

Muddy People – Sara El Sayed

These Are the Rules

Mama learned early on that her daughter was different from her son. Mohamed threw tantrums; Soos stayed quiet if you gave her something sweet. In Arabic, a *soos*, a cavity, is what you get after eating too much sugar. My parents gave me the nickname when I was four. By that time, I had two gold crowns and twice as many holes in my teeth.

In my mouth now, one would struggle to find a tooth not stuffed with a filling. I was never in the habit of maintaining good oral health. We aren't brought up that way; we don't nurture what isn't healthy. When our grass isn't as green as we want, we concrete over it.

Mohamed was difficult from the beginning. Stuck sideways inside my mother, he didn't want to come out.

'It's too much,' the delivering doctor said in Arabic, throwing his hands in the air. 'He won't budge. I don't know what to do.' He left the room to pray and came back smelling like cigarettes. By that time, Mama was screaming and Mohamed was crowning. 'By the grace of God,' said the doctor.

My father was happy his first child was a boy. They named him Mohamed like every other baby boy born in Alexandria, Egypt, on that day.

When my grandparents came to see him, the nurse brought the wrong baby.

'That's not my son,' said Baba.

His son, of course, was the one with the big nose.

'It was like a hook,' Nana tells me, reminiscing about the birth of her first grandchild. She makes a hook shape with her finger, in case words don't do justice to the severity.

'It was big,' Mama concurs.

'Huge. So ugly. Like his grandfather's.'

'An Arab nose, for sure.'

'And he was *green*. All over. Like an alien. Green and a big nose – very unattractive. A truly ugly child.'

My father describes my birth as 'no problems'. The biggest hitch, in fact, was Mohamed asking for squid sandwiches.

'*Soobeyt soobeyt!*' shouted the two-year-old, standing up in the front seat of our Lada Niva. Baba drove the toddler to the sandwich shop after dropping Mama at the hospital.

I ask Mama about my birth and she describes being knocked out by an anaesthetic, then being shaken awake by doctors telling her to push, then passing out, then waking up to the smell of squid, then seeing the contents of her stomach on the floor.

Mohamed never slept through the night as a baby. Soos never woke up. I didn't even wake during my first *zelzal*, earthquake. I was a newborn, the weight of a bottle of milk. My brother was the weight of a small cow, Mama says. The *zelzal* struck in the middle of the night. 'Your father picked you up out of your cot and ran downstairs straightaway,' says Mama, 'and he left the big fat two-year-old to me. Seven flights of stairs. Seven flights of stairs.'



The apartment building we lived in had armed guards out the front, who swung their guns over their shoulders like school who lived on the top floor: a diplomat. Someone from elsewhere who was important enough to kill for.

I was not supposed to talk to the guards, but sometimes they would smile at me when I was with my father. They weren't always there, which somewhat defeated the purpose. But constantly there, living in what was likely built as a cloakroom, was the porter and his family. I counted seven the last time I got a peek inside. He was a friendly old man who treated us like royalty. He greeted

my father, calling him *ustaaz*, professor. My father was not a professor, but this is what people like the porter called people like my father. It was clear to me, even then, that the porter would never be a *ustaaz*. That title was not made for him.

The porter would stand sentry outside the building when the guards disappeared, sometimes all night. Night was when people were energised, walking through the streets, kids playing in the park, dripping ice cream down their hands under the watchful eye of their smoking parents. People stayed out even later during Ramadan. One year, when we arrived back home late, the porter greeted my father.

'*Ramadan karim, ya ustaaz,*' he said. His voice was croaky from hours spent in silence.

'*Allahu akram,*' said my father. The door of the cloakroom was open, and I could hear his family, whispering to one another. My father thanked the porter for running an errand for him earlier. Baba removed the gold sparkly watch from his wrist and held it out to the porter. 'An early Eid gift,' he said, in Arabic.

The porter had a hard time accepting, but eventually he took it, looking a little wet-eyed. There was a blotch of ice cream on my father's shirt, from when he had finished my strawberry cone earlier. I wanted to tell him, but I was worried it would ruin the moment.

By morning, a guard would usually be back at his station, giving the porter a chance to sleep. Watching them from our seventh-floor balcony, they looked like toy soldiers. I wasn't scared of them, even with their guns.

A cardboard box on our balcony housed our pet tortoise, Leafy. One day Leafy escaped his box. Being slow, he had plenty of time to think. Even so, he walked right off the edge. His shell shattered when he hit the ground, and the guard who found him threw his body into the bushes of the park opposite the building. Always watching.

From our balcony we could see the entire park. To a child, it was a grand vista; in actuality, it was a circle of turf, lined with hedges twice as tall as a toddler. Pavement ran around the circle, then out diagonally to the corners of the rectangular plot, like the crosshairs of a sniper rifle. But for a long time, it was the biggest place on earth to me.

Baba has a story about a time he took me there. 'It was a rainy day, a bad day to go out,' he says. 'You were walking behind me, and suddenly you started screaming. Screaming and screaming, like you had seen a ghost. You had stopped in front of a puddle of water. You were screaming, "Sunny! Sunny!" And I said, "What do you mean, sunny? It's not sunny today." You keep screaming, "Sunny! Sunny!" And pointing to the water.

'You were screaming your lungs out. You know, the whole park was looking at us,' my father says. 'Finally, I got it. You don't mean *sunny*. You meant *muddy*. You were worried about crossing the water. You got the words confused. You meant one thing and you said something else. The complete opposite. Isn't that funny?'

Wet shoes – that was the problem. I was four, and I was learning how to keep my shoes clean. I had learned at mosque that cleanliness was next to godliness. You had to be clean when you spoke to Allah. Even outside the mosque, clean people got respect – people with neat hair, ironed shirts, pressed trousers and spotless, expensive new shoes. If you didn't have those things, you did not belong in the building. You belonged in the cloakroom.



This is an edited extract of *Muddy People: A Memoir* by Sara El Sayed, published by Black Inc. and is available where all good books are sold. <https://www.blackincbooks.com.au/books/muddy-people>