

WAJMA AHMADY

Wajma Ahmady captures both the joy of family life, a transplanted Afghan family, and the shame of not having her American friend understand or appreciate the delicious messiness of home.

What? You Never . . .

"Everywhere I go, it's me and me. Half of me living my life, the other half watching me live it."

—SANDRA CISNEROS

"About the truth, if you give it to a person, then he has power over you. And if someone gives it to you, then they have made themselves your slave. It's a strong magic. You can never take it back."

—CHAQ UXMAL PALOQUIN

It was after a weekend trip home. My friend came with me, an extra half off on a companion Amtrak ticket. On the way back, she touched her jeans and socks and said to herself, but loud enough for me to hear, "How did they get so dirty?"

And I said, "Maybe it was when we were playing with my cousins at the park?"

But then she said, "No, I was really careful. I think it was at your grandmother's house. The kitchen floor was really dirty."

I looked at her and wanted to say, "What? You never lived in a house where you started cleaning right after the last person finished eating, but the minute you're done washing the floor you see that it's dirty all over again just like it had been before and instead of crying, you laugh, you laugh so hard because now everyone is in the kitchen laughing with you and all the while you hear their voices like sweet hushes, theirs in

yours, and yours in theirs, and you know that you wouldn't give anything up for this, kneeling on the kitchen floor with the wet, wet rag and your heart filled with their voices?

What? You never slept on a *tushak* on the floor in one room with twenty people who whispered and talked and told stories and jokes into the dawn of the day even though you said you would sleep when the lights were out?

What? You never ate cross-legged on the floor, food laid out on the *dist-er-khan*, sharing food on the same plate with your cousins and aunts and uncles and neices and nephews, digging your hands into *bolonee* and *kaab-e-lee* and *sabzee*, and just when the last piece of *naan* is gone, your *beebeejan* walks in with a big, big platter saying, "Eat, eat, it's good for you!" and everyone wastes no time except for the *Amerikiai* who sits there politely and waits her turn?

What? You've never seen a grandfather throw the hollow chicken bones on the *dist-er-khan* and gurgle from the bottom of his throat and hear him spit loudly in the bathroom? That's nothing! In Mazar, they'll do it right in front of you on the street and clean their teeth with *naswaq* sitting there trying to sell you something in the bazaar!

What? You never . . .

Instead, shame crossed my face. I looked down and said, "Ya, it was dirty."