the beginning. Leaving out nothing," but he makes the mistake of adding too much information when he says, "starting with when Jane Plain brought in her three prescriptions and ordered four pairs of glasses" (133), information that Kahlil had not given him or his other interrogators. Kahlil asks him, "How did you know she had three prescriptions?" (134), but he now knows that the presence of these two men in his cell is part of the plot to get him to "talk" and somehow implicate him in a terrorist conspiracy. Orville commiserates with him when he tells him, "terrorists are getting even poorer treatment these days than we are." Kahlil once again states, "I'm not a terrorist" (127), but he knows that he is wasting his time because "the truth had done [him] no good whatsoever since his abduction" (136). The men who abduct him are not interested in the truth.

Eventually, Kahlil decides to speak because he realizes that "this may be his last—and only—opportunity to make a complete record of all the things he wanted to say." He believes that "he was probably going to be killed before this was all over," so he resolves that, "if it turned out he was going to die here, he'd die having said it all" (137). Interestingly, he believes that "he'd lost the power of speech" because "his struggle to see and understand the collision of personal decision with the forces of history had shut him down" (138), but when he speaks he simply relates his personal history. He tells Orville and Shadrack about Jane, about following her to Santa Vista and spending the night with her in the motel. He admits that, "until Jane I was completely faithful" (140), but Orville is not interested in the details of Kahlil's life. He wants to hear about his "Arab brethren" (140) who "embrace the jihad" (141). Kahlil responds, "I don't divide the world into Arab and non-Arab or Muslim and non-Muslim. I don't think in those terms," to which Orville replies, "Then you're one of the few these days who doesn't" (141).

Kahlil does not answer, but Shadi Neimneh's statement that Bloom's "heroism is being a sensitive human and a pacifist in a dehumanized, violent age" (80) applies to Kahlil in this case because, even though he does not think of himself as a hero, he behaves like one when his moral code keeps him from claiming that he is different from the terrorists, that he is a "good" Arab and therefore deserves better treatment.

By this point, it is clear even to Kahlil that Orville and Shadrack are in the cell to continue the interrogation from a different angle. Instead of beating him, Orville tries to draw words out of him. What he gets from Kahlil is the admission, "I've just tried to live a good life" (141) and a few basic details about his very ordinary life, like his involvement with the Hashanian Mutual Aid Society and the shame that he now feels over the fact that, when he was a boy, he felt shame that his father was considered a "colored man" by other kids at school. Kahlil worries that "his life with Sophie was probably over" (148) because he lied to her, and he now admits to himself that Jane is "an awkward, inarticulate belly dancer" because belly dancing "wasn't in her blood" (149). He tries to tell Orville about "his immortal soul. For, it seemed to him as he spoke, in that particular room, that he had one" (149), but Orville is not interested in Kahlil's philosophical musings any more than Sophie had been. He tells him "Let's wrap it up, Kahlil" (149), which at this point is practically impossible because Kahlil is pondering the seriousness of his crime, his sin against Sophie. He tries to diminish its seriousness by asking, "didn't statistics show that adultery was a common occurrence in modern society? Not the end of the world by any means. There, he admitted it: he'd committed a simple act of adultery. Or two. And he was appropriately ashamed" (149-150). Orville's response is, "You've moved in a very narrow world, Kahlil" (150), which may be the reason why, by the next day, Orville and Shadrack are gone, the door to the room is left open, his wallet and shoes are at the door, and Kahlil can finally escape.

Fearing for his life, Kahlil runs to a Laundromat where he finds an old woman who allows him to demonstrate his generosity. When the woman sneaks up beside him, he says, "You surprised me"; the woman "pointed her index finger at her head and spun it around in a circle," telling him that she was crazy. His response is, "Crazy? Ah, well. Me, too," and even though he "was desperate for something to drink," when he buys a soda from the coke machine, he hands it to her, saying, "Here, you take it" (153), and then he buys another one for himself. Consideration for the needs of others is not one of the virtues that people associate with heroes, but a redeemed American hero exhibits his own virtues. He is what contemporary Americans refer to as an "ordinary hero," risen from what William Graebner calls "the thesis of the new social history" which posits "that ordinary people in every situation, no matter how difficult, could and did shape and give meaning and dignity to their own lives" (542). Kahlil thinks of the woman's needs before he satisfies his own. In spite of what he has suffered, he does not forget his manners or neglect to feel sympathy for this woman who appears to be homeless. What happens next is a glorious, magical moment as the woman "stood and began swishing the seven or eight skirts she was wearing back and forth in time to the music." She was "directing her nearly toothless smile, radiantly, in his direction. 'Well . . . how nice,' he said, because it would have been rude to ignore such sincere attention and besides—whether she knew it

or not—she could be somebody's grandmother, somebody's *situe*" (*Belly Dancer* 152). Kahlil pays attention to the dance because he is a kind man and because he has respect for his elders, as his culture has taught him.

Even though he was exhausted, hungry, afraid that the men who brutalized him were looking for him, Kahlil stops to watch the woman dance. When his captors come to the Laundromat and ask the woman if she has seen "any suspicious characters in here this evening?" (155), she points "directly to the industrial-sized dryer into which he had climbed" (156). The man who asks the question ignores her pointing and calls her a "fucking nutcase" (156), even though he would have found Kahlil, the "suspicious character" that he was looking for, if he had paid attention. He stays true to who he has been and once again ignores the truth in favor of passing judgment on other people. The homeless woman also stays true to who she is and innocently points to the dryer in which Kahlil is hiding, but she does not do it out of hatred or malice. Unlike Jane Plain, the woman at the Laundromat simply answers the question truthfully. Fortunately for Kahlil, his abductors are not interested in the truth.

This is the beginning of Kahlil's journey home, a journey that will take him through yet another series of experiences with people who are not what they claim to be, but he must find the truth and learn from it. He has already figured out that Jane was a fake, and he also understands that his captors may have been independent agents or working with the authorities. While he is at the Laundromat, before the men come looking for him, he "had decided to make his way to a busy street, flag down a car, get to the police, and go home. Or, maybe go home first and then call the police"; however, because of what he has suffered, he wonders if "his interrogators *were* the police" (155). If this is the case, he cannot expose himself; he was a man "kidnapped and injured, the object of a manhunt. A fugitive avoiding his pursuers" (160), and he is now convinced that "the fire marshal and the man in the brown suit *were* the authorities" because "they had acted like they were the authorities" (161). Nothing that he sees is what it appears to be, but even fraudulent things can teach him a lesson.

Hitching a ride in a big rig is a quintessentially American experience for men who find themselves in trouble or simply on the road. For Kahlil, the journey home begins when a big rig slows down and the driver shouts at him to "get in fast" (162), and he does. The driver tells him that he is driving on that road by chance because "two cars going northbound on the freeway ran head-on into each other" and caused an accident that was, according to the driver, "a real incinerator" (165). This accident causes the detour that brings Benny to this road. Kahlil and the reader will find out later that the two cars that collide are Kahlil's "Tyrolean blue rental sedan" and the sedan driven by the man in the brown suit. The accident leaves "the shells of two burned-out vehicles, the ashy remains of four bodies, and three heads" (253), but Sophie is notified that her husband is dead because his "wallet flew from Shadrack's hands out of the window [. . .] and landed safe and sound, with Kali's driver's license and credit cards" (254) in it. The authorities assume that the headless body is Kahlil's body because his driver's license is found in Shadrack's wallet. When Kahlil returns home claiming to be alive, the police, instead of investigating what happened, are told "to find out what Kali knew and then put a lid on it. No further publicity, no arrests, no nothing" (255). Kahlil then knows that "the

reason they didn't ask about the man in the brown suit, the fire marshal, and Orville and Shadrack was because they *did* know about them. And they didn't want him to know they knew" (257). His suspicion that he could not have gone to the police for assistance after he escaped his captors is now confirmed.

Benny, the driver who picks him up, tells him almost immediately that he is carrying "a few Mexicans" (166). Kahlil points out that carrying Mexicans is "illegal," but Benny replies, "it's inevitable" (166). When Kahlil says that perhaps he should get out because he has "enough troubles as it is" (166), Benny admits,

'I can't pull over on the freeway just to let you out. That'll bring the highway patrol down on me for sure.'

'True,' Kali agreed reluctantly.

'And you don't look like an innocent bystander.'

'True again,' Kali said.

'I have a regular stop in a while. You can get out there. Meanwhile, try to relax. Take a nice, hot shower. You could use one.' (167)

Interestingly, when Benny's "regular stop" arrives and Kahlil has the opportunity to get off the rig to go home, he chooses to stay. It would have been nice if this unlikely hero had by this point already decided to do something heroic like helping the Mexicans who are hiding in the back of the rig, but he has not yet met them. He does not yet know that the Mexicans are in danger. His reason for choosing to extend his journey by staying in the rig is his fear that, "once he went back he'd have to explain his disappearance, why he looked like he did, and everything else. He'd have to confess his lies and hope for forgiveness" (172). For the first time, Kahlil takes the coward's way out. He tries to justify his choice by thinking that "there was a possibility that he was still in danger and that going home would bring that danger to his wife and family and friends," but he is really afraid "to endure the torrent of Sophie's emotions" (172), so "the freeway signs came and went" (173) without his making the choice to get out.

Kahlil chooses the journey because he fears confronting his wife. This cowardly choice, however, puts him in the truck when he needs to protect the Mexicans against Mario. Benny thinks that he is helping the Mexicans to find new lives in America. What Benny does not know is that Mario, the man who travels with the Mexicans, is a "coyote," their smuggler and captor. When Benny stops at the Galaxy Casino, Kahlil visits the Mexicans in the hidden compartment in the back of the truck. Even though the only one who speaks English is Mario, Kahlil immediately figures out that something is wrong. Innocently, Kahlil tries to tell the Mexicans a story, something he has learned from the ghost of his grandmother during his journey, but the Mexicans do not react. When Kahlil tells Mario that he is "trying to comfort" them, Mario asks, "'With a fairy tale?'" (185). Mario is a cynic who does not believe in stories. He has his own sad story about having been "arrested for murdering a man who never existed" simply because he had "had an affair with another man's wife" (187). According to Mario, the woman's husband ruined his life and caused his family to spend all their money to buy his

freedom. In order to pay his family back, he makes money "the most efficient way," by smuggling people into the United States. Kahlil listens to Mario's story, "resisting his desire to condemn before hearing the whole story," but "he did not like this man. He did not trust him. He was wary of tricks and lies. At bottom, he disapproved of infidelity, including his own" (187). Kahlil does not yet know for certain that Mario is delivering the Mexicans into slavery, but he now knows that he will have to confront him.

What Kahlil knows almost instinctively is that Mario is abusing the Mexicans and is using the woman for his own pleasure. When Mario nods to the woman, she stands up, and Kahlil notices her body language when "Mario led the woman through the door and into the passage-way. She did not resist; she did not acquiesce" (188). To help the woman, Kahlil jumps out of the truck and runs to the casino "where there were people, where there was help" (188), but he runs into a problem because of how he looks. Although he tells the guard who stops him that he needs help, he is not taken seriously. He has "a scabbed and swollen face" and is wearing "a jumble of ill-fitting clothes," Benny's clothes. He is also "ardent and agitated," so the guard laughs at him after asking "'You giving yourself up'" (190). Kahlil is judged by his looks. Even though the guard does not consider him dangerous, he also does not take him seriously, so Kahlil leaves the casino without finding anyone to help him rescue the Mexicans in the back of Benny's truck. Later, when Benny returns from the casino, Kahlil tries to tell him that Mario "mistreats those people" (193), but Benny also does not listen and instead attacks Kahlil because Kahlil reminds him that he was once a woman, and a woman is being abused in his truck. Kahlil must act alone.

Kahlil is heroic, but he is not a violent man. Since he feels that he must do something, he decides to attack Mario; however, when he enters the back of the truck and finds himself with a flashlight in his hand, he "couldn't do it" (199). He could not hit Mario over the head to knock him unconscious so that the others could escape. Instead, he tells Mario that immigration authorities are near. Mario does not want to believe him, but Kahlil tells him that he has heard the news from "the best authority." He cannot admit that he heard it from his grandmother's ghost because Mario would laugh at him, but he stresses the fact that Mario "can't afford not to" (198) believe him. As an illegal alien himself, Mario cannot take the risk, so he "jumped from the truck, strode across the parking lot, entered the casino, and effortlessly disappeared into its crowds" (199). Without resorting to violence, Kahlil wins his battle against Mario and liberates the Mexicans.

After winning his first battle against a formidable enemy, Kahlil leaves Benny's rig to walk home; he sleeps out in the open, "his bed, a concrete base that held in place one of four giant legs of a giant windmill" (201), a whimsical allusion to Don Quixote that does not quite work. Kahlil is conscious of what he is doing while Don Quixote was struggling with dementia and saw the windmill as his enemy. Kahlil, however, is attracted to the windmills, "for when he looked up and out, they were all he saw and their soft, spinning songs called to him" (201). As he stands there admiring the windmills and talking to his grandmother, Kahlil becomes so involved that he does not notice the rattlesnake near him. He is shocked into reality when a voice tells him, "'DO . . . NOT . . . MOVE'" and "an explosion at his left shoulder threw him to the ground." The man who appears behind

him and shoots the snake adds, "'Come on,' the man said cheerfully. 'We'll have it for dinner'" (214). Even though their meeting begins with a shock, Kahlil is taken in and made to feel safe by someone who lives on the margins of society. Max comforts Kahlil immediately by telling him that he "'shouldn't feel bad'" about not noticing the rattler because, "'even if you weren't deaf, you probably wouldn't have heard it. They only rattle sometimes. They're quiet as smoke when they want to be'" (216). Max assumes that Kahlil is deaf. He does not know that Kahlil does not hear the snake because he is deeply involved in a conversation with his dead grandmother, who disappears as soon as Max appears.

Max and Kahlil become quick friends, which Kahlil finds "a surprise—this fit, this unexpected harmonious meeting of apparently dissimilar human spirits" (216). Max feeds him, provides him with water, and even takes him to an abandoned nuclear plant where he used to work so that Kahlil can shower in a regular bathroom. During their brief time together, Kahlil tells Max that he comes "from a long line of storytellers" (219) and tells him the story of his family. Max eventually feels comfortable enough with Kahlil to tell his own story and admit that he "'wasn't in Nam'" and that he "lost [his arm] by accident, plain and simple" (237). For Max, admitting that he was never in Vietnam comes as a surprise even to himself because he has been using Vietnam as an excuse for the way he is living. One wonders if his life will also change after Kahlil goes home, but the novel does not follow Max's narrative. He is simply a kind man who helps Kahlil on his journey home. Kahlil helps Max when he tells him that the moving objects that he sees in the distance are not people coming to get him but "'floaters.'" He explains that floaters are "'small bits of debris—maybe cells, maybe pigment—trapped inside the eye.'" Max does not like what he is hearing, but Kahlil adds that "'it happens when we get older'" (240). Kahlil delivers this information to Max just before they part, which suggests that he is slipping into his role as an optician even before he gets home.

When Kahlil crosses the Los Angeles River and goes home, he does not enter his house. Instead, he stands outside watching Sophie through the window and deciding what to do. The man who faces brutal interrogators without cracking, tricks a coyote into abandoning his human cargo, and faces the solitude of the California canyons, sleeps outside his home because he is afraid to face his wife. He knows that he cheated, and he does not know how to approach the subject with her. When he wakes up the next day "in the dirt before the window," he sees that Sophie's sisters have already arrived and are planning "a day trip up the coast" which leaves "no time for Kali to accomplish gradual reentry. No possibility of a subtle broaching of delicate subjects" (251), so "he knocked," which he "would have done so out of respect for his wife, even if he did have his house keys." When Sophie opens the door, "two neighbors called 911 upon hearing the screams" because the "sisters, with their power-packed voices, screamed again and again" (252). Kahlil, contrite, tells his stunned wife, "'I don't blame you if you're upset, but can I come in? Please?'" Ever considerate, he adds, "'I know my shoes are filthy. I'll take them off. I'll leave them out here on the porch.'" Sophie, too stunned to speak, "extended her hand" to him and tells him, "'You missed your funeral.'" Sophie welcomes her husband home with no questions. His fear of facing her and having to admit to his lie

dissolves as "they held each other's hands. Then pressed together their shuddering bodies" (255). Sophie is too happy to see her husband alive to ask him what happened, but that in itself presents a problem.

Kahlil does not know what happens to Sophie during his absence, but she mentions immediately that he was assumed dead and that he had missed his own funeral. He is happy that Sophie offers "not a word of recrimination or anger. No probing, no cross-examination" (261), but Sophie's apparent lack of interest in what happened to him hurts. She simply is not concerned enough to ask what he had been doing for the last two weeks. Even after she has lived with the knowledge that he was dead, she still shows no interest in how his wallet was found near a car wreck in California when he was supposed to have boarded a plane headed for Cincinnati. The one question she asks of him is, "Was there another woman?" which Kahlil answers with a blatant lie, "Sophie, I can tell you in all honesty, no" because "as he sat there then, in his current condition, knowing things he now knew, there had been no one else" (265), but this is a revision of what actually happened. Kahlil leaves the relative safety of his home to follow Jane Plain, and he does spend two days in a hotel with her. He justifies his lie by thinking that his feelings for Jane are not real because he is not in love with her, as he believes he is in love with his wife.

At the end of his journey, however, Kahlil is as lonely with his wife and as burdened by the chaotic events taking place in the world as he was at the beginning of the novel. His situation at home remains unchanged; what changes for Kahlil is his newly found awareness of who he is as a Syrian in America. Although he is taken prisoner and sorely tested, he is able to defend himself and proves himself a descent, generous man; he survives the abuse of others without becoming an angry, hateful man who resents others. He also does not allow what happened to him to alter his sense of what is right and what is wrong. Kahlil's life is directly affected by the wave of anti-Arab hatred that follows the September 11 attacks, but he does not allow the hatred of others to influence what he believes. After he escapes his captors and he fears that the men are following him, he takes the time to appreciate the woman who dances for him at the Laundromat; he risks his life to help the Mexican prisoners, and he helps Max to understand that the loss of his arm was an unfortunate accident, not something that should force him to stay away from human contact. Kahlil also stays true to the memory of his Situe, whom he will not renounce no matter what his wife says. As Shadi Neimneh says of Bloom, Kahlil demonstrates that "heroism is being a sensitive human and a pacifist in a dehumanized, violent age" (80). Unlike the modernist anti-hero who lacks basic human decency and values, Kahlil proves during his journey that he has the courage of his convictions and the courage to stand up to people who abuse other people. He is the American hero, redeemed.

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