WORLDS APART

ONE OF THEM IS IN THE CITY. THE OTHER CAN'T BE.

Text by Gideon Lewis-Kraus
Photographs by Danna Singer

AS A BIOMEDICAL TECHNICIAN, Maher el-Rowmeim, 31, works marathon days at hospitals all over the five boroughs — Woodhull, in Brooklyn; Bronx-Lebanon; even the Sea View rehabilitation center, in Staten Island. In the evenings he rarely returns home to the far reaches of Queens much before 8, long after his wife, Ghadeer al-Howthi, 25, has gone to sleep in her spare, temporary apartment seven time zones in the future. Ghadeer is from Sanaa, Yemen's capital, which Maher's family left when he was a small boy, but she lives for the time being in Amman; she fled the war in Yemen to study dentistry in Jordan, with the idea that the end of her training would coincide with a visa allowing her to move to New York, where she might at last make a permanent home with her husband. They're accustomed to the distance; in the five years of their marriage, 10 months is the longest they've lived in the same place together.

It has been their good fortune, however, that this year's Ramadan has fallen in the late spring — the timing of the ritual fast makes it easier to catch each other awake. Maher rushes home on the E train to Richmond Hill to break his

16-hour abstention along with his entire family, with a sweet taste — one ceremonial date — followed by his mother's sambusas and shafoot. As he finishes up, Ghadeer is concluding her own predawn meal 5,700 miles away, and they have a window to talk before she prepares to return to sleep. On this, the third day of Ramadan, he hurried to open his Imo app for a video chat, letting him gaze for a few gauzy moments on the face of his distant love.

When Maher and his older brother, Yousef, were in their mid-20s and ready to think about marriage, there was no shortage of would-be matchmakers. The two brothers lived along with four other siblings in a large 12-family house owned by their father and uncle on a leafy street in Queens; the building was so crowded with extended family, and so tightly knit into networks of kinship and gossip in the old country, it felt as if an entire village had been transplanted from Yemen. It was the wife of an uncle in the unit downstairs who suggested a neat match for both brothers: for Maher, a young woman named Ghadeer Abdullah Abdullah al-Howthi; and, for Yousef, Ghadeer's equally wonderful sister, Nuha. The Howthis were known as a respectable family, modest, diligent and given over to good works: Ghadeer's father had a Ph.D. in political science, her mother was a gynecologist and two of her other siblings were doctors.

In early summer of 2012, seven of the eight members of the immediate family — everyone except their father, who announced that he would take off work only for an actual wedding — traveled to Yemen to embark upon the courtship process. The Rowmeims met with the Howthis on the ground floor of their home; after a while, each brother went upstairs in turn to meet a sister, who served him tea, and to spend a half-hour getting acquainted. The families found follow-up occasions to meet over the course of the summer, casually stopping by to celebrate Eid, and each time the relatives invented some flimsy excuse to make themselves scarce. Ghadeer was God-fearing but strong-willed, like her mother; unlike almost all urban Yemenite women, she chose to appear in public with her face uncovered. What appealed to Maher most about Ghadeer, beyond her intelligence and religious devotion,

was her steadfast and selfless compassion. If someone was sick, she was one to drop her own concerns and keep overnight watch by the bed. Maher liked to think he played a similar role in his own sprawling household.

In February 2013, the couples were wed in a three-day dual celebration, with two matching tiered cakes, followed by a joint honeymoon in Malaysia. The grooms planned to bring their brides to live in the States, a process of paperwork and interviews that tended to take a year or two, but there seemed to be no great rush.

The two couples lived in neighboring apartments in Sanaa for the remainder of 2013 before Maher left once more for Queens and Ghadeer returned home to live with her family. His older brother had urged him to file her paperwork as soon as possible. But Maher wanted to be meticulous, and as he had been told that it was better to start the process from the United States, it was only upon his return that he submitted the forms. When immigration officials finally got in touch, a year later, they asked for additional evidence to verify the union. Maher replied with a box that weighed 10 pounds; the sheaf of excessive documentation included, among other things, 500 pages of printed-out text messages.

In the meantime, hostilities broke out in Yemen and escalated quickly. Maher had to cancel a planned visit; the week he was supposed to be there, the couple's former bedroom was hit by a Saudi rocket, and the remnants of their furniture on the fifth floor fell through to the second story. When they spoke on the phone, Maher could hear the warplanes overhead and the explosions of nearby missiles as Ghadeer screamed and sobbed in terror. Under the pretext that their mother was ill, the sisters embarked with her on a 20-hour bus journey, through more than a dozen checkpoints, to the east, where they were able to fly to India on medical visas. The brothers joined them there and helped them move on to Amman; their academic records had gained them temporary residency permits there for medical study. In early 2017, the men again returned to the States alone, telling themselves a final reunification wasn't far off.

In May, Ghadeer was at last granted an interview with immigration authorities. It was scheduled for October at the United States embassy in Djibouti, across the strait from Yemen. Yousef accompanied his own wife to Djibouti in April, and after a fretful week, her application was accepted. Maher and Ghadeer traveled there together in October, at last optimistic after years of worry, but by then the small African city-state was flooded with Yemenite refugees; outside the embassy, asylum seekers stood in lines in the desert heat, feverish with rumor, as they waited to hear their names called.

The day of Ghadeer's appointment came, but the local clinic had been slow to send along the results of her medical exam; Maher realized too late that an extra hundred dollars might have expedited the process, and though he hoped always to live as a righteous man, he wished he had simply paid the bribe. The interview finally took place in December — just days after the Supreme Court narrowly supported a third version of the administration's travel ban; Yemen was one of the six Muslim-majority countries named. Their immigration officer was a kind man, Maher says, but despite their nearly five years of marriage and four years in the U.S.C.I.S. system, and furthermore despite Maher's financial guarantees and Ghadeer's near-certification as a dentist, and finally despite a family background check that had allowed her sister a green card, there was nothing he could do but recommend Ghadeer for a special waiver that would exempt her from the ban. Maher, his slender body enfeebled by the months and years of stress, came down with what Ghadeer diagnosed as malaria. By the time she had nursed him back to health, a week later, the couple were informed that their petition for a waiver had been denied.

Now, when they speak each evening, they go in circles trying to come up with some new strategy, some scant source of hope, but they know that the fate of their marriage is at the mercy of a Supreme Court decision that legal observers expect to go against them when the ruling comes down at the end of June. And so, their future uncertain, they take refuge in the past —

that cherished time in Sanaa, their newlywed spell of togetherness and stability.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a writer at large for the magazine. **Danna Singer** is a photographer and an adjunct professor at Rowan University.

LOVE CITY: 24 HOURS OF ROMANCE, LUST AND HEARTACHE IN NEW YORK



THE HEARTS OF NEW YORK



EDITOR’S LETTER



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CLINTON HILL



1:52 AM

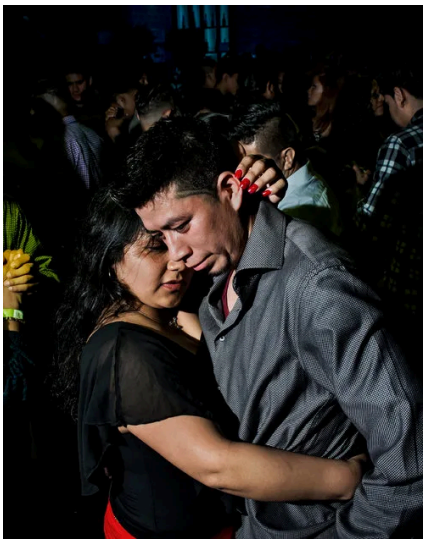
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SUNSET PARK





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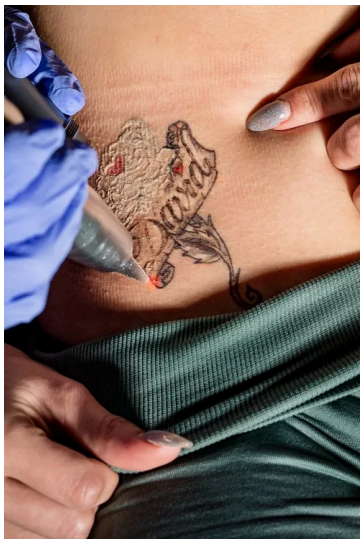
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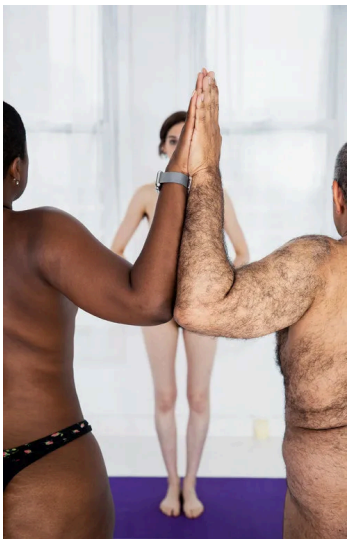
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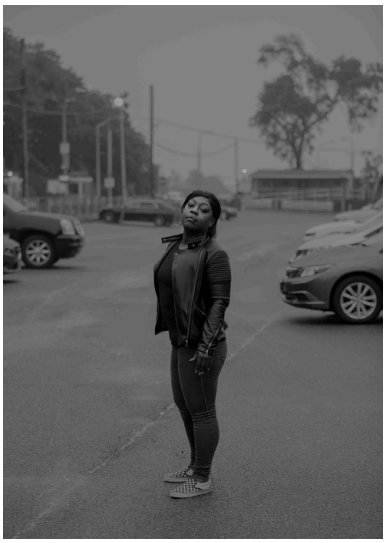
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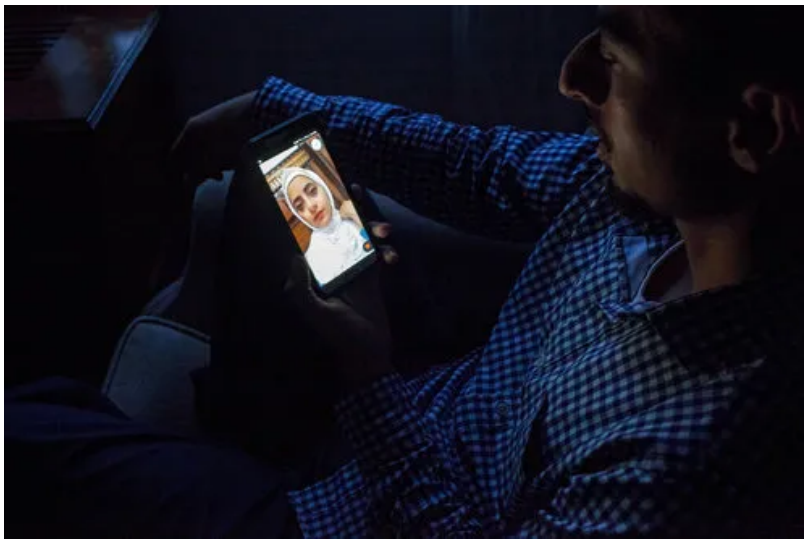
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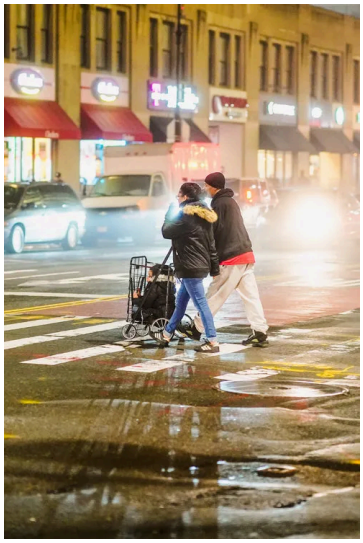
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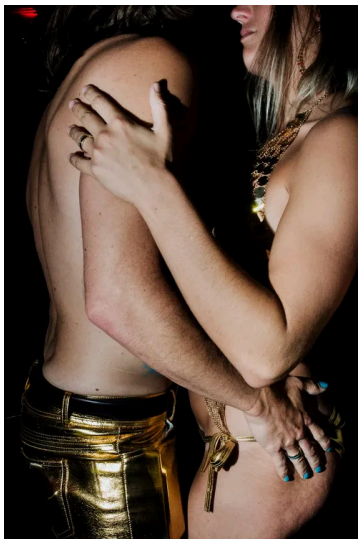
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BRONX CENTER

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LOVE LOST

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