

WENDY MARCUS

## Family Custom Tailor

A STUBBY, BROWN-EYED man jumped up from behind his sewing machine and waved his pointer finger at the swirl of scarf and long robe coming through the shop's front door. "Adel wife, Adel wife!"

He fired off some Arabic to a matronly, draped woman and gestured impatiently towards the waiting Sandra. He sat back down with a theatrical shake of his head.

"Can I help you?" The older woman's face was barely visible behind a snug *hijab*, headscarf. The heavily accented English conjured up for Sandra, a mostly uncovered Everett homemaker, the dusty sun-baked stones of past trips to Israel.

The woman swished behind the counter and placed a measuring tape around her neck.

The walls of Family Custom Tailor were covered with calendars in Arabic, pictures of five beaming children, and newspaper articles featuring a distinguished-looking man with wavy black hair declaring his love for America and Palestine. The shadowy shop was stacked with bolts of cloth and racks of unfinished clothes. A flickering shoebox-sized black-and-white television sat on the counter.

Sandra's gaze settled on a faded photo of a smiling young woman, hair curly and coiffed, in a short skirt and sleeveless white blouse, a measuring tape around her neck.

"I've had this silk from Tashkent and I've always thought I'd do something with it, but it's been ten years already. Doesn't look like that's going to happen. I was wondering if you could make me a jacket?"

"Put here." The woman tapped a wide work table behind the front counter. As Sandra unfolded the material, the woman moved her hands reverently across the rolls of gold.

"Beautiful, beautiful. How you want?"

Sandra pulled out a short, dressy jacket from her bag.

“I don’t have a pattern. Something like this?”

The seamstress fingered the seams, lining, pockets and hem.

“I talk with my husband, but I think yes. Please, you leave this here.”

“Do you need a deposit?” Sandra asked.

“No, not yet. My husband, he call you.” The older woman smiled and held out a business card with a dark green drawing of a thimble, a scissors, needle and thread, and the name Adel Al Tirhi. Underneath the name was printed, “Nothing is Impossible.”

Several weeks later came a phone message in a honeyed, older man’s voice.

“This is Adel Al Tirhi. Please, won’t you come in for a fitting now. Any time, just come.”

Sandra drove over to the shop. A grey-haired man with the bearing of a diplomat greeted her. Mr. Al Tirhi, the man in the clippings, brought out her material, now in pieces, and asked her to step to the back of the store by the mirrors so he could pin the jacket together.

The little man who had huffed at Mrs. Al Tirhi during Sandra’s first visit opened the back door. He flicked away a cigarette butt and blew a blue cloud over his shoulder before coming in. He wedged himself behind a sewing machine and ignored the two of them.

Mr. Al Tirhi studied Sandra in the mirror. He pinned and tugged. He repinned and refolded, soothing murmurs following each adjustment.

“Your husband will find you most attractive in this,” he whispered, his dark eyes daring. Sandra inclined her head, a queen acknowledging a court favorite’s flattering predictions. Mr. Al Tirhi eased her out of the pinned-together jacket and guided her to the front counter, his hand cupped under her right elbow.

Sandra’s stomach became a slow-motion fifty-foot wave. She could not meet Mr. Al Tirhi’s silky gaze for the breaker crashing onto shore inside of her. She searched the counter for a diversion and played with a business card. He gently pulled it out of her hands and turned the card over. He readied his pen.

“What is your husband’s name?”

Sandra wanted to say something exotic, wanted to captivate this man with his aging movie-star looks. If only American husbands knew from such charm.

“Ken,” she admitted, and watched him make a few squiggles . . . ah, Arabic . . . apparently “Ken and Sandra.” Mr. Al Tirhi drew a heart around the two names.

“These two, in love forever.”

Sandra felt the receding wave undermine sand from beneath her feet as it washed back out to sea. She gripped the counter's edge and stared at the photos on the wall to regain her composure.

"These are all your children?" she asked with a socialite smile, eyes wide.

"My four sons and one daughter. I think one day I will go back to Palestine, but my children are all grown and here and they are my life now." He raised an eyebrow and his shoulders, resigned but not unhappy.

"Congratulations on such a lovely family. I have three kids. They all go back to school next week. How do you say congratulations in Arabic?"

"*Mabruk!*"

"*Mabruk,*" Sandra echoed. "My people say *Mazel tov.*"

"I know. Good day."

Sandra had to come back into the shop for her car keys. She was that distracted.



A fall full of school field trips, weekend birthday parties and soccer games went by before Sandra realized she had not heard from Mr. Al Tirhi. She dialed the shop.

"Hallo?" It was the raspy voice of the little man.

"Mr. Al Tirhi, please."

"Not here."

"Is his wife in?"

"Not here. Both at hospital. They call you back." He hung up without getting her name or phone number.

Sandra tried again a few days later and got Mr. Al Tirhi's wife.

"My husband very sick," she said. "He work more slow. When can you come in?"

When Sandra showed up, Mr. Al Tirhi greeted her with a forced smile. He raised himself gingerly. He sat back down.

"I am only a little dizzy," he faltered. Supporting himself with one hand on the work table, he reached for the partially-sewn jacket.

Sandra had neither seen skin that grey nor eyes that dull. She wanted to flee but stood stone like and unnerved while he fit the jacket on her and stopped for shallow breaths. There was no conversation this time.

"I have it ready for you very soon," Mr. Al Tirhi assured her.

He's dying, Sandra guessed. I'll never see this jacket finished.

Weeks passed with no word from the tailor.

One morning on her way to a Hadassah book group, Sandra stopped by Family Custom Tailor. The cool Pacific Northwest mist did nothing to extinguish her slow burn. It was rude and unprofessional on their part not even to call, she fumed.

She got out of the car ready to scold. The front door of the dark shop was locked, a notice taped to the glass. "Owner in hospital. Sorry for any inconvenience." A phone number was listed. She knocked anyway.

Like a giant, curling fish, Mrs. Al Tirhi materialized from the depths of the store. She stood behind the notice and scrutinized Sandra before unlocking the door.

"I so glad to see you," she said, motioning Sandra towards the basted jacket hanging next to the mirrors.

Mrs. Al Tirhi helped Sandra into the garment. The shop was still. No television, no thick little man, no tinkling of bells on the front door. Just the two of them in wary silence.

Sandra's irritation withered. "How is your husband?" she ventured.

"He is home from the hospital. Cancer, stomach cancer." A long pause. "I tell him 'Adel, Adel, you must finish this jacket.'" Mrs. Al Tirhi broke off with a sob and Sandra felt her own eyes sting. Her dismay mounted as the older woman collapsed into a chair and wept without restraint.

In seconds that spanned centuries of uncertainty, Sandra put an arm around the distraught wife's shoulder. Mrs. Al Tirhi wiped her eyes and struggled out of the chair to finish the fitting, seemingly revived, if not a little embarrassed. "*In shaa' al-laah, in shaa' al-laah*, God willing, God willing," she murmured over and over.

When Sandra left, she jotted down the phone number on the notice outside the store.

Marine fog gave way to cold rain and then to the frost of November. Sandra dug through her wallet for a phone number. A young man answered, Ahmed, the second of Mr. Al Tirhi's sons, she learned.

"My father died five days ago." Ahmed said he was aware of Sandra's unfinished jacket and apologized for the delay, his voice smoother yet than his father's, she thought. He and his brothers were trying to return the remaining clothes. The business was up for sale and the shop closed. Certainly his mother could not run it.

"My father was one of the first Arab merchants in Everett," Ahmed told her. "He shooed his children away from the needle and thread and into college. When my mother is able, she will bring you the jacket," he promised.

“There’s no rush,” Sandra lied politely. “My little jacket’s not a big thing compared with what you’re going through.” She had hoped to wear it to a splashy synagogue fundraiser that weekend, four months after she had first walked into Mr. Al Tirhi’s shop.

When Mr. Al Tirhi’s daughter, Halima, called, Sandra was struck by her diction, a feminine version of the undulating speech of the Al Tirhi men. “Hello, Mrs. Sandra? Your jacket is finished. My mother and I would like to come by your house this evening.”

Their knock on the door brought Sandra’s two daughters, son and the terrier bounding into the large, tiled entry way. Mrs. Al Tirhi and a pony-tailed young woman in jeans waited outside, arm-in-arm. The children stared through the window at the older woman’s white and brown *hijab* and floor-length robes.

“Is she a wizard?” asked the boy, a seven-year-old Harry Potter fan.

Sandra opened the door. Mrs. Al Tirhi nodded and lowered her gaze. The young woman gave Sandra a familiar smile. “I am Halima.” A stunning girl, with her father’s amatory eyes.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Sandra started. “It’s so kind of you to come to my home.” She stopped, suddenly confused. Was this a business or social call? Should she offer tea? Would they drink in her house?

“*In shaa’ al-laah, in shaa’ al-laah,*” the older woman began intoning. She made no move to hand over the shimmering jacket under the plastic wrap, turning instead to Halima and speaking quietly in Arabic. Sandra’s son backed away, fearful of this stranger in his house. “Is she making a spell?” he whispered.

“My mother is reluctant to give you this colourful jacket,” Halima translated. “It was my mother and father’s last work together. You and your bright jacket will always have a special place in her heart. Its colour is so happy that she forgets to be sad when she looks at it.”

Sandra went to look for her chequebook.

“This jacket is coming with hefty strings attached to it,” she said to Ken on her way out of the kitchen.

“Not a willing player in their little drama, huh?” he drawled.

Sandra glared at him. That wasn’t it. “The jacket’s going to end up hanging in my closet because I won’t be able to bring myself to wear it!”

Back in the entryway, Sandra took an invoice covered in Arabic script from Halima, who freed the jacket from her mother’s quietly defiant hands.

More Arabic between the two women. Mrs. Al Tirhi dabbed her eyes.

“Please, my mother would like you to try on the jacket to make sure it fits, only, she says she will cry harder if she sees it on you.” Halima tilted her head. “Can you go to a room with a mirror? We will wait here. Please understand.”

Sandra avoided looking at Mrs. Al Tirhi. She took the jacket and walked into the main floor bathroom, the children and dog trailing in. She set her wallet on the bathroom counter and tore out a cheque. No pen. She’d fill it in later.

She slid her arms into the silk sleeves, like cool, soft water. A dream jacket. A jacket bound to be coveted. Sandra closed her eyes, imagining the smell of date palms and lush greenery. She heard the tinkling laughter of splashing children. Something trickled far away. She had donned an oasis.

She opened her eyes and saw her boy playing with water from the faucet. She frowned and flicked the spigot off, disoriented by the mirage evaporating in her mind. There had been others, familiar and strange, at that ethereal pool.

“Ooh,” goggled Sandra’s thirteen-year-old. “You look like a queen.”

“A golden jacket,” enthused her son. “You could do magic in it!”

“You must be glad to finally have it,” noted the intuitive-as-usual middle girl. “Is that the lady who made it?”

Sandra saw herself pause in the mirror, her shoulders rising and falling in a world-weary sigh. Explaining to the kids how things end, how devotion and business intertwine, how artistry in one person’s hands can happen from another’s prompt was so complicated. She looked at the children watching her in the mirror and appreciated the odd little lull in her house as seven people and a dog stopped thinking, scheming, reacting and simply waited.

“That lady and her husband made it, although I don’t think he saw it finished.” And to herself, “I just realized, I don’t know Mrs. Al Tirhi’s first name.”

Sandra took off the jacket. Logically, yes, it was hers, but emotionally it might never be. Her lovely life seldom demanded she give things up. She thought of Mr. Al Tirhi’s knowing fingers. He had spent a lifetime dressing and undressing women while making love to just one. She could be as gallant. She could give the jacket back. The trick would be getting Mrs. Al Tirhi to accept what they both wanted.

Sandra strained to think of what words would convince Mrs. Al Tirhi that she, Sandra, valued a shared piece of art and memory enough to give it away. Her focus grew more fevered: what if Sarah and Hagar had woven

their lives and the lives of their children into a virtuous, not vicious, cycle with the right words?

She put her cheque back into her wallet, spying a creased white business card and its bullish motto, "Nothing Is Impossible." While she might not agree with the late Mr. Al Tirhi's conviction and while it wasn't on her head to right an ancient familial banishment, she had an opening here. To make amends, to mend, possibly even to share. Wry thoughts sprang up in Sandra's mind: split the jacket, like a time-share condo, like joint custody, like the way she and her sisters had once borrowed from each other's closets! Sole possession seemed like such an artifact of history. She emerged from the bathroom, jacket over her arm.

"Please," Sandra addressed her visitors, sweeping an arm towards the kitchen table. "Come sit down." She put the kettle on and generously spooned sugar into teacups, peppermint tea the way she knew Arabs and Jews drank it in the Old City, impossibly sweet.