



GHASSAN  
KANAFANI

MEN IN  
THE SUN

and Other Palestinian Stories



MEN IN THE SUN  
& OTHER PALESTINIAN STORIES



*A Three Continents Book*

# MEN IN THE SUN & OTHER PALESTINIAN STORIES



GHASSAN KANAFANI

TRANSLATED FROM ARABIC BY  
HILARY KILPATRICK



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*To Anni H. Kanafani*

—G.







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## INTRODUCTION



*Hilary Kilpatrick*

**G**HASSAN KANAFANI WAS KNOWN IN THE WEST AS THE spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and as the editor of its weekly, *Al-Hadaf*. But in the Arab world, he was also considered a leading novelist and one of the foremost Palestinian prose writers.

He was born in 1936 in Acre, northern Palestine, from which his family fled in 1948, settling finally in Damascus. After completing his studies, he worked as a teacher and journalist, first in the Syrian capital and then in Kuwait. Later he moved to Beirut, where he wrote for several newspapers before starting *Al-Hadaf* in 1969. The magazine soon established itself and was widely quoted in the foreign press. Kanafani was for a time an active member of the Arab Nationalist Movement, but as his political ideas developed he moved toward Marxism, and eventually he came to share George Habash's belief that the solution to the Palestine problem could not be achieved without a social revolution throughout the Arab world.

Kanafani and his niece were killed in the explosion of his booby-trapped car in July 1972. He left a widow and two children.

His published works include five novels, two of them unfinished, five collections of short stories, two plays, and two studies of Palestinian literature. In the memoir that she published after his death, Kanafani's wife, Anni, wrote:

His inspiration for writing and working unceasingly was the Palestinian-Arab struggle. . . . He was one of those who fought sincerely for the development of the resistance movement from

a nationalist Palestinian liberation movement into a pan-Arab revolutionary socialist movement of which the liberation of Palestine would be a vital component. He always stressed that the Palestine problem could not be solved in isolation from the Arab world's whole social and political situation.

This attitude developed naturally out of his own experiences. At the age of twelve, Kanafani went through the trauma of becoming a refugee, and thereafter he lived in exile in various Arab countries, not always with official approval. *Men in the Sun*, for example, was written "when the political situation [in Lebanon] was particularly unstable and [Ghassan] had to remain hidden at home for more than a month because of his lack of official papers." His people were scattered, many of them living in camps or struggling to make a living doing the most menial work; their only hope lay in the future, and in their children, for whose education they made enormous sacrifices. In a letter to his son, Kanafani wrote:

I heard you in the other room asking your mother: "Mama, am I a Palestinian?" When she answered "Yes," a heavy silence fell on the whole house. It was as if something hanging over our heads had fallen, its noise exploding, then—silence.

Afterwards . . . I heard you crying. I could not move. There was something bigger than my awareness being born in the other room through your bewildered sobbing. It was as if a blessed scalpel was cutting up your chest and putting there the heart that belongs to you. . . . I was unable to move to see what was happening in the other room. I knew, however, that a distant homeland was being born again; hills, plains, olive groves, dead people, torn banners and folded ones, all cutting their way into a future of flesh and blood and being born in the heart of another child. . . . Do not believe that man grows. No; he is born suddenly—a word, in a moment, penetrates his heart to a new throb. One scene can hurl him down from the ceiling of childhood on to the ruggedness of the road.



His close involvement in the struggle for the recognition and restitution of Palestinian rights might lead us to expect that Kanafani's novels and short stories would be no more than vehicles for the preaching of those principles, albeit in an indirect form. Part of his achievement, however, lies in the fact that he avoided this pitfall—for rather than transfer experience directly from reality to the printed page, he reworked it to give it a more profound, universal meaning. "The Land of Sad Oranges" reveals the way in which he did this: the flight of Palestinians from their country is woven together with the themes of the reduction of a family to destitution and its children's loss of innocence, and the scene in which the narrator's uncle tries to shoot his children and himself provides the culminating point of all three strands. Concentrating on the day-to-day tragedy of one family, Kanafani avoided theorizing about wider historical issues. By refusing both to analyze the causes of the flight of this family and to indulge in accusations against specific groups, he gave his characters, passive victims of events, a universal quality that is reinforced by the symbol of their banishment.

*Men in the Sun* reveals an equal commitment to the Palestinian cause, but also a development on both the political and the artistic levels. The novella tells of four Palestinians in exile struggling to build, or rebuild, a future. On one level it can be read as an exposé of their weakness in preferring the search for material security over the fight to regain their land, and also as an attack on the corruption of the Arab regimes that allowed them to suffocate in an airless, marginal world of refugee camps. In fact, at the time the book was published, many readers took the ending literally, and Kanafani was accused by enraged compatriots of "throwing Palestinians on the garbage heap."<sup>\*</sup> But there is more to it than that. Abu Qais's memories of the land he left behind and of his daughter's birth a month

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<sup>\*</sup>Those who have seen the filmed version of the novella, *Al-Makhdūn* (*The Deceived*, 1972), will realize that the plot has been altered, so that the three Palestinians who in the book die in silence are shown in the film beating on the walls of their hiding place as they suffocate, to attract the attention of those outside. A film similar to the novella in its dénouement would have appeared glaringly incongruous at a time when the resistance movements were established.

after the family left its village could be matched by the stories of thousands of displaced persons who have been uprooted in Europe and elsewhere. The naive, barely educated Marwan, setting off into the unknown in order to support his family, is a brother of the economic refugees from the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and the Indian subcontinent who throng London, Paris, and Munich. The desert, often used as a symbol by Kanafani, here represents the ordeal of fire that the Palestinians must pass through, and it is depicted in its starkest guise; its presence contributes to the suspense that is built up as the lorry races along under the broiling August sun. Moreover, Kanafani's interest in technique is clearly revealed, as he skillfully blends present and past in the consciousness of his four characters, thereby enabling the reader to perceive their motives for undertaking the hazardous journey. The careful construction and controlled economy of the writing contribute to the total effect of a short novel that is among the best in Arabic literature.

"Umm Saad," one of a collection of stories built around a middle-aged refugee peasant woman, reveals a further stage in ideological development. The story takes place following the defeat of 1967, when, amidst a flood of accusation and self-criticism, the Palestinians have taken upon themselves the struggle to regain their land. The choice of such a central character, instead of the young, articulate fighter who might have been expected to be cast in that role, is consistent with Kanafani's preferred method of analyzing a situation through his characters' emotional reactions to it. To him, writes Anni Kanafani, "Umm Saad was a symbol of the Palestinian women in the camp and of the worker class, and the book about her speaks directly to the people whom she represents. In the dialogue between him and Umm Saad, it is the illiterate woman who speaks and the intellectual who listens and puts the questions." Umm Saad is the most memorable in a gallery of peasant characters who appear in Kanafani's novels and short stories. However cruel the blows life deals her, in the end she will recover; in her fundamental goodness, generosity, and willingness to stand out against the system, she is a cousin to Solzhenitsyn's *Matriona*. Yet, this is scarcely an idealized portrayal; Umm Saad is credible in her simplicity, and in writing about her Kanafani maintained an understated realism.

The choice of peasant characters in general, and Umm Saad in particular, is not without a political motive. The nature of Zionist colonization, with its stress on acquiring land, struck at the existence of the peasants, the largest section of Palestinian society. But Kanafani clearly felt an affinity with the peasants that went far beyond the dictates of a political stand, and this accounts for the insight with which he portrayed them. The figure of the farmer attached to his land has seldom been sympathetically portrayed in Arabic literature before this century, and characters such as Umm Saad and Abu Qais represent an enrichment of the Arabic literary tradition. Indeed, some would say that Kanafani's greatest achievement lay in his portrayal of the Palestinian peasant, both before and after 1948.

That Kanafani was not so concerned with politics that all his writing was invaded by it can be seen from such stories as "A Hand in the Grave." Because of the series of false positions in which the characters are placed, or place themselves, what might have been a harmless dare turns out to have a tragic consequence. The matter-of-fact style of narration and realistic portrayal of scenes from the narrator's family life foreshadow his own hardheaded reaction to the incident; by contrast, the more suggestible Suhail is the victim of a limited but nonetheless genuine tragedy, which is not lessened by the consideration that it was caused by cowardice, meanness, and dishonesty.

The theme of tragedy brought about by human weakness and petty vices repeats itself in many of Kanafani's stories, whether or not the setting is Palestinian. It is one of the strands running through "If You Were a Horse . . .," in which other motifs that recur in Kanafani's work also can be discerned. One of these concerns superstition, foretelling the future, and the extent to which a supposed knowledge of what will happen can influence the course of events. The son who has respected his father's superstitious belief fears that he may thus have brought about the disaster he sought to avoid. Kanafani set a puzzle for the reader, and by not supplying an answer he avoided committing himself on whether there might be anything in the idea that the future can be foretold or impending disasters averted by warnings. But aside from the metaphysical

question, there is the level of practical action, and there Kanafani's criticism of Arab society can be seen at work. Superstitions that provide a justification for passivity are to be condemned; through the false sense of security that they engender, they pave the way for tragedies that need not be inevitable, given a realistic appreciation of the situation.

The horse that appears in this story is more than a mechanical device to assist the flow of the plot. Kanafani liked to paint horses, and they play an important role in others of his stories and novels. His wife describes the meaning that they had for him: "The horse to us Arabs, he said, symbolizes beauty, courage, honesty, intelligence, truth, and freedom." That Barq, the heartbreakingly beautiful horse, should have killed the wife whom Abu Ibrahim passionately loved reveals the connection that often exists in Kanafani's work between ideal qualities and death, especially when these ideal qualities wake a great love.

A similar combination of motifs—beauty, mysterious tenderness, love, and death—is to be found in "The Falcon," a haunting interweaving of symbol and reality. The setting, a nameless town being developed on the edge of the desert, and the engineers and guards working at the construction site could be duplicated all over the Gulf area. The use of this milieu by a Palestinian writer is particularly apposite, since its desolate but financially rewarding conditions have attracted many Palestinian professionals who have been unable to find work elsewhere. The figure of Jadaan provides a stark contrast with this world. As a bedouin, he represents an alien way of life, which in other circumstances may have been perceived as hostile and threatening; here, though, paradoxically, it is their contact with the bedouin guards that prevents the engineers from feeling completely isolated. Jadaan himself is a symbol of pride, of grandeur, and of devotion to an ideal so great that he sacrifices his life for it. Having given up all for a love that was doomed to tragedy, he waits, calm and unmoved, for death; only his pride remains to him.

In some of Kanafani's stories, the hero chooses death not for individualistic reasons, but in order to further the struggle of his people, thus illustrating the attitude toward death that Kanafani him-



self came to hold. Anni Kanafani relates her husband's response when a Western correspondent asked him, shortly before he was killed, whether death had a meaning to him:

Of course death means a lot. The important thing is to know why. Self-sacrifice, within the context of revolutionary action, is an expression of the very highest understanding of life, and of the struggle to make life worthy of a human being. The love of life for a person becomes a love for the life of his people's masses, and his rejection that their life persists in being full of continuous misery, suffering, and hardship. Hence, his understanding of life becomes a social virtue, capable of convincing the militant fighter that self-sacrifice is a redemption of his people's life. This is a maximum expression of attachment to life.



Kanafani lived and died according to his ideals. Yet, unlike many committed writers, he refused to impose an ideological scheme on his fiction in any but the most general terms. He believed that the role of literature in the transformation of society was different from that of other forms of writing, and it should therefore not be subjected to rigid rules applicable elsewhere. Thus, although his plays, novels, and short stories were written to serve the cause of Palestine, they have a universal appeal, thanks to his literary talents and his tenacity in preserving that freedom without which art is stifled.



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“Letter from Gaza” was published originally in Arabic in 1956; “The Land of Sad Oranges” in 1958; “If You Were a Horse . . .” and “The Falcon” in 1961; *Men in the Sun* and “A Hand in the Grave” in 1962; and *Umm Saad* in 1969.

“The Falcon” and an extract from *Umm Saad* appeared in English in *Middle East International*.



MEN IN THE SUN  
& OTHER PALESTINIAN STORIES







## MEN IN THE SUN



### ☞ ABU QAIS

Abu Qais rested on the damp ground, and the earth began to throb under him with tired heartbeats, which trembled through the grains of sand and penetrated the cells of his body. Every time he threw himself down with his chest to the ground he sensed that throbbing, as though the heart of the earth had been pushing its difficult way towards the light from the utmost depths of hell, ever since the first time he had lain there. Once when he said that to his neighbor, with whom he shared the field in the land he left ten years ago, the man answered mockingly:

“It’s the sound of your own heart. You can hear it when you lay your chest close to the ground.”

What wicked nonsense! And the smell, then? The smell that, when he sniffed it, surged into his head and then poured down into his veins. Every time he breathed the scent of the earth, as he lay on it, he imagined that he was sniffing his wife’s hair when she had just walked out of the bathroom, after washing with cold water. The very same smell, the smell of a woman who had washed with cold water and covered his face with her hair while it was still damp. The same throbbing, like carrying a small bird tenderly in your hands.

The damp earth, he thought, was no doubt the remains of yesterday’s rain. No, yesterday it had not rained. The sky now could rain nothing but scorching heat and dust. Have you forgotten where you are? Have you forgotten?

He turned himself over and lay on his back, cradling his head in his hands. He started to stare at the sky. It was blazing white, and

there was one black bird circling high up, alone and aimless. He did not know why, but he was suddenly filled with a bitter feeling of being a stranger, and for a moment he thought he was on the point of weeping. No, yesterday it didn't rain. We are in August now. Have you forgotten? Those miles of road speeding through a void, like black eternity. Have you forgotten it? The bird was still circling around alone like a black spot in that blaze spread out above him. We are in August. Then why this dampness in the ground? It's the Shatt. Can't you see it stretching out beside you as far as the eye can see?

"When the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, meet, they form one river called the Shatt al-Arab, which extends from just above Basra to . . ."

Ustaz Selim, a thin, gray-haired old man, said it a dozen times in his loud voice to a small child standing beside the blackboard, when he was walking past the school in his village. So he stood on a stone and began to eavesdrop through the window. Ustaz Selim was standing in front of the young pupil, shouting at the top of his voice as he shook his thin stick:

"When the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, meet . . ."

The child was trembling with anxiety, while the laughter of the other children in the class could be heard. Abu Qais stretched out his arm and tapped a child on the head. The child raised his eyes to him as he was eavesdropping by the window.

"What's going on?"

The child laughed and replied in a whisper:

"Idiot!"

He drew back, got down off the stone and went on his way, still followed by the voice of Ustaz Selim repeating: "When the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, meet . . ."

That night he saw Ustaz Selim sitting in the headman's reception room, smoking his gurgling water pipe. Ustaz Selim had been sent to their village from Jaffa to teach the boys, and he had spent so much of his life teaching that the title "Ustaz" had become an inseparable part of his name. That night in the reception room someone asked him:

". . . and you will lead the prayers on Friday, won't you?"



"No, I'm a teacher, not an imam. I can't lead the prayers."

The headman said to him:

"What's the difference? Our teacher was an imam."

"He was a teacher in a Quran school, but I teach in a secular school."

The headman repeated his question, insistently:

"What's the difference?"

Ustaz Selim did not answer, but behind his spectacles his eyes ran over the faces as though he was imploring the help of one of those sitting there. However, everyone was confused about this, like the headman.

After a long period of silence, Ustaz Selim cleared his throat and said quietly:

"Well, I don't know how to perform the prayers."

"You don't know?"

There were growls from everyone, but Ustaz Selim reaffirmed what he had said:

"I don't know."

The seated men exchanged looks of surprise, and then fixed their eyes on the face of the headman, who felt that it was for him to say something. He burst out without thinking:

"And what *do* you know, then?"

Ustaz Selim seemed to be expecting a question like that, for he answered quickly, as he was rising:

"Many things. I'm a good shot, for instance."

He reached the door and turned, and his thin face was trembling.

"If they attack you, wake me; I may be of some use."

This, then, was the Shatt that Ustaz Selim had spoken of ten years before. Here he was lying thousands of miles and days away from his village and Ustaz Selim's school. The mercy of God be upon you, Ustaz Selim, the mercy of God be upon you. God was certainly good to you when he made you die one night before the wretched village fell into the hands of the Jews. One night only. O God, is there any divine favor greater than that? It is true that the men were too busy to bury you and honor you in your death. But all the same you stayed there. You stayed there. You saved yourself

humiliation and wretchedness, and you preserved your old age from shame. The mercy of God be upon you, Ustaz Selim. If you had lived, if you had been drowned by poverty as I have, I wonder if you would have done what I am doing now. Would you have been willing to carry all your years on your shoulders and flee across the desert to Kuwait to find a crust of bread?

He sat up, leaned on the ground with his elbows, and began to look at the great river again as though he had not seen it before. . . . So this was the Shatt al-Arab, "a vast river that steamers sail along carrying dates and straw, like a street full of passing cars in the center of town."

That's what his son Qais had shouted, hurriedly, when he had asked him that night:

"What is the Shatt al-Arab?"

He meant to test him, but Qais quickly answered in a loud voice, adding:

"I saw you looking through the classroom window today. . . ."

Abu Qais turned to his wife, who grinned. He felt a little embarrassed, and slowly remarked:

"I knew it before."

"No, you didn't. You learned it today while you were peeping through the window."

"All right. And what does it matter whether I know it or not; is it the end of the world?"

His wife glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and then said:

"Qais, go and play in the other room." When he slammed the door behind him, she turned to her husband:

"Don't speak like that in front of him. The boy is happy because he knows it. Why do you discourage him?"

He stood up, went over to her and put his hand on her stomach, whispering:

"When?"

"In seven months' time."

"Ah!"

"We want a girl this time."

"No, we want a boy. A boy."

But she gave birth to a girl he named Hosna, who died two months later. The doctor said distastefully:

"She was extremely emaciated."

It happened a month after he left his village, in an old house in another village far from the firing line.

"Abu Qais! I feel I'm going to give birth!"

"All right. All right. Keep calm."

He said to himself:

"I wish that women gave birth after a pregnancy of a hundred months. Is this the time for labour?"

"O God!"

"What?"

"I'm going to give birth."

"Shall I call anyone?"

"Umm Umar."

"Where can I find her now?"

"Hand me that cushion!"

"Where can I find Umm Umar?"

"O my God! Lift me up a little. Let me rest against the wall."

"Don't move much. Let me call Umm Umar."

"Hurry! Hurry! O Lord of creation!"

He hurried outside. But as he shut the door behind him he heard the cry of the newborn child, so he turned back and put his ear to the wood of the door. . . .

The roar of the Shatt, the sailors shouting to each other, the sky blazing, and the black bird still circling aimlessly.

He got up, brushed the earth from his clothes, and stood looking at the river.

More than at any time in the past he felt alien and insignificant. Rubbing his hand over his rough chin, he brushed from his head all the thoughts that had gathered like teeming hosts of ants.

On the other side of this Shatt, just the other side, were all the things he had been deprived of. Over there was Kuwait. What only lived in his mind as a dream and a fantasy existed there. It was certainly something real, of stones, earth, water, and sky, not as it slumbered in his troubled mind. There must be lanes and streets, men and women, and children running about between the trees.

No. No. There were no trees there. Saad, his friend who had emigrated there, worked as a driver, and come back with sacks of money, said there were no trees there. The trees exist in your head, Abu Qais, in your tired old head, Abu Qais. Ten trees with twisted trunks that brought down olives and goodness every spring. There are no trees in Kuwait, Saad said so. You must believe Saad because he knows more than you, although he is younger than you. All of them know more than you, all of them.

In the last ten years you have done nothing but wait. You have needed ten big hungry years to be convinced that you have lost your trees, your house, your youth, and your whole village. People have been making their own way during these long years, while you have been squatting like an old dog in a miserable hut. What do you think you were waiting for? Wealth to come through the roof of your house? Your house? It is not your house. A generous man said to you: "Live here!" That is all. And a year later he said to you: "Give me half the room," so you put up patched sacks between yourself and the new neighbors. You stayed squatting till Saad came and started to shake you as milk is churned to make butter.

"If you get to the Shatt, you can easily reach Kuwait. Basra is full of guides who will undertake to smuggle you there across the desert. Why don't you go?"

When his wife heard what Saad said, she glanced from one to the other and began to rock her baby again.

"It's a risk, and who knows what the outcome will be?"

"What will the outcome be? Ha, ha! Abu Qais, says: 'Who knows what the outcome will be?' Ha, ha!"

Then Saad looked at her and said:

"Have you heard what your husband says? Who knows what the outcome will be! As though life were like eating yogurt. Why doesn't he behave like us? Is he better?"

She did not raise her eyes to Abu Qais, who was hoping she would not.

"Do you like this life here? Ten years have passed and you live like a beggar. It's disgraceful. Your son, Qais, when will he go back to school? Soon the other one will grow up. How will you be able to look at him when you haven't . . .?"

"All right. That's enough."

"No. It's not enough. It's terrible. You are responsible for a big family now. Why don't you go there? What's *your* opinion, Umm Qais?"

His wife was silent, while he thought: "Soon he too will grow up . . ." but he said:

"It's a long way. And I'm an old man; I can't walk as you did. I might die."

No one in the room spoke. His wife was still rocking her child. Saad gave up insisting, but the rough voice exploded inside his own head:

"Die! Who says that isn't preferable to your life at the moment? For ten years you have been hoping to return to the ten olive trees that you once owned in your village. Your village! Ha!"

He turned to his wife.

"What do you think, Umm Qais?"

She gazed at him, whispering:

"It's just as you think."

"We'll be able to send Qais to school."

"Yes."

"And perhaps buy one or two olive shoots."

"Of course."

"Maybe we'll be able to build a shack somewhere."

"Certainly."

"If I arrive. If I arrive."

He broke off, and looked at her. He had known that she would start weeping; her lower lip would tremble a little and then one tear would well up, gradually growing bigger and slipping down her brown, wrinkled cheek. He tried to say something, but he was unable to. A choking lump was tearing his throat. A lump just like the one he had felt when he arrived in Basra and went to the shop belonging to the fat man whose job was smuggling people from Basra to Kuwait. He stood before him, bearing on his shoulders all the humiliation and hope that an old man can carry. And there was a blanket of echoing silence after the fat proprietor of the office had repeated:

"It's a difficult journey, I tell you. It will cost you fifteen dinars."

of those men who do not expect the head of a family to accomplish miracles. "I'll take twenty dinars from you. And you will find yourself in Baghdad."

"Twenty dinars?"

"Yes, and you must help me the whole of the way, too. We'll set off the day after tomorrow. I must deliver a small car to a rich Baghdadi who spent part of the summer in Ramallah and then decided to return to Baghdad by plane."

"But . . . twenty dinars?"

Abul-Abd looked at him intently, and then exploded: "I'll save your life for twenty dinars. Do you think you'll spend your life here in hiding? Tomorrow they'll arrest you."

"But where from? Where can I get you the twenty dinars from?"

"Borrow them, borrow them. Any friend will give you twenty dinars if he knows you are traveling to Kuwait."

"Twenty dinars?"

"Twenty, twenty."

"To Baghdad?"

"Directly."

But he lied to him. He took advantage of his innocence and ignorance, tricking him, making him get out of the lorry after a journey on a burning hot day, telling him that he must walk round H4 so as not to fall into the hands of the frontier guards, and then promising to meet him on the road.

"But I don't know this area. Do you realize what it means for me to walk all this distance round H4, when the sun is at its height?"

Abul-Abd hit the dusty side of his lorry again. They were standing by themselves a mile before H4. He shouted out:

"What do you think will happen? Your name is registered at all the frontier posts. If they see you with me now, without a passport or an exit visa, a plotter against the state, what do you think will happen? Stop making difficulties. You are as strong as a bull, and you can move your legs. I'll meet you on the road beyond H4."

They all talked about roads. They said: "You will find yourself on the road!" And all they knew of the road was its blackness and its

pavements. Here was the fat man, the Basran smuggler, repeating the very same tale. "Can't you hear? I am a very busy man. I told you: fifteen dinars and I will get you to Kuwait. Of course you will have to walk a little, but you're young and strong; it will not do you any harm."

"But why don't you listen to me? I told you that I will give you the money when we reach Kuwait."

"You will get there. You will get there."

"How?"

"I swear to you on my honor that you will get to Kuwait."

"You swear on your honor?"

"I swear to you on my honor that I will meet you beyond H4. You have only got to walk round that damned place and you will find me waiting for you."

He had given H4 a wide berth. The sun was pouring flame down on his head, and as he climbed the yellow slopes, he felt he was alone in the whole world. He dragged his feet over the sand as though he were walking on the seashore after pulling up a heavy boat that had drained the firmness from his legs. He crossed hard patches of brown rocks like splinters, climbed low hills with flattened tops of soft yellow earth like flour. If they had taken me to the desert prison, Al-Jafr, at H4, I wonder if life would have been kinder than it is now. Pointless, pointless. The desert was everywhere. Abul-Abd had given him a headdress, and he had wrapped it round his head, but it was no use for keeping off the blaze. Indeed it seemed to him that it too was catching fire. The horizon was a collection of straight, orange lines, but he had taken a firm decision to go forward, doggedly. Even when the earth turned into shining sheets of yellow paper he did not slow down. Suddenly the yellow sheets began to fly about, and he stooped to gather them up.

"Thanks. Thanks. This damned fan makes the papers fly about in front of me, but I can't breathe without it. Ha! What have you decided?"

"Are you sure the guide you send with us won't run away?"

"How will he be able to run away, you fool? There will be more than ten of you. He won't be able to escape from you."

"Where will he take us to?"

"As far as the Jahra road, beyond Mutlaa. There you will be inside Kuwait."

"Will we have a lot of walking to do?"

"Six or seven hours, no more."

Four hours later he reached the road. He had left H4 behind him, and the sun had set behind the brown hills. But his head was still burning, and he had the feeling that his forehead was dripping blood. He sat down on a stone and gazed into the distance at the end of the straight black road. His head felt muddled, with thousands of confused voices throbbing in it, and it seemed to him that the appearance of a big red lorry at the end of the road was a stupid fantasy. He stood up, looking at the road again, but he could not see clearly yet. Was it twilight or sweat? His head was still humming like a beehive, and he cried with all his strength:

"Abul-Abd, damn your father, damn your forefathers!"

"What did you say?"

"Me? Nothing, nothing. When will the journey begin?"

"As soon as there are ten of you. You know, we cannot send a guide with each of you. So we wait till the number reaches ten and we send one guide with them. Will you give me the cash now?"

He tightened his hold on the money in his pocket, and reflected:

"I will be able to return the amount to my uncle in less than a month. A man can collect money in the twinkling of an eye there in Kuwait."

"Don't be too optimistic. Dozens of people have gone before you and come back without bringing a penny with them. All the same I'll give you the fifty dinars you have asked for. You must realize that they are the fruits of a lifetime."

"Then why do you give me the money, if you're sure that I won't return it to you?"

"You know why, don't you? I want you to make a start, even in hell, so that you'll be in a position to marry Nada. I can't imagine my poor daughter waiting any longer. Do you understand?"

He felt the unuttered insult wound his throat, and he had an urge to give the fifty dinars back to his uncle, to throw them in his face with all the strength in his arms and all the hatred in his heart. To marry him off to Nada! Who told him that he wanted to marry



Nada? Just because his father had recited the Fatiha\* with his uncle when he and Nada were born on the same day? His uncle considered that was fate. Indeed he had refused a hundred suitors who had asked for his daughter's hand and told them she was engaged. O God of devils! Who told him that he, Assad, wanted to marry her? Who told him that he ever wanted to get married? Here he was now reminding him again. He wanted to buy him for his daughter as you buy a sack of manure for a field. He tightened his grasp on the money in his pocket and got ready to get up. But when he touched it there in his pocket, soft and warm, he felt he was holding the keys of his whole future. If he allowed his rage to get the better of him now and gave the money back to his uncle, he would never be offered the opportunity to obtain fifty dinars by any means. He calmed himself, firmly shutting his mouth and tightening his grasp on the bundle of money in his trouser pocket. Then he remarked:

"No. No. I will give you the money when all the preparations for the journey are made. I will see you once a day. I am staying in a nearby hotel."

The fat man smiled. He went on smiling, and then burst out, laughing loudly:

"It's better for you not to waste your time, my boy. All the smugglers ask the same price. We have come to an agreement among ourselves. Don't wear yourself out. All the same, keep your money till the preparations are made. It's up to you. What's the name of the hotel where you are staying?"

"The Shatt Hotel."

"Ah, the rats' hotel."

The wild rat ran across the road, its little eyes shining in the car's headlamps. The blonde woman said to her husband, who was concentrating on driving:

"It's a fox. Did you see it?"

The husband, a foreigner, laughed. "You women! You make a rat into a fox."

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\* The first sura of the Quran, customarily recited at the conclusion of an agreement or contract. (Tr.)

They had picked him up a little after sunset, after he had waved to them in their small car. When the husband stopped the car, he looked through the window. He was trembling from the extreme cold. The wife was frightened of him, but he gathered together in his mind all the English he had learned, and said:

“My friend had to go back to H4 with the car, and he left me —”

The man interrupted him:

“Don’t lie. You’re escaping from there. All right. Get in. I’ll take you to Baaquba.”

The back seat was comfortable, and the girl handed him a blanket, which he wrapped himself in; he could not tell exactly whether he was trembling because of the desert cold, or from fear, or exhaustion. The man asked:

“Have you walked a lot?”

“I don’t know. Four hours perhaps.”

“The guide abandoned you, didn’t he? That’s always happening.”

The girl turned to him with a question:

“Why are you escaping from there?”

Her husband gave her the answer:

“It’s a long story. Tell me, do you drive well?”

“Yes.”

“You can take my place when you’ve had a little rest. I may be able to help you cross the Iraqi frontier. We will get there at two in the morning, and the officials will be asleep.”

He could not get his mind to focus on one subject. He was confused and did not know where to start asking the host of questions that needed an answer, so he tried to get to sleep, even if it was just for half an hour.

“Where are you from?”

“Palestine. Ramleh.”

“Oh. Ramleh is a very long way away. A couple of weeks ago I was in Zeita. Do you know Zeita? I stood in front of the barbed wire. A little child came up to me and said in English that his house was a few feet beyond the barbed wire.”

“Do you work in an office?”

"Work in an office? Ha! The devil himself is too innocent to be employed in an office. No, my friend, I'm a tourist."

"Look! Look! There's another fox. Didn't you see how his eyes glitter?"

"He's a rat, my dear, a rat. Why do you insist that he's a fox? Have you heard what happened there recently, near Zeita?"

"No. What happened?"

"The devil himself doesn't know what happened. Will you stay in Baghdad?"

"No."

"Oh. This desert is full of rats. What on earth do they eat?"

He answered quietly:

"Rats smaller than them."

"Really?" said the girl. "It's frightening. Rats themselves are horrible, frightening animals."

The fat man who owned the office said:

"Rats are horrible animals. How can you sleep in that hotel?"

"It's cheap."

The fat owner of the office stood up and came towards him, putting his heavy arms on his shoulders:

"You look tired, my boy. What's happened? Are you ill?"

"Me? No."

"If you are ill, tell me. I may be able to help you. I have many friends who are doctors. Don't worry, you won't pay anything."

"You're very kind. But I'm a little tired, that's all there is to it. Will the preparations take long?"

"No. Thank heavens there are many of you. You'll find yourself on the road in two days."

He turned his back and went towards the door, but before he went through it he heard the fat man chuckling behind his back:

"But take care the rats don't eat you before you set out."

## ☞ MARWAN

Marwan came out of the shop belonging to the fat man who smuggled people from Basra to Kuwait, and found himself in the

crowded covered street, which smelt of dates and big straw baskets. He had no definite idea where to make for now; there, inside the shop, the last threads of hope that had held together everything inside him for long years had been snapped. The last words the fat man had spoken were decisive and final; it seemed to him that they were forged from lead.

"Fifteen dinars, can't you hear?"

"But . . ."

"I beg you, I beg you. Don't start wailing. You all come here and then start wailing like widows. My friend! My dear friend! No one's forcing you to stay here. Why don't you go and ask someone else? Basra is full of smugglers."

Yes, of course Marwan would go and ask someone else. Hasan, who had worked in Kuwait for four years, had told him that to smuggle one person from Basra to Kuwait cost five dinars and no more, and that when he came to stand in front of the smuggler he must be more than a man, and show more than courage, or they would laugh at him, cheat him, and take advantage of his sixteen years.

"They told me that the price for one person was five dinars."

"Five dinars? Ha, ha! That was before Adam married Eve. Turn around, my boy, take three steps, and you will find yourself in the road without being thrown out."

Marwan gathered all his courage and put it into his words. There were only seven dinars left in his pocket, and a moment before he had thought himself rich. But now . . . was he being treated like a child?

"You'll take five dinars from me and be satisfied, or else . . ."

"Or else?"

"Or else I'll denounce you to the police."

Getting up, the fat man came round his desk, till he stood, panting and dripping with sweat, in front of Marwan. He stared at him for a second, looking him up and down, and then raised his heavy hand in the air. "You want to complain to the police about me, son of a . . ."

The heavy hand crashed down onto his cheek, and the word was lost in a fearful roar, which began reverberating between his

ears. He almost lost his balance for a moment, and staggered a couple of steps back. The voice of the fat man, hoarse with anger, reached him:

“Go and tell the pimps that I’ve hit you. You’ll complain to the police about me?”

Marwan stood his ground for a short while, which was enough for him to realize that any attempt to restore his honor was futile. In fact he felt, to the marrow of his bones, that he had committed an unforgivable sin. As the marks of the fingers on his left cheek burned, he began to digest his humiliation.

“What are you waiting here for?”

He turned on his heel and went out through the door. His nose was assailed by the smell of dates and big straw baskets. What should he do now? He had no wish to ask himself the question. Yet he didn’t know why he felt some sort of relief; what could be the reason for it? He wanted to distract himself by searching for the reason. Part of his mind was taken up with feelings of happiness and relief, but they couldn’t sidetrack him from all the sorrows that had filled his heart in the last half hour. When all his efforts failed, he leaned against the wall. Crowds of people walked past without paying him any attention. Perhaps it was the first time in his life that he had found himself alone and a stranger in a throng of people like this. He wanted to know the reason for that remote sensation that gave him contentment and rest; a sensation like the one he used to have when he had finished watching a film, and felt that life was grand and vast, and that in the future he would be one of those men who spend every hour and day of their lives in exciting fulfilment and variety. But what was the reason for his having such a feeling now, when he had not seen a film like that for a long time, and only a few minutes before the threads of hope that had woven fine dreams in his heart had been broken in the fat man’s shop?

It was no use. It seemed he would not be able to penetrate the thick veil of disappointment that separated him from that distinct feeling which existed, unexpressed, somewhere in his mind. In the end he decided not to wear his brain out, but to occupy himself with walking. But as soon as he left the wall and began to walk through the crowd, he felt a hand grasp his shoulder.

"Don't be so desperate. Where are you going now?"

The tall man had begun to walk beside him familiarly, and when Marwan looked at him he thought he'd seen him somewhere before. All the same, he moved a step away from him and gave him a questioning look.

"He's a well-known thief," said the man. "What made you go to him?"

He answered after a short hesitation:

"Everyone goes to him."

The man came closer to Marwan and linked his arm through his, as though he had known him for ages.

"Do you want to go to Kuwait?"

"How did you know?"

"I was standing by the door of that shop, and I saw you go in and come out. What's your name?"

"Marwan. And you?"

"They call me Abul Khaizuran."\*

For the first time since Marwan had set eyes on the man, he noticed that he really did remind one of a cane. He was very tall, very thin, but his neck and hands had a suggestion of strength and firmness, and for some reason he looked as though he could bend down and put his head between his legs without its upsetting his spine or his other bones at all.

"Well, what do you want of me?"

Abul Khaizuran sidestepped the question with one of his own:

"Why do you want to go to Kuwait?"

"I want to work. You know how things are there. For months I . . ." He suddenly fell silent and stood still.

Only now did he recognize the source of that feeling of rest and contentment which he had not been able to discover a few minutes before. It was suddenly revealed to him in its full depth and clarity; in fact, in some wonderful way it had broken down all the barriers of despondency that stood between him and the realization of it. Here was this feeling taking possession of him again with unparal-

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\* "Khaizuran" means "cane," "bamboo." (Tr.)

leled force. The first thing he had done that morning, early, had been to write a long letter to his mother. Now he felt all the more relief because he had written that letter before seeing all his hopes dashed in the fat man's shop, and losing the pure joy that he had poured into the letter. It had been wonderful to spend some time with his mother.

He'd got up early that morning. The servant had taken the bed up to the roof of the hotel, because sleeping in the room when it was as hot and damp as that was impossible. When the sun rose he opened his eyes. The weather was beautiful and calm, and the sky was still blue, with black pigeons hovering low in it. He could hear their wings fluttering when they flew over the hotel in a wide circle. A thick blanket of silence covered everything, and the air had a clean, moist scent of early morning. He stretched out his hand to the small case under the bed, took out a notebook and pen, and proceeded to write to his mother as he lay there.

It was the best thing he'd done for months. He was not obliged to do it, but he did it quite willingly. He was in an excellent mood, and the letter reflected the tranquillity of the sky above him. He didn't know how he had allowed himself to describe his father as nothing but a depraved beast, but he was unwilling to cross the words out once he'd written them; he didn't want to cross out anything in the whole letter—not only because his mother would see the crossed-out words as a bad omen, but also, quite simply, because he didn't want to.

In any case, he didn't hate his father so much. His father had certainly done something horrible, but which of us doesn't from time to time? He could quite understand his father's circumstances and he could forgive him. But could his father forgive himself for such a crime?

"To leave four children, to divorce you for no reason, then to marry that deformed woman. It is something for which he won't forgive himself, when he wakes up one day and realizes what he's done.

"I don't want to hate anybody; it is beyond me to do so even if I wanted to. But why did he do that, to *you*? You don't like any of us to talk about him, I know. But why do you think he did that?

"It's all over and done with now, and there's no hope of us getting him back again. But why did he do it? At least let us ask why.

"I'll tell you why. When we stopped hearing news of my brother Zakaria the situation finally changed. Zakaria used to send us about two hundred rupees from Kuwait every month. That sum gave my father some of the stability he dreamed of. But when we stopped hearing news of Zakaria—let us hope he's all right—what do you suppose my father thought?

"He told himself, in fact he told us all, that life is an extraordinary business, and that a man wants to be able to settle down in his old age and not find himself obliged to feed half a dozen open mouths. Didn't he say that? Zakaria had gone . . . there had been no news of him. Who would feed the mouths? Who would pay for the rest of Marwan's education, and buy May's clothes, and bring back bread for Riyad, Salma, and Hasan? Who?

"He is penniless, you know that. His one and only ambition was to move from the mud house that he had occupied in the camp for ten years and live under a concrete roof, as he used to say. Now, Zakaria had gone. All his hopes had collapsed, his dreams had been destroyed, his ambition had seeped away. So what would he do, do you think?

"His old friend, Shafiq's father, suggested he should marry her. He told him she owned a three-roomed house on the edge of the town, which she had bought with the money collected for her by a charity. Shafiq's father had one desire: to transfer to a husband's shoulders the burden of his daughter, who had lost her right leg during the bombardment of Jaffa. He already had one foot in the grave and wanted to go down into it reassured about the fate of his daughter, who had been turned down by everyone because of that leg, amputated at the top of the thigh. My father thought about the matter; if he let two rooms and lived with his lame wife in the third, he would live out the rest of his life in security, untroubled by anything. And more important than that, under a concrete roof."

"Do you want to stand here forever?"

He shook his head and walked on. Abul Khaizuran was looking at him out of the corner of his eye, and he imagined he was about to smile sarcastically.



"What's the matter with you, thinking like this? Thinking doesn't suit you, Marwan. You're still young, and life is long. . . ."

Marwan stopped again and jerked his head back slightly.

"And now, what do you want from me?"

Abul Khaizuran went on walking, so Marwan caught up with him again.

"I can smuggle you to Kuwait."

"How?"

"That's my affair. You want to go to Kuwait, don't you? Here is someone who can take you there. What more do you want?"

"How much do you want from me?"

"That's not really important."

"It is."

Abul Khaizuran smiled broadly, and his lips parted to show two rows of large teeth, gleaming white. Then he said:

"I'll be quite honest with you. I have got to go to Kuwait, and I said to myself: why not earn a little money and take someone with you who wants to go there? How much can you pay?"

"Five dinars."

"Is that all?"

"I haven't any more."

"Very well. I accept."

Abul Khaizuran put his hands in his pockets and strode forward, taking such big steps that Marwan almost lost him and had to hurry after him. But he stopped suddenly and shook his finger in front of his lips. "But . . . you mustn't tell anyone that. I mean, if I ask someone else for ten dinars, don't tell him I'm just getting five from you."

"But how do you expect me to trust you?"

Abul Khaizuran thought for a moment, then he smiled the same broad smile again, saying:

"You're right. You'll give me the money in Al-Safa Square in Kuwait—in the capital, in the middle of the capital. Satisfied?"

"All right."

"But we'll need some more people to make the journey. You must help me. That is a condition."

"I know someone staying in the same hotel with me who wants to go."

"That's splendid. I know someone else. He comes from the town where I lived in Palestine, in the old days, and I came across him here. But I haven't asked you: what do you want to do in Kuwait? Do you know anyone there?"

Marwan stopped again, but Abul Khaizuran pulled him by the arm and he trotted along by his side.

"My brother works there."

Abul Khaizuran shook his head as he hurried along. Then he raised his shoulders so that his neck sank between them and he seemed shorter than before.

"If your brother is working there, why do you want to take a job? People of your age are still at school."

"I was at school two months ago. But now I want to work to support my family."

Abul Khaizuran stopped and took his hands out of his pockets, putting them on his hips. He began to stare laughingly at Marwan.

"Ah! Now I understand. Your brother has stopped sending you money, hasn't he?"

Marwan nodded and tried to walk on, but Abul Khaizuran caught his arm and stopped him.

"Why? Has he got married?"

Amazed, Marwan looked at Abul Khaizuran, and whispered:

"How did you know?"

"Ah! One doesn't have to be a genius to understand. Everyone stops sending money to their families when they get married or fall in love."

Marwan felt a small disappointment growing in his heart, not because he had been surprised, but because he had discovered that it was something common and well known. He had thought that his heart held a great secret that no one else knew. He had guarded it from his mother and father for months and months, and here it was now, seeming on the tongue of Abul Khaizuran like a well-known, self-evident principle. "But . . . why do they do that? Why do they deny . . .?"

He suddenly fell silent. Abul Khaizuran had begun to laugh.

"I'm glad you are going to Kuwait, because you will learn many things there. The first thing you will learn is: money comes first, and then morals."

When Abul Khaizuran left him, having arranged to meet him again in the afternoon, he had lost, yet again, those wonderful sensations which had purified him inside throughout the morning. In fact it surprised him that the letter he had written to his mother could give him that marvellous feeling which made his disappointment appear less important than it really was. A silly letter, which he had written under the influence of a feeling of loneliness and hope on the roof of a miserable hotel at the end of the world. What was so extraordinary about it? Did he think his mother didn't know the whole story? What did he want to say? Did he want to convince her that her husband's desertion of her and her children was a fine and natural thing? Then why all that talk? He loved his father with a great and unshakeable love. But that changed nothing of the terrible truth, the truth that proclaimed that his father had fled . . . fled . . . fled. Just as Zakaria had done, when he got married and sent him a short letter, telling him that his turn had come and he must leave that stupid school, which taught nothing, and plunge into the frying pan with everyone else.

All his life Marwan had found himself at odds with Zakaria. In fact, they hated each other. Zakaria had been quite unable to understand why he had to spend ten years providing for the family while Marwan went off to school every day like a baby. He, Marwan, wanted to become a doctor. He used to tell his mother that Zakaria would never understand what it meant for someone to get an education, because he had left school when he left Palestine, and since then he had plunged into the frying pan, as he liked to say.

And here he was now, having married without telling anyone except Marwan, as though he wanted to confront him with his conscience. But what choice had he left him? Nothing except to leave the school, to plunge into the frying pan and stay there from now until eternity.

All right! All right! In a few days he would reach Kuwait. It would be better if Zakaria helped him, but if he pretended not to know him, he would find out how to start off, as many others had done. He would send every penny he earned to his mother, and overwhelm her and his brothers and sisters with gifts till he made the mud hut into a paradise on earth and his father bit his nails with regret.

Yet he couldn't hate his father so much, for the simple reason that his father still loved them all. Marwan had been completely convinced of that when he went to say good-bye to his father before he left. He did not tell his mother that he was going to Shafiq's house, or she would have been beside herself. His father said to him there:

"Marwan, you know that I have had no choice in the matter. It is something that has been decreed for us since the beginning of creation."

Shafiq said:

"We suggested to your mother that she should come and live here but she didn't agree. What more do you want us to do?"

She was sitting on a carpet of goatskin. The stick was lying beside her, and he thought: "I wonder where her thigh ends?" Her face was beautiful, but hard-featured like the faces of all those who are incurably ill, and her lower lip was twisted as though she were about to cry.

His father said:

"Take this. It is ten dinars; you may need them. You will write to us, won't you?"

When he stood up, Shafiq raised her arms in the air, praying for his success. Her voice was hoarse, and when he turned to her before going through the door, she broke down and sobbed. His father said to him:

"May God send you success, Marwan, you brave boy."

And he tried to laugh. He couldn't, so he began rubbing the boy's back with his large, hard hand, while Shafiq picked up her stick and stood up with a quick movement. She had stopped crying.

Marwan shut the door behind him and walked away. He could still hear Shafiq's stick tapping the tiles monotonously, but as he turned the corner the sound died away.

## THE DEAL

Marwan brought his companion Assad to the meeting with Abul Khaizuran. They arrived a little late and found Abul Khaizuran

waiting for them, sitting with Abu Qais on a big concrete seat on the pavement of the street, which ran parallel to the Shatt.

"The whole group's here together now, isn't it!" Abul Khaizuran laughed loudly, striking Marwan on the shoulder with one hand and stretching out the other to shake hands with Assad.

"So this is your friend. What's his name?"

Marwan answered curtly:

"Assad."

"Let me introduce you to my old friend, Abu Qais. Now the group's complete. It doesn't matter if one more comes too, but already we have enough, now."

Assad said:

"You seem to me to be a Palestinian. Are you the one who's undertaking to smuggle us?"

"Yes, I am."

"How?"

"That's my affair."

Assad laughed sarcastically and then said slowly, bringing out each word forcefully:

"No. It's *our* affair. You must explain all the details to us. We don't want to have problems from the start."

Abul Khaizuran said in a decisive tone:

"I'll explain all the details to you when we've come to an agreement, not before."

Assad replied:

"We can't agree before we know the details. What do the others think?"

Nobody answered, so Assad repeated the question.

"What does Abu Qais think?"

Abu Qais replied:

"I think as you do."

"What's your opinion, Marwan?"

"I'm with you."

Assad spoke forcefully:

"Very well, let's be brief. It seems to me that old Abu Qais has no knowledge of this kind of thing, and as for Marwan, it's his first

experience. I'm an old hand at this game. What is your opinion if I negotiate on your behalf?"

Abu Qais raised his hand in the air to show his agreement, and Marwan nodded. Assad turned to Abul Khaizuran:

"You see, they've made me responsible. Let me tell you something. We come from the same country. We want to earn money and so do you. Fine. But the whole thing must be quite fair. You must explain every step to us in detail, and tell us exactly how much you want. Of course, we'll give you the money after we arrive, not before."

Abu Qais remarked:

"Assad's quite right. We must be quite clear about things. If you start by making conditions, you end up satisfied, as the saying goes."

Abul Khaizuran took his hands out of his pockets and put them on his hips. He let his gaze wander slowly and coldly over all their faces, until it settled on Assad.

"First of all, you'll each pay ten dinars. Agreed?"

Abu Qais said:

"I agree."

Assad protested:

"Please. You have made me responsible, so let me speak. Ten dinars is a large sum. A professional smuggler takes fifteen. Then—"

Abul Khaizuran interrupted him.

"So we're disagreeing before we've started. That's what I was afraid of. Ten dinars, and not a penny less. Good-bye."

He turned his back and took two slow steps before Abu Qais caught up with him, shouting:

"Why have you lost your temper? It's a matter of question and answer, and agreement is the brother of patience."

"Very well. We'll give you ten dinars. But how will you take us?"

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. Listen!" Abul Khaizuran sat on the concrete seat with the three standing round him. He explained to them, with the help of his long hands:

"I have a lorry that is licensed to cross the frontier. Now you must realize it's not mine. I'm a poor man, poorer than any of you, and I'm only connected with that lorry because I drive it. Its owner

is rich and well known, and so it doesn't wait long at the frontier or get searched. The owner of the lorry is well known and respected, the lorry itself is well known and respected, and consequently the driver of the lorry is well known and respected."

Abul Khaizuran was an excellent driver. He had served in the British army for more than five years before 1948. When he left the army and joined the Freedom Fighters, he had the reputation of being the best lorry driver one could find. That was why the commandos in Al-Tira invited him to drive an old armored car that the village had captured after a Jewish attack. Although he had no experience of driving armored cars, he did not disappoint those who stood on both sides of the road, watching him as he climbed through the small armor-plated door and disappeared for a few minutes, after which the motor roared into action and the vehicle set off slowly down the narrow, sandy road. But it soon broke down, and none of Abul Khaizuran's efforts succeeded in putting it into running order again. If the villagers were greatly disappointed, Abul Khaizuran was still more so, but all the same he had increased the sum of his experiences in the world of mechanics. And who could say that this particular experience hadn't helped him when he joined the drivers working for Al-Haj Rida in Kuwait?

One day he had managed to drive a huge water tanker along a muddy salt road without its sinking into the earth and breaking down like all the other lorries in the convoy. Haj Rida had gone out into the desert with a number of his men for some days' hunting. But the spring was treacherous, and as they were returning, the road appeared firm and white, which encouraged the drivers to start along without hesitation. Then all the vehicles, big and small, began to sink into the mud one after the other. But Abul Khaizuran, who was driving his huge lorry behind them all, skillfully continued advancing, without stopping for a second. When he caught up with Haj Rida's car, whose wheels were three-quarters sunk in mud, he stopped his lorry. Getting out, he went up to Haj Rida, saying:

"How would Haj Rida like to get into my lorry? It'll take more than four hours to extricate these cars, and by then Haj Rida will have reached home."

Haj Rida replied:

"Splendid. The noise of your lorry's motor is kinder to the system than stopping here four hours."

Abul Khaizuran drove his huge lorry for six hours over that treacherous ground, which looked hard and white because of a fine film of salt that had dried on the surface. The whole of the way he was moving the steering wheel lightly and quickly to left and right so that the two front wheels could open a path slightly wider than necessary.

Haj Rida was delighted with Abul Khaizuran's skill, and mentioned it to all his friends for months. He was even more delighted when he learned that Abul Khaizuran had refused several offers of work elsewhere, made to him after the story became known. He asked to see him and congratulated him, and then he increased his wages a little. What was more important was that Haj Rida imposed a condition that Abul Khaizuran should be an obligatory companion on every hunting trip or long journey.

A week earlier Haj Rida had set off with a convoy of lorries on a hunting trip he had organized specially for some guests staying with him. He had asked Abul Khaizuran to drive the big water tanker, which would accompany the convoy the whole way to ensure a supply of water for the entire journey, lasting more than two days. The convoy had driven far into the desert, when suddenly Haj Rida decided to follow a different route on the return journey, which would bring him to Al-Zubair, and then from Al-Zubair he could take the main road to Kuwait. Abul Khaizuran could have been in Kuwait by now with the rest of the convoy if his lorry hadn't developed a small fault that had kept him in Basra two days longer to have it repaired, before catching up with those who had gone on ahead.

"So you want to put us inside the water tank on your lorry when you drive back?"

"Exactly. I said to myself: 'Why not seize the opportunity to earn an honest penny, while you're here, and as your lorry does not get searched?'"

Marwan looked at Abu Qais and then at Assad. They both looked at him in their turn, questioningly.



"Listen, Abul Khaizuran. I don't like the sound of this game. Can you imagine it? In heat like this, who could sit in a closed water tank?"

"Don't make a mountain out of a molehill. This isn't the first time. Do you know what will happen? You'll get into the tank five minutes from the frontier, and fifty meters beyond it you'll climb out. We'll repeat the performance for another five minutes at Mut-laa on the Kuwait border, and then suddenly you'll find yourselves in Kuwait!"

Assad shook his head and stared at the ground, grimacing with his lower lip. Marwan had begun to play with a dry twig, while Abu Qais went on staring at the tall driver. Suddenly Marwan asked:

"Is there any water in the tank?"

"Of course not. What are you thinking of? Am I a smuggler or a swimming teacher?" It seemed that Abul Khaizuran liked the idea, for he started to chuckle, hitting his thighs with his hands and turning round. "What are you thinking of? Am I a swimming teacher? Listen, my boy, the tank hasn't seen any water for six months."

"I thought you were carrying the water for a hunting expedition a week ago," said Assad quietly.

"Oh well . . . you know. You know what I mean."

"No. I don't know."

"I mean for six days. One exaggerates sometimes. Now, are we agreed? Let's bring this momentous meeting to an end."

Abu Qais stood up, preparing to say the decisive word. But before he spoke he let his eyes wander over them all and then waited a little, looking at Assad as though he were imploring his help. He went up to Abul Khaizuran.

"Listen, Abul Khaizuran, I'm a simple man and I don't understand all these complications. But that story of the hunting expedition . . . I didn't like it. You say you carried water for Haj Rida, and now you say that the tank of your lorry hasn't had sight or smell of water for six months. I'll tell you the truth, and I hope you won't be angry. I doubt whether you have a lorry at all." Abu Qais turned to the others and continued in a sad tone of voice: "I prefer to pay fif-

teen dinars and go with a smuggler by the desert road. I don't want any more problems."

Abul Khaizuran laughed, saying loudly:

"Go and see what it's like . . . do you think I don't know those smugglers? They leave you in the middle of the road and melt away like a lump of salt. And you, in turn, will melt away in the August heat without anyone knowing. Go on, go and see what it's like. Many have tried before you. Would you like me to show you the way? Why do you think they take the money from you first?"

"But I know many people who've arrived there by way of the smugglers."

"Ten percent at the most. Go and ask them, and they will tell you that they finished the journey without a smuggler or a guide, and that their luck helped them to survive."

Abu Qais froze in his place. For a moment it seemed he would fall. Marwan noticed that Abu Qais resembled his father closely, and he looked away from him, no longer able to concentrate his mind on a single subject. Abul Khaizuran went on, shouting:

"You must decide quickly! I've no time to waste. I swear to you on my honor—"

Assad quietly interrupted him:

"Leave the subject of honor for another time. Things go better when a man doesn't swear by his honor."

Abul Khaizuran turned to him:

"No, Mr. Assad. You are an intelligent, experienced man. What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About everything."

Assad smiled, noticing that Abu Qais and Marwan were waiting to hear his decision. He started speaking slowly and sarcastically:

"First, excuse us from believing the story of the hunting expedition. It seems to me that Haj Rida and you, sir, are involved in smuggling. I beg your pardon, let me finish. Haj Rida believes that smuggling people on the return journey is a trivial matter, so he leaves it to you—while you in turn leave him the smuggling of

more important things, for a reasonable share of the profits. Or do you think he doesn't know you smuggle people on the return journey?"

Abul Khaizuran smiled broadly, showing his clean white teeth again. He seemed not to want to answer Assad. Marwan blurted out:

"And the story of the hunt?"

Assad replied:

"The story of the hunt is cooked up for the frontier guards, not for us. But Abul Khaizuran sees no harm in telling it. . . ."

Abul Khaizuran smiled more broadly than before and began to exchange glances with the men, without saying a word. For a moment he looked like an idiot. Abu Qais remarked:

"But what does Haj Rida smuggle? You said that he's rich."

They all looked at Abul Khaizuran, who suddenly stopped smiling, his face again taking on an expression of carelessness and authority. He spoke decisively:

"And now, that's enough chatter. You mustn't think, Mr. Assad, that you're so clever. What have you decided?"

Assad said quietly:

"Personally, I'm only interested in reaching Kuwait. I'm not concerned with anything else. That is why I shall travel with Abul Khaizuran."

Marwan said excitedly:

"I will go along with you both."

Abu Qais said:

"Do you think that I'm capable of accompanying you? I'm an old man."

Abul Khaizuran laughed violently, then linked his arm with Abu Qais's. "Aha! Ah, Abu Qais, who's given you the idea that you're so old? Umm Qais, perhaps? You must come with us."

They had walked a few steps forward and left Marwan and Assad standing by the big concrete seat. Abul Khaizuran looked back over his shoulder and shouted:

"Abu Qais will sleep in the lorry with me. I'll come and sound my horn in front of the hotel tomorrow morning, early."

## THE ROAD

It was not too uncomfortable riding on the back of the huge lorry. Although the sun was pouring its inferno down on them without any respite, the breeze that they felt because of the lorry's speed lessened the intensity of the heat. Abu Qais had climbed up on top with Marwan, and they sat side by side on the edge of the tank. They had drawn lots, and it was Assad's turn to sit beside the driver for the first part of the journey.

Assad said to himself: "The old man will be last to sit in the shade here. But it doesn't matter; in any case the sun is still bearable now. At midday the old man will be lucky."

Abul Khaizuran spoke suddenly, raising his voice so that Assad could hear over the roar of the motor:

"Just imagine! In my own mind I compare these hundred and fifty kilometers to the path that God in the Quran promised his creatures they must cross before being directed either to Paradise or to Hell. If anyone falls he goes to Hell, and if anyone crosses safely he reaches Paradise. Here the angels are the frontier guards."

Abul Khaizuran burst out laughing as though he were not the person who had made the remark, then he began to hit the steering wheel with both hands and shake his head. "You know, I'm afraid the goods will perish, up there. . . ."

He indicated by a movement of his neck where the old man was sitting with Marwan on the tank, and laughed violently.

Assad asked quietly:

"Tell me, Abul Khaizuran. Have you ever been married?"

"Me?" he asked in surprise, and his thin face became veiled in sadness as though he hadn't been laughing a moment before. Then he replied slowly: "Why do you ask?"

"For no particular reason. I was thinking that you have a splendid life. No one to drag you in any direction. You can fly off alone wherever you like . . . you can fly off alone."

Abul Khaizuran shook his head, then he narrowed his eyes to meet the sunlight that had suddenly struck the windscreen. The light was shining so brightly that at first he could see nothing. But he felt a terrible pain coiled between his thighs. After a few mo-

ments he could make out that his legs were tied to two supports that kept them suspended, and that there were several men surrounding him. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them as wide as he could. The circular light above his head hid the ceiling from him and blinded him. As he lay there, tied firmly in that strange fashion, he could only remember one thing that had happened to him a moment before, and nothing else. He and a number of armed men were running along when all hell exploded in front of him and he fell forward on his face. That was all. And now, the terrible pain was still plunging between his thighs and the huge round light was hanging over his eyes and he was trying to see things and people, narrowing his eyes as much as he could. Suddenly a black thought occurred to him and he began to scream like a madman. He couldn't remember what he said then, but he felt a hand covered with a slippery glove placed over his mouth with a violent movement. The voice reached him as though it were coming through cotton:

"Be sensible. Be sensible. At least it's better than dying."

He didn't know if they could hear him as he shouted through his teeth, while the slippery hand covered his mouth. Or was his voice lost in his throat? At any rate, he could still hear the same voice as though someone else was shouting in his ear:

"No. It's better to be dead."

Now . . . ten years had passed since that horrible scene. Ten years had passed since they took his manhood from him, and he had lived that humiliation day after day and hour after hour. He had swallowed it with his pride, and examined it every moment of those ten years. And still he hadn't yet got used to it, he hadn't accepted it. For ten long years he had been trying to accept the situation? But what situation? To confess quite simply that he had lost his manhood while fighting for his country? And what good had it done? He had lost his manhood and his country, and damn everything in this bloody world.

No, he couldn't consent, even after ten years, to forget his tragedy and get used to it. He couldn't even accept it when he was under the knife and they were trying to convince him that it was better to lose one's manhood than one's life. O God of devils! They

don't even know that, they don't know anything, and then take it on themselves to teach people everything. Hadn't he accepted it, or was he incapable of accepting? From the first few moments he had decided not to accept; yes, that was it. Moreover, he couldn't entirely picture what had happened, and so he had fled from the hospital instinctively and blindly, before he had completely recovered. It was as though his flight could bring things back to normal again. He had needed a long time merely to accustom himself just to being alive, but had he succeeded? No, not yet. Each time he was asked, casually, "Why haven't you got married?" the same feeling of pain plunging between his thighs came back to him, as though he were still lying under the bright round light with his legs suspended in the air.

The light blazed so piercingly that his eyes began to water. Assad stretched out his hand at that moment and brought down the long sun shield to shade Abul Khaizuran's face.

"Yes, that's better. Thanks. Do you know, Abu Qais is a lucky man."

Assad realized that Abul Khaizuran wanted to change the subject of marriage, which his question had raised, so he simply responded:

"Why?"

"If he'd been fated to go with the smugglers, it would have been nothing less than a miracle if he'd reached Kuwait." Hunching his arms around the steering wheel, Abul Khaizuran rested his chest on them: "You don't know how things are here. None of you know. It's me you should ask, me. I know as many stories as there are hairs on a cat."

"The fat man seems kindhearted. I liked him."

Abul Khaizuran bent his head and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, which was lying on the wheel. Then he said:

"Ah! The fat man doesn't cross the frontier with you, and he doesn't know what happens."

"What does happen?"

"I have a cousin called Hasanain, who was smuggled across the border once. After more than seven hours' walking, darkness fell.

Then the smuggler pointed to a cluster of far-off lights, saying: 'There's Kuwait. You'll reach it when you've walked for half an hour.' Do you know what happened? That wasn't Kuwait, it was a remote Iraqi village. I can tell you thousands of stories like that. Stories of men who became like dogs as they looked for one drop of water to moisten their cracked tongues with. What do you think happened when they saw bedouin encampments? They bought a mouthful of water in exchange for all the money or wedding rings or watches they owned. People say Hatim\* was a bedouin. But I think that's a complete lie. That time has passed, Abu Saad, it has passed. But you don't realize it. You think that the fat man has the power to do everything. I know someone who survived alone in the desert for four days; when a car picked him up on the road to Al-Jahra he was at his last gasp. Guess what he did! He wanted just one thing out of life; he wanted to go back to Basra as soon as he recovered, even if it meant going back through the desert. Do you know why? He told me he wanted to go back there to get his hands round the fat man's neck and throttle him, and then let all hell break loose. He'd started out with two friends of his youth, from Gaza, across Israel, across Jordan, across Iraq. Then the smuggler abandoned them in the desert, before they had crossed the Kuwaiti border. He had buried his two friends in that unknown region and was carrying their identity cards in the hope that he would reach Kuwait and send them to their families. He didn't want anyone to give him advice; he said he didn't want to forget or forgive. After less than a month had passed, he retraced his steps to Iraq, but he was arrested, and now he is spending his second year in a miserable prison. What are you thinking of? You come to us straight from school like babes, thinking that life is easy. Do you suppose that Abu Qais wasn't gambling with his life? And he would have been the loser. I'm as sure of that as I am of this damned sun. Tomorrow, when you get to Kuwait, you'll speak well of me and say: 'Abul Khaizuran was telling the truth,' and you'll thank God a thousand times because I rescued

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\* Hatim, of the bedouin tribe of Taiy, is proverbial among the Arabs for his limitless generosity and hospitality. (Tr.)

you from the claws of the fat man. Have you ever in your life seen a skeleton lying on the sand?"

"What did you say?"

"I asked you: have you ever in your life seen a skeleton lying on the sand?"

"No."

Abul Khaizuran gave a sharp turn to the steering wheel to avoid a wide rut in the sand, and then the lorry began to jog and jolt over a road like an extended flight of steps. Assad felt his entrails were almost leaping past his chattering teeth out of his mouth.

"You would have seen many if you'd gone with the smugglers. And in any case, it won't mean anything."

"Why?"

"Because you'll be too busy to think about it, or, as Hasanain said, you won't want to think about it."

Assad merely smiled stupidly, not knowing what he ought to do. Then, nudging Abul Khaizuran in the ribs, he asked:

"Then why do you smuggle?"

"Me? Smuggle?"

Assad laughed and hit Abul Khaizuran's thigh with his hand.

"Then what do you call this?"

"Shall I tell you the truth? I want more money, more money, much more. And I find it difficult to accumulate money honestly. Do you see this miserable being which is me? I have some money. In two years I'll leave everything and settle down. I want to relax, to stretch out, to rest in the shade, thinking or not thinking. I don't want to make a single movement. I've had more than enough exhaustion in my life. Yes indeed, more than enough."

Abul Khaizuran quickly switched off the motor, opened the door and jumped down. He started shouting: "Now the serious part is beginning. Come on! I'll open the cover of the tank for you. Ha! The climate will be like the next world inside there."

He climbed lightly up the small iron ladder and set to work on the round cover of the tank. Marwan thought slowly: "He has strong arms." They were dripping with sweat, while his shirt was completely soaked and his face appeared daubed in mud.



The cover opened with a sound like an explosion, and Abul Khaizuran lifted up the edge of the metal disk, till it was vertical over its hinge and its inside could be seen, red with rust. Abul Khaizuran sat beside the opening, with his legs hanging down wide apart, and began to mop his sweat with the red handkerchief with which he covered the back of his neck, under the collar of the blue shirt. He was panting.

"I advise you to take your shirts off. The heat's stifling, terrifying, and you'll sweat as though you were in an oven. But it's only for five or seven minutes, and I'll drive as fast as I can. Inside there are iron girders, one in each corner, and I would rather you held on to them tightly, or else you'll roll around like balls. Of course you must take your shoes off."

They all remained standing on the ground, motionless. Abul Khaizuran got up and then jumped down, trying to laugh.

"One could sleep inside if the weather were a little kinder."

Abu Qais looked at Marwan and they both looked at Assad. Under the pressure of those glances, he took a couple of small steps forward, and then came back and stood still again, while Abul Khaizuran watched him.

"I advise you to hurry up a little. We're still in the early morning, but soon the inside of the tank will become a real oven. You can take a water bottle with you, but don't use it when you feel the lorry's standing still."

Marwan made up his mind and walked quickly up to the iron ladder. But Assad rushed to climb it before him, and then leaned over the uncovered opening. He put his head down into the tank for a few minutes, and brought it out again:

"This is hell. It's on fire."

Abul Khaizuran spread out his hands, saying:

"I told you that before."

Marwan too had climbed up and poked his head through the opening, taking it out again with a look of disgust and fear on his face. Abu Qais got up beside them, panting. Abul Khaizuran shouted up from below:

"Do you know what to do if any of you wants to sneeze?"

Assad smiled wanly, while Marwan looked down, and Abu Qais seemed not to understand the question.

"Hold your finger straight under your nostrils like this." Abul Khaizuran imitated the gesture, and his faced looked ridiculous.

Walking forward, Assad said:

"I don't think any of us will sneeze in this oven. Don't be worried on that score." Assad put his hands on his hips and stood beside the opening of the tank, with his head bowed, as though he wanted to see what was inside; meanwhile Abu Qais took off his shirt and carefully rolled it up, putting it under his arm. His chest appeared, covered with grizzled hair, and his protruding shoulder blades could be seen. He sat on the edge of the opening, dangling his legs inside. He threw his shirt in first, then slipped down, slow and straight, supporting himself on his arms, which were braced over the edge of the opening, until his feet touched the bottom and he let his arms go, sliding his body down carefully. His head was swallowed up and his arms disappeared.

Assad bent down and shouted:

"How do things look?"

A resounding voice echoed from inside, as though from a great depth.

"It's a cursed well. Come on!"

Assad looked at Marwan, who had taken off his shirt and stood waiting while Abul Khaizuran again climbed the ladder.

"Whose turn?"

"Mine." Marwan went up to the opening, and turned his back to it. He let his legs down first, leaning his stomach on the edge. His whole body slid skilfully down, and his two hands remained for a moment holding on to the frame of the opening before they disappeared.

Assad followed his companions without taking off his shirt, and when the opening hid him from sight, Abul Khaizuran bent down trying to see what it was like inside. But he couldn't make out anything, for each time he looked, his body blocked out the light from the opening and it was impossible to see. At last he shouted: "Well?"

A resonant voice replied:

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up! We're almost suffocating."

Abul Khaizuran quickly closed the cover and turned its curved handle twice. He jumped down and rushed to his seat. Before the cab door was shut the lorry had begun to eat up the road.

In those few minutes there was only one thought in Abul Khaizuran's mind. The rutted road, like an extended flight of steps, was shaking and jolting the lorry ceaselessly and mercilessly. This shaking was enough to turn eggs into omelettes more quickly than an electric whisk could. It didn't matter as far as Marwan was concerned: he was a boy. And it didn't matter to Assad, who was strongly built. But what about Abu Qais? No doubt his teeth were chattering like those of a man almost freezing to death, with the difference that here there was no frost.

Abul Khaizuran could eliminate some of the shaking if he increased his speed, if he made this infernal tank travel at one hundred and twenty instead of the ninety the speedometer was indicating now. But if he did so, who could guarantee that the lorry wouldn't overturn on a bloody road like this? It didn't matter if the lorry overturned, since it wasn't his, but what if it came to rest on its roof? And who knew if the engine would bear that kind of speed in weather like this, on this sort of terrain? They always put high numbers on the speedometer that it's not wise for a skillful driver to get up to.

He didn't slow down when he reached Safwan, nor, as he turned into the square, making for the police post on the left, did he raise his foot a hair's breadth from the accelerator. He swept around, sending up dust in a wide circle, and only lifted his foot when he sharply pressed the brake, in front of the entrance. He shot inside like an arrow.

The customs square at Safwan is broad and sandy, with one large, isolated tree in the middle whose long drooping leaves throw a wide shadow in the square. Round it stand rooms with low wooden doors, which are occupied by crowded offices and men who are always busy. As Abul Khaizuran's tall figure rushed across the square, he noticed nothing except some women sitting in the shade of the tree, wrapped in their veils. One or two children were standing by the water tap, and the watchman was sleeping on his old cane chair.

"Abul Khaizuran's in a hurry today."

"Yes. Haj Rida's waiting. If I'm late he'll sack me."

"Haj Rida won't sack you. Don't worry. He won't find another young man like you."

"Ah, the world's as full of young men as it is of mushrooms. If he made one gesture, they would be all over him like flies."

"What've you got with you?"

"Arms. Tanks. Armored cars. And six planes and two guns."

The man broke into a hearty laugh. Abul Khaizuran lightly slid the papers away from under his hands and darted outside. Entering another room he said to himself: "The most difficult part's over." After a minute he came out of the other room, and in less than the twinkling of an eye he was switching on the engine, rending the silence that had settled over Safwan, and setting off again.

While the lorry sped away like an arrow, leaving a trail of dust behind it, Abul Khaizuran streamed with sweat, which traced a network of channels over his face, meeting at his chin. The sun blazed brightly and the wind was hot, and carried a fine dust like flour. "Never in my life have I seen such awful weather." He undid the buttons of his shirt and his fingers touched the thick hair on his chest, which was soaked. The road had flattened out, and the lorry no longer jolted as before, so he accelerated. The speedometer leapt forward like a white dog tied to a tent peg.

He peered forward, his eyes drowned in sweat, and made out the edge of the little hill. Behind that hill Safwar would be hidden, and it was there that he must stop.

He pressed harder on the accelerator so that the lorry would climb the hill without slowing down. He felt his leg muscles were knotted into a ball and about to tear. The ground sped past and the lorry roared. The glass blazed and the sweat burned his eyes. But the top of the hill still seemed as far away as eternity. O almighty, omnipotent God! How could the top of a hill arouse all these feelings, which surged through his veins and poured their fire onto his dust-stained skin as salt sweat. O almighty God, you who have never been with me, who have never looked in my direction, whom I have never believed in, can you possibly be here this time? Just this time?

He blinked several times to clear the sweat from his eyelids, and when he opened his eyes the hilltop stood in front of him. He climbed to the top, stopped the engine, and let the lorry roll along a little before he stopped it and jumped from the door to the back of the tank.

Marwan emerged first. He raised his arms, and Abul Khaizuran roughly pulled him out and left him lying on top of the tank. Abu Qais pushed his head out and tried to climb up but it was beyond him. So he got his arms out and let Abul Khaizuran help him. Assad was able to climb through the opening. He had taken his shirt off.

Abul Khaizuran sat on top of the hot tank. He was panting, and he seemed to have aged. In the meantime Abu Qais had slipped slowly down over the wheels and lay in the shadow of the lorry face down. Assad stood for a moment, breathing deeply. He seemed to want to say something but couldn't. Finally he panted:

"Oh! It's so cold here."

His face had become red and damp. His trousers were soaked with sweat, and his chest, which had marks left by rust, looked as though it were spattered with blood. Marwan got up and came down the iron ladder, exhausted. His eyes were reddened, and his chest was dyed with rust. When he reached the ground, he rested his head on Abu Qais's thigh, slowly stretching out his body beside the wheel. Assad followed him a moment later, and then Abul Khaizuran. They sat resting their heads on their knees, their legs bent. Abu Khaizuran spoke after a while:

"Was it terrible?"

No one answered him. His gaze wandered over their faces, which seemed to him yellow and mummified. If Marwan's chest had not been rising and falling and Abu Qais's breathing an audible whistle, he would have thought they were dead.

"I told you seven minutes. And all the same, the whole thing didn't take more than six."

Assad glared at him, Marwan opened his eyes without focusing on anything in particular, and Abu Qais turned his face away.

"I swear to you on my honor! Six minutes exactly. Look! Why don't you want to look? I told you so, I said it from the beginning,

and now you think I'm lying to you. Here's the watch. Look! Look!"

Marwan raised his head, propped himself up on his arms, and began looking in Abul Khaizuran's direction with his head slightly tilted back. He appeared not to see him clearly.

"Have you tried sitting there for six minutes?"

"I told you . . ."

"It wasn't six minutes."

"Why don't you look at your watch? Why don't you? It's on your wrist. Come on, look! Look! And stop staring at me like an idiot."

Abu Qais spoke:

"It was six minutes. I was counting the whole time. From one to sixty, a minute. That's how I reckoned. I counted six times. The last time I counted very slowly."

He was talking haltingly, in a low voice, and Assad asked:

"What's wrong with you, Abu Qais? Are you ill?"

"Me? Me? Ah . . . no. But I'm breathing my share of air."

Abu Khaizuran stood up and brushed the sand from his trousers. He set his hands on his hips and began to look from one to the other of the three men.

"Come on. We mustn't waste any more time. You have another Turkish bath in front of you in a few minutes' time."

Abu Qais stood up and went over to the driver's cab, and Assad climbed the iron ladder, but Marwan stayed sitting in the shade. Abu Khaizuran asked:

"Don't you want to get up?"

"Why can't we rest a little?"

Assad shouted down:

"We'll have a long rest when we arrive, not before. Come on."

Abul Khaizuran gave a loud laugh. He struck Marwan on the shoulder with his hand and said:

"Come and sit beside Abu Qais. You are thin and won't bother us much. And you look very tired."

Climbing up, Marwan sat beside Abu Qais. Abul Khaizuran shouted loudly before he closed the door:

"Put on your shirt, Assad, or you'll be roasted in the sun."

Marwan murmured in a weak voice to Abul Khaizuran:

"Tell him to leave the oven door open and perhaps it will cool down."

Abul Khaizuran cried cheerfully:

"And leave the tank door open."

The engine roared and the big lorry began to trace a misty line across the desert, which rose and then dissolved in the heat.

## ☞ SUN AND SHADE

The lorry, a small world, black as night, made its way across the desert like a heavy drop of oil on a burning sheet of tin. The sun hung high above their heads, round, blazing, and blindingly bright. None of them bothered to dry their sweat any longer. Assad spread his shirt over his head, bent his legs, and let the sun roast him without resistance. Marwan leaned his head on Abu Qais's shoulder and closed his eyes. Abu Qais stared at the road, tightly closing his lips under his thick gray moustache.

None of the four wanted to talk anymore, not only because they were exhausted by their efforts, but because each one was swallowed up in his own thoughts. The huge lorry was carrying them along the road, together with their dreams, their families, their hopes and ambitions, their misery and despair, their strength and weakness, their past and future, as if it were pushing against the immense door to a new, unknown destiny, and all eyes were fixed on the door's surface as though bound to it by invisible threads.

We'll be able to send Qais to school and buy one or two olive shoots. Perhaps we'll build a cottage to live in, which will be ours. I'm an old man; I may arrive or I may not. And do you think that the life you lead here is better than death? Why don't you try, as we do? Why don't you get up off that cushion and set out through God's world in search of a living? Will you spend the whole of your life eating the flour ration for one kilo of which you sacrifice all your honor at the doors of officials?

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its engine roaring remorselessly.

Shafiq is an innocent woman. She was an adolescent when a mortar bomb smashed her leg and the doctors amputated it from the top of the thigh. And his mother didn't like anyone to talk about his father. Zakaria has gone. There, in Kuwait, you'll find everything out. You'll learn everything. You're still a boy, and you know no more of life than a babe in arms knows of its house. School teaches nothing. It only teaches laziness. So leave it and plunge into the frying pan with the rest of humanity.

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its engine roaring with an intolerable noise.

Perhaps it was buried in the ground, the bomb he trod on as he was running; or maybe it was thrown in front of him by a man hidden in a nearby ditch. None of that is important now. His legs were suspended in the air and his shoulders were still on the comfortable white bed, and the terrible pain was still plunging between his thighs. There was a woman there, helping the doctors. Whenever he remembered it, his face was suffused with shame. And what good did patriotism do you? You spend your life in an adventure, and now you are incapable of sleeping with a woman! And what good did you do? Let the dead bury their dead. I only want more money now, more money.

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its engine roaring loudly.

The policeman pushed him in front of the officer, who said to him: "You think you're a hero when the donkeys carry you on their shoulders, demonstrating in the street." He spat in his face, but Assad didn't move as the saliva ran slowly down his forehead and gathered on the tip of his nose in a nasty viscous mess. They led him out, and when he was in the corridor he heard the policeman who was grasping his shoulder say in a low voice: "Damn this uniform!" Then he let him go, and Assad ran off. His uncle, wishing to marry him off to his daughter, wanted him to make a start in life. Otherwise he would never have collected fifty dinars in the whole of his life.

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its roaring engine a gigantic mouth devouring the road.

The sun in the middle of the sky traced a broad dome of white flame over the desert, and the trail of dust reflected an almost blind-



ing glare. They used to be told that someone wasn't coming back from Kuwait because he'd died; he'd been killed by sunstroke. He'd been driving his shovel into the earth when he fell onto one knee and then on both. And then what? He was killed by sunstroke. Do you want him buried here or there? That was all, sunstroke. It was quite right. Who called it "sunstroke"? Wasn't he a genius? This desert was like a giant in hiding, flogging their heads with whips of fire and boiling pitch. But could the sun kill them and all the stench imprisoned in their breasts? The thoughts seemed to run from one head to another, laden with the same suspicions, for their eyes suddenly met. Abul Khaizuran looked at Marwan and then at Abu Qais, whom he found staring at him. He tried to smile, and failed, so he wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, murmuring:

"This is the Hell that I have heard of."

"God's Hell?"

"Yes."

Abul Khaizuran reached out his hand and turned off the engine; then he slowly got down, followed by Marwan and Abu Qais, while Assad remained perched above them.

Abul Khaizuran sat in the shade of the lorry and lit a cigarette. He said in a low voice:

"Let's rest a little before we begin the performance again."

Abu Qais asked:

"Why didn't you set out with us yesterday evening so that we would be saved by the cool of the night from all this trouble?"

Without raising his eyes from the ground, Abul Khaizuran replied:

"The road between Safwan and Mutlaa is full of patrols at night. During the day no patrol can run the risk of making a reconnaissance in heat like this."

Marwan remarked:

"If your lorry is sacrosanct and never searched, why can't we stay outside that terrible prison?"

Abul Khaizuran replied sharply:

"Don't be silly. Are you so afraid of spending five or six minutes inside? We've done more than half the journey, and only the easiest

part is left." He stood up, went over to the water skin hanging outside the door, and opened it. "I'll put on a splendid lunch for you when we arrive. I'll have two chickens killed . . ." He raised the water skin and poured the water into his mouth until it began to trickle out at the corners onto his chin and his wet shirt. When he had quenched his thirst he poured the rest of the contents over his head, letting the water run down over his forehead, neck, and chest, which gave him an extraordinary appearance. He hung the water bottle outside the door again, spread his big hands and cried:

"Come on, you've learned the art well. What time is it now? Half past eleven. Think, in seven minutes at the outside I'll open the cover for you. Remember that, half past eleven."

Marwan looked at his watch and nodded. He tried to say something but it was beyond him, so he took a few steps over to the iron ladder and began to climb it.

Assad rolled up his shirt and plunged into the opening. Marwan hesitated a little and then followed him, leaning with his stomach on the edge and then skilfully sliding down with a sharp movement. Abu Qais shook his head, saying: "Seven minutes?"

"At the outside!"

Abul Khaizuran patted Abu Qais on the shoulder and looked straight into his eyes. They stood there together streaming with sweat, neither of them able to speak.

Abu Qais climbed the ladder with firm steps, and let his legs down through the opening. The two younger men helped him down.

Abul Khaizuran closed the cover and turned the curved metal handle twice before jumping quickly down and rushing to his seat.

Only a minute and a half later he had driven his lorry through the big open gate in the barbed-wire fence round the post of Mutlaa. He brought it to a stop in front of the wide steps leading to the tiled one-story building flanked on both sides by small rooms with low, closed windows. Opposite it were a few stalls selling food, and the noise of air conditioners filled the air.

There were only one or two cars parked waiting at the edge of the big square. The silence hung heavy and unbroken, except for the hum of the air conditioners attached to all the windows looking

out onto the square. Only one soldier was standing in a small wooden hut beside the wide flight of steps.

Abul Khaizuran hurried up the steps and made for the third room on the right. Immediately he opened the door and went in, he felt, from the glances directed at him by the officials, that something was going to happen. But he didn't pause, pushing his papers in front of the fat official sitting in the center of the room.

"Aha! Abu Khaizurana!" shouted the official, as he slid the papers to one side with deliberate carelessness, and crossed his arms on the metal desk. "Where have you been all this time?"

Abul Khaizuran panted:

"In Basra."

"Haj Rida asked after you more than six times."

"The lorry had broken down."

The three officials in the room broke into loud laughter and Abul Khaizuran turned round, at a loss. Then he fixed his eyes on the fat man's face.

"What is it that amuses you this morning?"

The three officials exchanged glances and then burst out laughing again. Abul Khaizuran said tensely, shuffling from one foot to the other:

"Now, Abu Baqir, I've no time for jokes. Please . . ."

Stretching out his hand he moved the papers closer in front of the official, but again Abu Baqir pushed them away to the edge of the desk, folded his arms and smiled wickedly.

"Haj Rida asked about you six times."

"I told you, the lorry was not working. And Haj Rida and I can come to an understanding when we meet. Please sign the papers. I'm in a hurry."

He slid the papers closer again, but once more Abu Baqir pushed them away.

"Your lorry wasn't working?"

"Yes. Please! I'm in a hurry."

The three officials looked at one another and quietly gave a knowing laugh. The desk of one of them was completely bare except for a small glass of tea; the other had stopped working to follow what was happening.

The fat man called Abu Baqir said, belching:

"Now, be sensible, Abu Khaizurana. Why do you hurry your journey in terrible weather like this? The room here's cool, and I'll order you a glass of tea. So enjoy the comfort."

Abul Khaizuran picked up the papers, took the pen lying in front of Abu Baqir and went round the table to stand beside him. He pushed the pen towards him, nudging his shoulder with his arm.

"I'll spend an hour sitting with you when I come back, but now let me leave, for Baqir's sake and Baqir's mother's sake. Here!"

Abu Baqir, however, did not move his hand but continued to stare stupidly at the driver, on the point of bursting out laughing again.

"Ah, you devil, Abu Khaizurana! Why don't you remember that you are in a hurry when you are in Basra? Eh?"

"I told you, the lorry was in the garage."

Again he pushed the pen towards Abu Baqir, but he didn't move.

"Don't lie, Abu Khaizurana, don't lie! Haj Rida has told us the story from A to Z."

"What story?"

They all exchanged glances, as Abul Khaizuran's face turned white with terror, and the pen began to tremble in his hand.

"The story of that dancer. What's her name, Ali?"

From the other side of the empty desk, Ali answered:

"Kawkab."

Abu Baqir hit his desk with his hand and gave a broad smile.

"Kawkab. Kawkab. Abu Khaizurana, you devil. Why don't you tell us what you get up to in Basra? You make out to us that you are a decent, well-behaved fellow, and then you go to Basra and commit mortal sins with that dancer, Kawkab. Yes, Kawkab, that's the name."

"What's all this rubbish about Kawkab? Let me go before Haj Rida gives me the sack."

Abu Baqir replied:

"Impossible. Tell us about this dancer. The Haj knows the whole story and he's told it to us. Come on."

"If Haj Rida's told it to you, why do you want me to tell it again?"

Abu Baqir stood up and gave a bull-like roar.

"Ah! So it's true. It's a true story." He walked round the desk and came to the middle of the room. The story of depravity had excited him. He had thought about it day and night, endowing it with all the obscenity created by his long, tormenting deprivation. The idea that a friend of his had slept with a prostitute was exciting, and worth all those dreams.

"You go to Basra and make out that the lorry isn't working, and then you spend the happiest nights of your life with Kawkab. Good heavens, Abu Khaizurana! Good heavens, you devil! But tell us how she has shown her love for you. Haj Rida says that she loves you so much that she spends her money on you and gives you checks. Ah, Abu Khaizurana, you devil!"

He came up to Abul Khaizuran, his face red. Obviously, he'd enjoyed himself thinking about the story as Haj Rida had told it to him over the telephone. He leaned over and whispered hoarsely in his ear:

"Is it your virility? Or aren't there many men about?"

Abul Khaizuran laughed hysterically and shoved the papers at Abu Baqir's chest. He picked up the pen and began signing them automatically, shaking with suppressed laughter. But when Abul Khaizuran stretched out his hand to take them, Abu Baqir hid them behind his back, warding off Abul Khaizuran with his other arm.

"Next time I'll go with you to Basra. Agreed? You'll introduce me to this Kawkab. Haj Rida says she's really beautiful."

Abul Khaizuran said in a trembling voice as he stretched out his arm, trying to reach the papers:

"I agree."

"On your honor?"

"On my honor."

Abu Baqir collapsed into renewed laughter, shaking his round head as he went back to his desk, while Abul Khaizuran rushed outside with his papers, pursued by Abu Baqir's voice:

"You devil, Abu Khaizurana! He's deceived us for two years, but now he's been shown up. Ah, you devil, Abu Khaizurana!"

Abul Khaizuran burst into the other room, looking at his watch. A quarter to twelve. The signing of the other papers didn't take more than a minute. When he shut the door after him the heat lashed him again, but he took no notice, jumping down the wide steps two at a time until he stood in front of his lorry. He looked at the tank for a moment and he had the impression that the metal was about to melt under that fearful sun. The engine responded to the first touch, and he instantly closed the door, not waving to the guard. The road now was completely level and he had a minute or a minute and a half before he could round the first bend, hiding him from the post. He was forced to slow down a little when he met a large lorry, but then he put his foot down till the vehicle was going at top speed. When he reached the bend the wheels set up a screech like a howl and almost touched the sand verge as they made their enormous turn. There was nothing in his mind but terror, and he thought he would collapse over his steering wheel in a faint. The wheel was hot and he felt it scorch his hard hands, but he didn't slacken his hold on it. The leather seat burned under him and the glass windscreen was dusty and blazed with the sun's glare.

A loud hiss came from the wheels as though they were flaying the asphalt. Did you have to talk so much rubbish, Abu Baqir? Did you have to spew up all your filth onto my face and theirs? The curse of almighty God be upon you. The curse of almighty God, who doesn't exist anywhere, be visited upon you, Abu Baqir! And on you, Haj Rida, you liar! A dancer? *Kawkab*? God damn you all!

He stopped the lorry sharply, and climbed over the wheel to the roof of the tank. When his hands touched the metal roof he felt them burn, and couldn't keep them there. He moved them away and leaned his elbows, in their sleeves, on the metal roof, crawling to the angular lock. He took hold of it with a corner of his blue shirt and turned it, so that it burst open and the rusty metal disk stood vertical over its hinge.

As he let go of the disk he caught sight of the heads of the watch on his wrist. They pointed to nine minutes to twelve. The round glass had cracked into little pieces. The uncovered opening yawned empty for a moment. Abul Khaizuran's face, drawn to it, twitched

compulsively, his lower lip trembling as he panted for breath, overcome with terror. A drop of sweat from his forehead fell onto the metal roof of the tank and immediately dried. He put his hands on his knees, bent his soaked back until his face was over the black hole, and shouted in a dry, grating voice:

“Assad!”

The sound reverberated in the tank and almost pierced his eardrums as it came back to him. Before the echo of the rumble that his first cry had set up had died away, he shouted again:

“Hey there!”

He put two firm hands on the edge of the opening and, supporting himself on his strong arms, slid down inside the tank. It was very dark there, and at first he couldn't make out anything, but when he moved his body away from the opening a circle of yellow light fell into the depths and showed a chest covered with thick gray hair that began to shine brightly as though coated with tin. Abul Khaizuran bent to put his ear to the damp gray hair. The body was cold and still. Stretching out his hand, he felt his way to the back of the tank. The other body was still holding on to the metal support. He tried to find the head but could only feel the wet shoulders; then he made out the head, bowed on the chest. When his hand touched the face, it fell into a mouth open as wide as it could go.

Abul Khaizuran had a choking sensation. His body had begun to run with sweat at such an amazing rate that he felt he was coated in thick oil, and he couldn't tell whether he was trembling because of this oil covering his chest and back or whether it was caused by fear. Bending down, he felt his way to the opening, and when he put his head through it, Marwan's face came into his mind for some reason, and wouldn't go away. He felt the face take possession of him from within, like a fresco shimmering on a wall, so he started to shake his head violently as he slipped down from the opening and the merciless sun burned it. He stood for a moment breathing in fresh air. He couldn't think of anything. Marwan's face had surged up to take complete possession of his mind, like a spring that bursts from the earth and sends its water high into the air. When he reached his seat he remembered Abu Qais, whose shirt was still lying on the seat beside him. He took it in his long fingers and threw

it far away. He switched on the lorry's motor and it began to roar again, as the lorry made its slow, majestic way down the slope.

He turned round to look through the small, wire-netted window, and saw the round disk open, standing straight over its hinge, with its inside corroded with rust. Suddenly the metal disk disappeared behind drops of salt water, which filled his eyes. He had a headache and vertigo such as he had never felt before. Were those salty drops tears, or sweat running from his burning forehead?

## THE GRAVE

As darkness fell, Abul Khaizuran drove his lorry away from the sleeping city. Pale lights trembled along the side of the road, and he knew that those lampposts that were retreating in front of the window would come to an end shortly, when he had left the city far behind him. The darkness would be unbroken. The night was moonless, and the edge of the desert would be silent as the grave.

He turned his lorry off the asphalt road and drove along a sandy track that led into the desert. He had made up his mind at noon to bury them, one by one, in three graves. Now he felt consumed with exhaustion, as though a drug had been injected into his arms. He had no strength to work, and he wouldn't be capable of wielding a spade for long hours to dig three graves. Before he went to take his lorry out of Haj Rida's garage, he told himself that he wouldn't bury them. He would throw the three corpses into the desert and return home. But now he wasn't pleased with the idea. He didn't like to think that his companions' bodies should be lost in the desert, at the mercy of birds and beasts of prey, and that there would be nothing left of them after a few days except white bones lying on the sand.

The lorry moved over the sandy track with a muted noise, while he went on thinking. He wasn't thinking in the strict sense of the term, but a series of disconnected scenes was passing ceaselessly through his brain, incoherent and inexplicable. He could sense exhaustion creeping through his limbs like straight columns of ants.



A breeze sprang up and carried to his nostrils a smell of putrefaction. He said to himself: "The municipality piles up the rubbish here." Then he reflected: "If I dumped the bodies here they would be discovered in the morning and buried under official auspices." He turned his steering wheel and followed the tracks of many wheels that had dug their path through the sand before him, and then he switched off the headlamps, advancing slowly by the light of the side-lamps alone. When the black heaps of rubbish rose up in front of him, he switched off the side lamps. The air around him filled with the putrid stench, but he soon got used to it. Then he stopped his lorry and climbed down.

Abul Khaizuran stood beside his lorry for a few moments to make sure that no one was watching him, then he climbed up onto the back of the tank. It was cold and damp. He turned the curved metal handle slowly and pulled the iron disk up so that it burst open with a sharp explosion. Supporting himself on his arms, he slid lightly down inside. The first corpse was cold and firm, and he tossed it over his shoulder. He pushed the head out of the opening first and then, holding the corpse by its legs, he lifted it and threw it upwards, hearing the heavy sound it made as it slid over the edge of the tank, and the muffled bump as it struck the sand. He had great difficulty in prising the hands of the other corpse away from the iron support, but then he pulled it by its legs to the opening and threw it out over his shoulder, straight and stiff. He heard it strike the earth. The third corpse was easier than either of its companions.

He jumped down, slowly closed the opening, and climbed down the ladder to the ground. There was thick darkness everywhere, and he was relieved that he would be saved by it from seeing the faces. Holding them by their feet, he dragged the corpses one by one and threw them onto the end of the road, where the municipality's dustcarts usually stopped to dump their rubbish, so that the first driver arriving in the morning would easily have an opportunity to see them.

He climbed into his seat, turned on the engine and slowly reversed, trying his utmost to mingle the tracks of his lorry's wheels with those of others. He had decided to drive back to the main road

in reverse, in order to confuse the traces completely. But a thought occurred to him when he had covered some distance, and he switched off the engine again, walked back to where he had left the bodies, and took the money from their pockets. He also removed Marwan's watch. Then he retraced his steps to the lorry, walking on the edge of his soles.

As he returned to the lorry and lifted one leg up, a sudden thought flashed into his mind. He stood rigid in his place, trying to do or say something. He thought of shouting, but immediately realized what a stupid idea that was. He tried to finish climbing into the lorry, but didn't feel strong enough. He thought that his head would explode. All the exhaustion which he felt suddenly rose to his head and began to hum in it, and so he put his head in his hands and began to pull his hair to expel the thought. But it was still there, huge and resounding, unshakeable and inescapable. He turned to look back to where he had left the corpses, but he could see nothing, and that glance simply set the thought ablaze so that it began to burn in his mind. All at once he could no longer keep it within his head, and he dropped his hands to his sides and stared into the darkness with his eyes wide open.

The thought slipped from his mind and ran onto his tongue: "Why didn't they knock on the sides of the tank?" He turned right round once, but he was afraid he would fall, so he climbed into his seat and leaned his head on the wheel.

"Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you say anything? Why?"

The desert suddenly began to send back the echo:

"Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you bang the sides of the tank? Why? Why? Why?"



## THE LAND OF SAD ORANGES



WHEN WE SET OUT FROM JAFFA FOR ACRE, THERE WAS nothing tragic about our departure. We were just like anybody who goes to spend the festival season every year in another city. Our time in Acre passed as usual, with nothing untoward. I was young then, and so I probably enjoyed those days because they kept me from going to school. But whatever the fact of the matter, the picture gradually became clearer on the night of the great attack on Acre. That night passed, cruel and bitter, amidst the despondency of the men and the prayers of the women. You and I and the others of our age were too young to understand what the story meant from beginning to end, but that night the threads began to grow clearer. In the morning, when the Jews withdrew, threatening and fuming, a big lorry was standing at the door of our house. A simple collection of bedding was being thrown into it, from here and there, quickly and feverishly. I was standing leaning against the ancient wall of the house when I saw your mother climb into the lorry, followed by your aunt and the children. Your father started tossing you and your brothers and sisters into the lorry, and on top of the belongings, and then he seized me from my corner and lifted me over his head into the iron rack on the roof of the driver's cab, where I found my brother Riyad sitting quietly. The lorry was already moving off before I had settled myself into a comfortable position. Beloved Acre was already disappearing behind the bends in the road going up to Ras Naquora.

It was rather cloudy, and a chilly feeling invaded my body. Riyad was sitting quite quietly, with his legs hanging over the edge

of the rack, leaning his back against the luggage, as he stared into the sky. I sat silently, with my chin between my knees and my arms wrapped round them. The groves of orange trees followed each other in succession along the side of the road. We were all eaten up with fear. The lorry panted over the damp earth, and the sound of distant shots rang out like a farewell.

When Ras Naqoura came into sight in the distance, cloudy on the blue horizon, the lorry stopped. The women climbed down over the luggage and made for a peasant sitting cross-legged with a basket of oranges just in front of him. They picked up the oranges, and the sound of their weeping reached our ears. I thought then that oranges were something dear and these big, clean fruits were beloved objects in our eyes. When the women had bought some oranges, they brought them over to the lorry and your father climbed down from the driver's side and stretched out his hand to take one. He began to gaze at it in silence, and then burst into tears like a despairing child.

In Ras Naqoura our lorry stopped beside many others. The men began handing their weapons to the policeman stationed there for the purpose, and as our turn came and I saw the rifles and machine guns lying on the table and looked towards the long line of lorries entering Lebanon, rounding the bends in the roads and putting more and more distance between themselves and the land of the oranges, I too burst into a storm of weeping. Your mother was still looking silently at the orange. And all the orange trees that your father had abandoned to the Jews shone in his eyes, all the well-tended orange trees that he had bought one by one were printed on his face and reflected in the tears that he could not control in front of the officer at the police post.

In the afternoon, when we reached Sidon, we had become refugees.

We were among those swallowed up by the road. Your father looked as though it was a long time since he had slept. He was standing in the street in front of the belongings heaped on the ground, and I quite imagined that if I ran over to say something to him he would explode in my face: "Damn your father! Damn . . . !" Those two oaths were clearly etched on his face. I myself, a child ed-

uated in a strict religious school, at that moment doubted whether this God really wanted to make men happy. I also doubted whether this God could hear and see everything. The colored pictures that were handed out to us in the school chapel showing the Lord having compassion on children and smiling in their faces seemed like another of the lies made up by people who open strict schools in order to get higher fees. I was sure that the God we had known in Palestine had left it too, and was a refugee in some place that I did not know, unable to find a solution to his own problems. And we, human refugees, sitting on the pavement waiting for a new Fate to bring some solution, were responsible for providing a roof under which to spend the night. Pain had begun to undermine the child's simple mind.

Night is a fearful thing. The darkness that gradually came down over us cast terror into my heart. The mere thought that I would spend the night on the pavement aroused all kinds of fears within me. They were cruel and harsh. No one was prepared to have pity on me. I could not find anyone to console me. Your father's silent glance cast fresh terror into my breast. The orange that your mother held in her hand set my head on fire. Everyone was silent, staring at the black road, keen for Fate to appear round the corner and hand out solutions to our difficulties, so that we could follow him to some shelter. Suddenly Fate did come; your uncle had reached the town before us, and he was our fate.

Your uncle never had great faith in ethics, and when he found himself on the pavement like us, he lost it entirely. He made for a house occupied by a Jewish family, opened the door, threw his belongings inside and jerked his round face at them, saying very distinctly: "Go to Palestine!" It is certain that they did not go, but they were frightened by his desperation, and they went into the next room, leaving him to enjoy the roof and tiled floor.

Your uncle led us to that shelter of his and pitched us into it with his belongings and family. During the night we slept on the floor, and it was completely taken up with our small bodies. We used the men's coats for coverings, and when we got up in the morning we found that the men had passed the night sitting up. The tragedy had begun to eat into our very souls.

We did not stay long in Sidon. Your uncle's room was not large enough for half of us, but it held us for three nights. Then your mother asked your father to look for some job, or let us return to the orange trees. Your father shouted in her face, the rancor trembling in his voice, and she fell silent. Our family problems had begun. The happy, united family we had left behind, with the land, the house, and the martyrs killed defending them.

I don't know where your father got the money from. I know that he sold the gold he had bought for your mother when he wanted to make her happy and proud that she was his wife. But the gold did not bring in a sum large enough to solve our problems. There must have been another source. Did he borrow at all? Did he sell something else he had brought away without our noticing? I don't know. But I do remember that we moved to a village on the outskirts of Sidon, and there your father sat on the high stone balcony, smiling for the first time and waiting for the fifteenth of May in order to return in the wake of the victorious armies.

The fifteenth of May came, after a bitter period of waiting. At exactly midnight your father poked me with his foot as I lay asleep and said in a voice vibrant with hope: "Get up and see for yourself as the Arab armies enter Palestine." I was up like a shot, and we clambered down barefoot over the hills to the main road, which lay a full kilometer from the village. All of us, young and old, panted as we ran like madmen. The lights of the lorries climbing to Ras Naqoura shone in the distance. When we got to the road we felt cold, but your father's shout drove everything else from our minds. He had begun to race after the lorries like a small boy. He was calling out to them. He was giving hoarse shouts and gasping for breath, but still he raced along after the string of lorries like a little boy. We ran along beside him, shouting in unison with him. The friendly soldiers were looking at us from under their helmets, silent and motionless. We were gasping for breath. Meanwhile your father, racing along despite his fifty years, pulled cigarettes out of his pocket to throw to the soldiers and went on shouting to them. We were still running along beside him, like a little flock of goats.

Suddenly the lorries were at an end. We went back to the house exhausted, our breathing coming with a low whistle as we gasped

for air. Your father was absolutely silent, and we too were incapable of speech. When the lights of a passing car fell on your father's face, his cheeks were wet with tears.

Things dragged past extremely slowly after that. The communiqués deceived us, and then the truth in all its bitterness cheated us. Despondency found its way back to people's faces. Your father began to find enormous difficulty in mentioning Palestine and talking of the happy past spent in his plantations and houses. And we were the ones who formed the massive walls of the tragedy that dominated his new life, as well as being the wretches who discovered, without any difficulty at all, that the idea behind climbing the hills in the early morning, as your father ordered, was to distract us from demanding breakfast.

Complications set in. In some extraordinary way the simplest thing was enough to rouse your father. I remember perfectly the time when someone asked him for something—I neither know nor recall what. He shuddered, and then began trembling as though he had received an electric shock. His eyes glittered as they roamed over our faces. A diabolical thought had implanted itself in his brain, and he jumped up like a man who has found a satisfactory conclusion. Overwhelmed by his awareness that he was able to put an end to his difficulties, and by the dread of someone who is about to undertake a momentous action, he began to mutter to himself as he turned round and round, looking for something we could not see. Then he pounced on a chest that had accompanied us from Acre and started to scatter its contents with terrible nervous movements. Your mother had understood everything in an instant and, caught up in the agitation that mothers feel when their children are exposed to danger, she set about pushing us out of the room and telling us to run away to the mountain. But we stayed by the window. We plastered our little ears to its shutters, and heard your father's voice: "I want to kill them. I want to kill myself. I want to be done with . . . I want . . ."

Your father fell silent. When we looked into the room again, through the cracks in the door, we saw him lying on the ground, gasping for breath and grinding his teeth as he wept, while your mother sat at one side watching him anxiously.

We did not understand. But I remember that when I saw the black revolver lying on the floor beside him, I understood everything. Driven by the mortal terror of a child who has suddenly caught sight of an ogre, I ran off towards the mountain, fleeing from the house.

As I left the house behind, I left my childhood behind too. I realized that our life had ceased to be pleasant, and it was no longer easy for us to live in peace. Things had reached the point where the only solution was a bullet in the head of each one of us. So we must take care to behave suitably in all that we did, not asking for something to eat even when we were hungry, keeping silent when your father spoke of his difficulties and nodding and smiling when he said to us: "Go and climb the mountain, and don't come back till midday."

I returned home in the evening, when dusk had fallen. Your father was still ill and your mother was sitting beside him. Your eyes all had a catlike glitter and your lips were sealed as though they had never been opened, as though they were the scars left by an old wound not properly healed.

You were huddled there, as far from your childhood as you were from the land of the oranges—the oranges that, according to a peasant who used to cultivate them until he left, would shrivel up if a change occurred and they were watered by a strange hand.

Your father was still ill in bed. Your mother was choking back the tears of a tragedy that has not left her eyes till now. I slipped into the room like a pariah. When my glance fell on your father's face, which was twitching with impotent fury, I saw at the same moment the black revolver lying on the low table, and beside it an orange.

The orange was dried up and shriveled.





## “IF YOU WERE A HORSE . . .”



**I**F YOU WERE A HORSE I WOULD PUT A BULLET through your brain.”

Why a horse? Why not a dog, or a cat, or a rat, or anything else if it had to be an animal so that one could put a bullet through its brain?

Ever since he had begun to understand what words meant—he didn't remember when exactly—he had heard this sentence on his father's tongue. It was strange indeed that his father was the only person in the world whom he heard wish that his son were a horse, and nothing but a horse. What was even stranger was that his father never wished that anyone else were a horse, however much he disagreed with them or was infuriated by them.

To begin with, he supposed that his father hated horses, hated them more than anything else in the world, and that he only said to someone “If you were a horse I'd shoot you” when he had completely lost his temper with him. He supposed, again to begin with, that his father hated no one in the world as much as he did his son, and for that very reason his father did not say to anyone else: “If you were a horse I'd shoot you.”

But with the passage of time he soon abandoned that silly idea completely. For he discovered that his father loved horses and had been a great expert on them in days gone by. He had only abandoned horses when he abandoned the countryside.

One day his father was uncharacteristically happy and cheerful, and so he seized the opportunity to ask him:

"Why do you wish I were a horse when you are overcome by the urge to be rid of me?"

His father suddenly frowned and answered in a grave tone:

"You don't understand these things. There are situations where killing a horse is a necessary, useful action."

"But I'm not a horse."

"I know. I know. That's why I sometimes wish that God had created you a horse."

Saying this, his father turned his broad shoulders and walked away. But the son took a few steps and stood in his path. His father stopped and gave him a penetrating stare, looking him up and down with his sharp eyes. He tried in vain to divine what was in his father's mind.

"Do you hate me so much?"

"I don't hate you."

"What, then?"

"I'm afraid of you."

There was a short silence, and then he stood aside to let his father pass. As his father turned at the bend in the wide staircase, he realized how much he loved him, this unfortunate old man who had lived most of his life in loneliness and solitude. His youth had been taken up with horses, but it was not long before he abandoned everything, all of a sudden. His wife had died after bearing him a son whom he took with him to the city. He sold all his horses and the meadows in which he let them roam freely, his horses Samra, Bayda, Barq, Saba. Why had his father taken that step? It did not occur to the young man to ask him, and if he had he would not have received an answer.

He knew his father through and through, and he knew that the past was, for him, a solid wooden box locked with a thousand keys that had been cast into the depths of the ocean.

Once he became obsessed with the story, he decided to discover its secrets at the first opportunity. His father had set off for the country to visit those of his friends and relatives who were still there, and the son went up to his room, which he hardly ever entered. For the first time he became aware of the existence of the great number of pictures decorating the walls, pictures of truly

beautiful horses. He slipped a knife into the crack of the drawer to open it, and drew out a notebook with a black leather cover, ensconcing himself in the armchair to read it.

It was an enormous disappointment. There was nothing helpful in the book, only numbers, prices, and pedigrees. Prices of horses that had been bought and sold, and pedigrees stretching back hundreds of years. There were just some incomplete phrases written carelessly in the margins of the notebook, like the scribblings of a daydreamer.

"20.4.1929: They tell me to sell him or kill him."

He turned the pages attentively. He felt he had caught hold of the end of the thread and was afraid to lose it.

"1.12.1929: He's my most treasured possession, and I won't part with him lightly. They still advise me to kill or sell him.

"20.3.1930: These are annoying superstitions. Barq is the most splendid horse I have ever seen in my life and the quietest I have ever heard of. I shall not kill him."

On the last page a trembling hand had traced the final sentence in that strange diary: "27.7.1930: He threw her savagely, by the riverbank, crushed her skull with his hooves, and pushed her with his forelegs till she fell in the river. Abu Muhammad shot him in the head."

Abu Muhammad said:

"The horse should have been killed at birth, at the very instant when it dropped onto the straw. Killing a horse after that is extremely difficult. When a horse lives with you for one, two, or even three years, he becomes a brother, and closer than a brother. Can a man kill his brother? Your father, may God forgive him, did not agree, and said that he was the most beautiful horse he had seen. We told him: "That sort always is very beautiful, but it shouldn't be allowed to live." He answered: "But he's a thoroughbred." We warned him: "He'll cost you more than he's worth." Your father, may God forgive him, is an obstinate man. He neither killed, sold, nor got rid of the horse. We warned him: "Abu Ibrahim, at least don't ride him." But, God forgive him, he didn't listen.

"You don't remember your mother. She was a beautiful woman, and everyone loved her. Your father, may God make life easy, was madly in love with her. We never saw anyone on the whole of the plain who loved his wife as your father did. And she was very beautiful and intelligent. They lived together for a year, as I remember, and at the end of it she gave birth to you, before the horse threw her on that riverbank.

"You ask why we wanted to kill the horse. It's a difficult question, my boy. It can only be answered by men of experience and wisdom, and only men of experience and wisdom can understand the answer. I'm an old man; why don't you ask someone else?

"Your father doesn't hate you; your father's afraid of you. Ever since you were a baby, too feeble to pick up a pebble, your father's been afraid of you. If I were you, I wouldn't ask him why."

Why was his father afraid of him? Why only his father? All his friends in the hospital knew him as a peaceable, unassuming man. He had never killed a single insect. Why was no one else except his father afraid of him? Why weren't any of the patients who submitted themselves to his scalpel in complete confidence afraid of him? His face was devoid of any expression that might arouse fear. Why was his father afraid of him? Why his father, alone among everyone?

One night something tipped the scale.

He was asleep in his room when he heard a sharp cry of pain from his father's room. He rushed up the stairs and burst in, to see his father writhing on the bed. It didn't take him long to discover that the old man was suffering from acute inflammation of the appendix, and that it might burst at any minute.

As the orderlies were wheeling him on the trolley to the operating theatre, the father inquired:

"Who will carry out the operation?"

One of them replied:

"The best surgeon in the city—your son."

The old man suddenly sat up on the trolley and tried to free himself from the hands holding him. When the attempt failed, he began to shout as loudly as he could:

"Any other doctor except my son! Any other butcher, but not my son!"

"Why? His hands have completed thousands of operations successfully."

The old man went rigid on the trolley. Pain and terror had begun to choke him, but he shouted, as he fiercely resisted the approach of unconsciousness:

"He'll kill me. He'll kill me."

"What nonsense."

"Nonsense or not, I don't want my son to enter the theatre, even if it's only to watch. I don't want him there."

It was pointless to continue the argument. He knew his father better than anyone else, and so he spread his hands in a gesture of resignation, turned, and made his way back to the waiting room.

The doctor who performed the operation said:

"Believe me, the operation on your father was the hardest one I've ever performed. The local anesthetic seemed to have the effect on him of making him chatter away throughout the operation. Your father told ridiculous stories that the devil himself wouldn't understand. He said that Abu Muhammad, and I don't know who this fellow is, was an unfeeling, neutral person, which was why he could kill a horse, when the horse's owner couldn't.

"I would have liked you to hear how well your father spoke about his youth. He talked of your mother and your mother's beauty. Here he cried a little, probably because he was affected by the spirit fumes from the theatre, and then he said he bore the responsibility for her death with Barq. By the way, who is this Barq?"

"And your father talked about a horse he had had thirty years ago, too. It was born on a stormy night, from a pure-bred dam and a bedouin sire brought by a tribesman from the depths of the desert. It was the loveliest horse in the world, in your father's eyes. It was a pure gray, without a blemish. Your father said that when he saw the foal he jumped over the partition—he described that exactly—and tried to make it stand on its legs. But as soon as the foal stood up, everyone noticed that a great uneven reddish-brown

patch covered the whole of its right side. Your father said that he liked that mark at first, but Abu Muhammad immediately called out from the other side of the partition: "That foal must be killed at once." Your father angrily asked why, and he replied: "Don't you see that patch of blood? That patch means that the foal will cause the death of someone dear to you. It's carrying the blood of its victim with it from birth. So it must be killed before it is full-grown."

"Your father wanted to demolish the superstition, so he said, and he didn't kill the horse. He said that he was easy to ride, obedient and intelligent, and he lived in his fields for a long time without harming a fly.

"Then your father fell silent, and lay back. If you want the truth, I was gladder of his silence than his story. I was so enthralled by those superstitions that I almost stopped concentrating. But when he stopped speaking, I got back into my stride.

"Have you ever in your life heard of a legend like that? Have you ever heard of a horse bearing his victim's blood on his neck from birth? Your father spoke of it with a mystic's faith. And I'm amazed. Didn't you ever try to argue with him about those cock-and-bull stories?"

It was almost sunrise when he set off back to his house. His colleague's talk was still going round in his head.

So that was the explanation! That was the explanation of the loathing that his father had harbored for thirty years. That was why his father was afraid of him, and for that very reason he wished that his son were a horse so that he could put a bullet through his brain.

That was the explanation, then.

The brown mark, tinged with red, which zigzagged across much of his right side and back, a mark like the one that had covered Barq's side, the victim's blood, as the legend put it. That mark, which his girlfriend had been touching one day when she said: "It's the biggest mole I've ever seen. But why is it reddish, like a patch of blood?" That was it, then. His poor father was afraid of him because he carried the mark of his victim's blood on his side from birth, as

Barq had borne his mother's blood for years before he met her, crushed her skull, and pushed her into the river.

This, then, was what had tortured his father for thirty years and made him wish that his son were a horse, so that he would have the right to put a bullet through his brain.

An idiotic story, destructive of people's lives. Idiocy in which his father had lived for thirty years. A barrier of fear erected between father and son. Why? Because Abu Muhammad did not know the simple medical explanation behind that perplexing riddle, a reddish-brown patch. Because his father . . .

All at once he stopped in the middle of the road, thinking:

"My father tried to demolish this myth. He wanted to challenge the superstition. And what was the result? It seems that Abu Muhammad was the winner. My father lost the battle, and the price he paid was heavy.

"A reddish-brown patch. We know what causes it, but we don't know why it's in one place and not in another. Mightn't it be a sign of some kind? Abu Muhammad said that my mother was an excellent rider and very good at handling horses. Why did Barq kill her, then? Why did he specifically crush her skull and push her into the river, for no reason? Why all this insistence on killing her?

"Abu Muhammad won the battle, and my poor father lost it, and his youth with it. But now my poor father is embarking on another battle, with me this time. Which of us will win?"

He walked on a little, and then stopped again. A torturing thought had exploded in his head.

"I allowed that talkative, inquisitive doctor to perform the surgery, quite willingly, merely because I had been hurt by the patient's raving. Can he have killed him out of negligence, because he was taken up with listening to him? If that is so, then I am the murderer. I was capable of performing the operation perfectly, in spite of the poor old man. What have you done, you fool?"

He stood still for an instant, then turned and began to race back to the hospital. The sun had begun to rise, and as his big feet struck the damp paving stones, the echo resounded like a horse's galloping.







## A HAND IN THE GRAVE



I WOKE UP VERY EARLY THAT DAY. I COULD HEAR MY father repeating “God be praised” as he prepared to perform his prayers. Later he came past me:

“Your eyes look tired. What’s happened? Didn’t you sleep well last night?”

I nodded, turning the soap over in my hand, and began to look at my face in the mirror with its silver back peeling away at the edges, without replying to my father’s questions. I did not turn my head, but I realized that he had hung the towel round his neck and put on his sandals. He began to yawn, stretching his arms as far as they would go. As I soaped my face I heard my sister ask my father:

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing. Your brother’s face looks as though it’s been bleached; he definitely didn’t sleep last night. Do you know when he came home yesterday?”

“Yes. He wasn’t late.”

“You’re lying. You always tell lies, when it’s something to do with Nabil.”

I began to rinse my face with water, and though the conversation seemed to threaten a nasty storm, I felt that I was outside it all. I heard my sister say:

“I told you that he came home early last night. You just don’t want to believe it. Will you drink your coffee?”

“I don’t want any coffee. I don’t want to be poisoned. Can he tell me why his face is so pale if he went to bed early?”

I dried my face and turned towards him. I knew he was looking for a reason to explode. That is how he appeared every morning, doing nothing the whole time before breakfast except search for a pretext to unburden himself of his rage; today I represented his first attempt. He looked hard at me and then repeated his question, his lips quivering:

"If you went to bed early, young man, why is your face so pale?"

I circled round him, and when my shoulder was level with his I observed quietly:

"Facial pallor has a number of causes. It may be due to worms in the stomach, or a heavy meal the night before, or excessive smoking. And there are more serious causes, anemia for instance, TB, or the onset of hemiplegia."

What I expected did not occur, for my father did not get in the least upset. Instead he gave me a sidelong admiring glance. Perhaps he was remembering that he had supported me for more than ten years so that I could enter the medical faculty, and here I was giving him scientific answers in all seriousness, which brought joy to his heart. But he did not want to give way so easily.

"You woke up early this morning. Did you give the call to the dawn prayer then?"

I had reached my room, and flung the towel over the bed. Without turning to face my father and sister, who were standing in the doorway, I answered in a calm tone:

"I woke up early to rob a grave."

"To rob what?"

"A grave." I turned and faced him, trembling. "To rob a grave. Yes. Is that strange? In the faculty we need a skeleton, and Suhail and I have been told to provide it."

My father was still incapable of taking in the whole picture, and he stood there repeating without being aware of it:

"To rob a grave?"

"Yes, to rob a grave, and steal the skeleton of some man who has been dead more than twenty years because I want to study it."

My sister closed the door between us and left me alone. When I could hear no sound on the other side of the door, I put on my clothes. The sack and shovel I had already prepared, and it was up

to Suhail to provide a small pick. I bent down to pick up my things, but my sister opened the door before I could straighten up and gave me an affectionate rebuke:

"Why did you upset him, Nabil? You're not yourself this morning. Why did you lie to him?"

"I wasn't lying. I mean to rob a grave."

My father had joined her, and was looking over her shoulder. I noticed that he was trembling, and then he burst out shouting:

"God curse the hour when I enrolled you in the medical faculty. You want to steal a corpse, do you? Thief! Godless sinner! Haven't you read what God said in . . .?"

"I have. I've read all God's Word, but God isn't against the medical faculty. They require me to provide a skeleton, just as the sheikh used to require you to know the section 'Ain Min.'"<sup>\*</sup>

He gave me a look of disapproval for intruding into his past with this levity, then quickly came up with an angry question:

"Are all the students of the medical faculty going to rob people's graves this morning? You won't leave a single corpse in the graveyards! Tell me, are all the students going to rob graves?"

I threw the shovel into the sack, twisted it round my wrist, and went up to him:

"Certainly not! A skeleton costs seventy-five lire. Have you got seventy-five lire? That's why Suhail and I mean to steal, because you can't give me seventy-five lire, and his uncle can't give it to him either!"

I pressed my lips together and glared angrily at him. He was gazing at me, completely at a loss, and I lifted the sack, thrusting it into his face.

"And now, let me go before the sun rises and gives us away."

He moved out of my way, baffled, unable to take his eyes from my face. His mouth was hanging open, although he was incapable of uttering a word, as I passed him on my way to the door.

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<sup>\*</sup> The Quran is divided into thirty sections for purposes of recitation, and each section is numbered according to letters of the Arabic alphabet. (Tr.)

Suhail was waiting for me close to the corner. In the twilight before dawn he resembled a black ghost lurking in a corner to frighten a naughty child.

"Is it you?" he whispered in the gloom, and drew his arm through mine. I knew, without looking at his face, that he was as frightened as I was. We took a few steps, then he stopped.

"He hasn't given you seventy-five lire, eh?" he asked in the tone of someone wanting to say that he too had been unable to obtain the seventy-five lire. I shook my head and then explained:

"I left everything till this morning. And apparently surprise prevented him from even thinking of it. So I went out, expecting him to shout to me before I left that he would give me the seventy-five lire. But he stood there, flabbergasted. What happened to you?"

Suhail said, nodding:

"My uncle thought that I wanted to fool him out of seventy-five lire, but when I assured him that that's how things really were, he told me that he was prepared to pay the expenses of the living but not the cost of the dead. Then he said I was young and brave, so what prevented me robbing a grave and saving the money?"

We walked on a little, then turned into the street that led out of the city. I heard his whisper:

"So that's how it is."

"What?"

"We'll rob a grave. The attempts at begging have failed. Your father would sell his own skeleton for less than seventy-five lire; as for my uncle, he'd sell his for the price of one breakfast. It's no good, we must rob a grave."

I stopped, and gripped his shoulder.

"Don't say you're afraid! If you are, go back, and I'll go on alone."

"I? Afraid? Ha! *I'm* not frightened. But I don't like making my way through the end of the night to steal a corpse. How do you think you look, on your way to rob the dead?"

There was no doubt about it, he was frightened, more frightened than I. We walked on silently, our heads bowed. There was a cemetery outside the city, an old cemetery with low graves built out of brown earth. It was not walled, and was generally quite un-

guarded. It was a graveyard such as is found in some remote spot, inexplicably, as though it were the remains of an ancient battle between strangers who had come from afar and perished without anyone bothering to give them a proper burial.

Our steps had a funereal ring. When we approached the cemetery I felt my chest shaking, so violently was my heart beating, and I fancied that something, a ghost perhaps, was perched on my shoulder. I did not look at Suhail, out of fear that he would think that I was scared, and I seemed to hear the whistle of his breathing as he trod heavily and silently beside me.

"Here we are." I spoke after I had gathered all my forces together, and shifting the sack from one shoulder to the other, I stood still. "We must choose a good grave."

He did not reply. In the distance an ugly light was silently spreading above the top of the mountain. The incubus was still perched on my shoulder, and my chest was shaken by violent spasms. I turned to Suhail, who was gazing in front of him, motionless.

"Listen, Suhail! If you are frightened, let's go back."

He glanced at me for a moment, then walked in front of me up the slight incline to the cemetery. Panting as he climbed, he began to speak:

"I? Frightened? If you want, *you* go back. But I'll carry on. What do you think of this grave? It looks solid, and old, and it's large. Don't you think it's suitable?"

I didn't expect Suhail to be so courageous. What he said caught me by surprise, and made me want to prove to him that I was equally brave.

"This one? It looks to me more like a bull's grave, but it's fine so long as it takes your fancy."

As soon as I finished speaking I was terrified, and I made the sudden discovery that Suhail, too, was terrified, and that he was looking at me in utter disbelief that I could speak such ill of the dead. I was trying hard to put the sack on the ground and get out the shovel, but I had the feeling that the sack was too heavy to move and my arm was a numb, empty shell. I could hear Suhail whispering to himself:

"Seventy-five lire! Only seventy-five lire! For heaven's sake!"

I saw him throw his small pick on the ground, take off his jacket with a nervous gesture, and turn to me:

"Don't stand there like a fool. Let's start before it gets any lighter. Don't tell me you're frightened! It was your idea."

I put the sack down. Suhail had gone to work forcefully and quickly and had broken away the mound of earth. He leaned on the pick as I shoveled the soil away. We could both feel our blood beginning to flow again.

"There's still the stone slab. What do you think? Shall we drag it away?"

I glanced at him as he panted for breath. In the light of dawn he took on a mythical aspect. "We're almost there," I said to myself, making an effort to appear normal. It was clear to me that Suhail was relying on my courage; at the same time, I had to earn my reputation in the faculty when Suhail related the event the next day. I felt the slab with my fingers, then raised my head to him.

"I don't think we'll be able to move it away. Let's make a hole in it."

"But we may break part of the skeleton."

"No, when a corpse is buried they usually place the stone some way away from it. Haven't you ever seen a burial in your life?"

He lifted up his pick with a curt "No."

I took the pick from him when he tired, and he in turn took it from me. We worked quickly, out of fear that the columns of peasants would begin to reach the city. It was growing lighter, an ashen, cold, ugly light, and we each of us could make out the expression on his companion's face without difficulty. So, come what might, we busied ourselves with the work.

Suddenly a small cry burst from Suhail. The head of the pick had made a small black hole in the stone and stuck itself into it. We raised the pick together, and he lifted his head and looked at me when our hands touched. I smiled and began to widen the opening as I felt him looking beyond me fearfully.

"You won't be able to get it out of that little hole. You must make it wider," said Suhail behind me, his voice trembling. I was

gasping as I enlarged it, and I found it preferable to talk so that my fear would lose itself in the panting brought on by exertion.

"We won't get anything out now. We just want to be sure that it's there, and then we can widen the hole."

"And which of us will stick his hand in?" he asked in a quiet but scared voice, while I began to clean the edges of the hole. It gave forth a strong stench of decay. I ignored his question.

"Who will put his hand in?" he repeated, and this time I stood up and faced him.

"Either of us. You aren't afraid, are you? Do you know what's inside? A skull like the ones that the students pick up every morning in the faculty. That's all."

"Then you put your hand in," he said in a desperate tone. He was as terrified as it is possible to be, and had reached a point when he could no longer go on with the game. For my part, I could not imagine that we should give in after all we had achieved, so I gave a calm reply:

"Yes. I'll put my hand in."

I knelt down, put my arm through the hole, and groped inside the grave for several minutes without being able to feel anything. I stood up.

"I couldn't reach the bottom. You're thinner than I am. How would you like to put your arm in? You've seen with your own eyes. There's nothing to be afraid of."

He glanced at me in silent doubt for a moment, then stepped forward, bent down till he was kneeling, and stretched his arm through the hole. His face was white, but then his color returned, and I guessed that he had found nothing.

"I haven't got to the bottom," he said with a certain cheerfulness. Meanwhile I bent down opposite him, saying:

"Bend your shoulder down farther. We mustn't go back empty-handed. Try!"

Suhail slid his arm farther in, and began to squeeze his shoulder through as he lay on his side, stretched out, with his face touching the ground.

"Have you felt anything?"

He gave a jerky "No!" in reply.

I stood up, putting my hand on my hip. He was obviously keen, and making sustained, violent efforts.

I cannot recall what distracted my attention from him the next moment, but all of a sudden I was brought back to my surroundings by a terrible scream that did not stop. In the tide of swift fear that I felt flow through my limbs, I saw Suhail turn over, his face grazing the gravestone, as he made a hysterical attempt to pull his arm out of the hole. I glimpsed his eyes as I dragged at his other arm in an effort to free him, and I shall never forget the sight of them, stretched open as far as they could go. His blue lips trembled while he choked out the scream of a slaughtered beast between his teeth, and his whole body trembled on the stone as though the awful hand of an unseen demon was shaking him savagely. Even when I could get his arm out of the hole, he did not stop screaming. The jagged edges of the opening had cut deep scratches in his shoulder and forearm and they were beginning to ooze blood.

Without stopping those hideous loud screams, Suhail stood up, while I in turn had begun to shiver and had no idea what I ought to do. I tried to grasp his shoulders and shake him, but he was turning round and round, trembling as though he were having convulsions. All at once he fell silent, and it was as if he was not the person who had been screaming a moment before. Pressing his bluish lips together obstinately, he turned to face me. There was no color in his face, and his eyes were reddened circles. On his forehead beads of sweat mingled with the fine dust of the tombstone. He stared at me as though he were looking through me at some loathsome vision, but then he opened his lips and shouted in my face, forcing the words out between his teeth:

"My fingers! My fingers! I stuck them in its eyes!"

I was trembling, but more out of fear of Suhail than anything else. I gripped him by the shoulders and shook him fiercely, shouting:

"You idiot! This is an old grave . . . it's more than fifty years old!"



He gave me a stupid look; clearly he had not heard me. He started repeating:

“His eyes . . . I stuck my fingers in his eyes!”

The rest of Suhail's story is not very strange. And why not admit now that the idea was mine? And that it was not expected that in the first year of the medical faculty we should buy a skeleton? But we, Suhail and I, wanted to acquire a skeleton, so as to have the feeling that we had joined the medical faculty.

Suhail and I went back to the university that afternoon. I was ill. Suhail, however, began to tell the story to the other students, trembling like a leaf as he did so. In the days that followed, he continued to tell the story to anyone he came across, explaining in amazing detail how he had put his fingers into the eyes of the corpse. The university found itself obliged to expel him from the medical faculty after all hope of curing him had been abandoned. Everyone thought he had gone mad. I, for my part, transferred to the faculty of law after I discovered that I could not stand the sight of a skeleton.

Today, after more than seven years have passed since that incident, fate has proved that it was both just and stupid. I remember how Suhail's uncle told me the next day that he hoped that Suhail would not be able to get to the cemetery, and expected that he would come back to him panic-stricken, after which he would give him the price of the skeleton. My father, on the other hand, praised God at length when he heard the story, and observed to my sister that the thieves had received their due reward from the grave and the dead man. Thus he came to believe that the grave we had desecrated was that of a saint and took to visiting it every dawn to receive blessing from its earth and sand and pray beside it.

Yes, it was both a just and a foolish fate. For only yesterday, after more than seven years had passed, I learned by chance the story of the graveyard we had visited.

It was not a real graveyard. It was a kind of wasteland belonging to a Turkish peasant who, during the periods of famine, had taken the trouble to construct earthen graves that were actually no more than covers for small storage spaces where he kept wheat and flour

to avoid its being stolen or confiscated. The Turk had left a will that was only opened yesterday, when he died, and the secret was contained in that will.

Only yesterday, the heirs took possession of the ground to remove the graves and begin cultivating it.

The city's newspapers published the news on their front pages.



## UMM SAAD



AN EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

UMM SAAD LIVED FOR COUNTLESS YEARS WITH MY family in al-Ghabasiya, and since then she has lived for a crushing load of years in the torment of the camps. She still comes to our house every Tuesday. She looks at things, conscious of her part in them to the marrow of her bones, and she looks on me as a son, pouring into my ear the tales of her misery, her joy, and her troubles. But never once does she complain.

She is a woman of about forty, I think, with a strength greater than rock and a patience more than endurance itself. She spends every day of her week coming and going, living her life ten times over in toil to snatch for herself and her children an honest bit to eat.

I have known her for years. She represents something in my life that I cannot do without. When she knocks on the door and puts her poor belongings down in the hall, I am enveloped in the smell of the camps, in their misery and deep-rooted steadfastness, their poverty and hopes. Again my mouth is filled with the bitterness that I have tasted year after year until it has sickened me.

Last Tuesday she came as usual, put down her poor bundle, and turned to face me.

“Cousin, I want to tell you something. Saad has gone.”

“Where?”

“To them.”

“Who?”

“The fedayeen.”

A cautious silence fell between us, and suddenly I saw her sitting there, ageing, strong, her life worn away by wretched toil. Her hands were folded in her lap, and I could see the palms, dry as blocks of wood, cracked like an old tree trunk. Through the furrows that years of hard work had traced in them, I could see her sorry journey with Saad, from the time when he was a child until he grew to maturity. Those firm hands had nourished him as the earth nourishes the stem of a tender plant, and now they had opened suddenly, and the bird that had nestled there for twenty years had flown away.

“He’s joined the fedayeen.”

I was still gazing at her hands, folded palms upwards like two disappointed creatures, crying out from the heart, chasing the man who was leaving everything for danger and the unknown. Why, O God, must mothers lose their sons? For the first time I was seeing that heartbreaking situation, at a word’s distance from me, as though we were in a Greek theatre living out a scene of inconsolable grief. Trying to distract her and myself, I asked her:

“What did he tell you?”

“He didn’t say anything. He simply went. In the morning his friend told me he had gone to join them.”

“Didn’t he tell you before that he would go?”

“Oh, yes. And I believed him. I know Saad, and I knew that he would go.”

“Then why were you surprised?”

“Me? I wasn’t surprised. I’m just telling you about it. I said to myself: ‘You may be interested to know what’s become of Saad.’”

The hands, folded in her lap, moved, and I could see them, beautiful, strong, always capable of making something. I doubted whether they were really lamenting. She added:

“No, I said to my neighbor this morning: ‘I wish I had ten like him.’ I’m tired, cousin. I’ve worn my life threadbare in that camp. Every morning I say ‘O, Lord.’ Twenty years have passed now, and if Saad doesn’t go, who will?” She stood up, and an air of simplicity came over the room. Everything seemed more familiar, and I could see the houses of al-Ghabasiya in it again. But I followed her to the kitchen. There she laughed as she looked at me, saying:

"I told the woman sitting beside me on the bus that my son had become a combatant. . . . I told her that I loved him and missed him, but he was a true son of his mother. Do you think they'll give him a machine gun?"

"They always give their men machine guns."

"And what about food?"

"They have enough to eat, and they're given cigarettes."

"Saad doesn't smoke, but I'm sure that he will learn to there. Light of his mother's eyes! I wish he were nearby, so I could take him food every day that I had cooked myself."

"He'll eat the same as his companions."

"God bless them all." She fell silent for a moment, then turned to face me. "Do you think he'd be pleased if I went to see him? I can save the money for the journey, and get there in two days." She remembered something and finished off: "Do you know something? Children are slavery. If I didn't have these two children, I'd have followed him. I'd have lived there with him. In a tent, yes, a tent in a refugee camp is quite different from one in a guerrilla base. I would have lived with them, cooked for them, done all I could for them. But children are slavery."

I replied:

"There's no need to visit him there. Let him manage alone. A man who joins the fedayeen doesn't need his mother to look after him anymore."

She wiped her hands on her apron. Deep in her eyes I glimpsed something like disappointment, that terrifying moment when a mother feels that she can be dispensed with and thrown into a corner like an object worn out with use. She came closer, asking:

"Do you really think so? Do you think there's no point in my going to the commander there and asking him to keep an eye on him?" She hesitated, feeling torn in two. Then she asked:

"Or could you ask his commander to keep an eye on him? Say to him: 'Look after Saad, may God give your children long life.'"

"How?" I replied. "You can't ask someone to look after a guerrilla."

"Why?"

“Because you’d be asking his commander to arrange things so that he stayed out of danger. But Saad himself, and his companions, believe the best way to look after them would be to send them to war immediately.”

Again she sat there, but she seemed stronger than I had ever seen her. I watched a mother’s perplexity and torment in her eyes and hard hands. At last she made up her mind.

“I tell you what. When you tell his commander to look after him, advise him not to annoy him. Say to him: ‘Umm Saad begs you, for your mother’s sake, to let Saad do what he wants. He’s a good lad, and when he wants something and it doesn’t happen, he gets very miserable.’ Tell him, I beg you, to let Saad do what he wants. If he wants to go to war, then why doesn’t his commander send him?”



## THE FALCON



OUR WORLD WAS ARRANGED WITH EXTREME CARE: each one according to his rank. And that is exactly what made our relationship with the guards of the building that we, the engineers of the New Construction Company, occupied a relationship of greeting and no more.

“Good evening, Jadaan.”

The answer would come curtly from the wooden bench:

“Good evening, Abdallah.”

This Abdallah was each of us; each one of us he called Abdallah. Jadaan did not bother to learn our names, each of us was Abdallah to him, and may God release the believers from the bother of remembering foreigners' names. . . .

The guards' room was at the end of the passage leading to the new building that was given up to us. It was indeed a splendid building, in contrast to the one we had lived in previously, which was filthy and intolerably crowded with mice and neighbors.

Here, in this new building, we lived entirely apart from everything, and with the passage of days we almost felt we were isolated, not only from the quarter in which we lived, but from the whole city. If the guards had not said good-bye to us and greeted us whenever we came in and out of the building, we would certainly have felt that we were in an elegant cage that we had assigned to ourselves.

These guards were bedouin who had come from the desert. Jadaan was the night watchman, but nevertheless he would spend part of the hours of daylight prowling round the place, because there was nothing else for him to do. The day watchman was called Mubarak, a stout man of about forty, of a dark brown complexion

and with a bent back, who walked as though he had just got up from sitting a long time. He wore the official uniform allotted to guards, a dark blue one with big brass buttons, and he slept inside the neat guards' room and covered himself with white sheets that were changed every week.

We felt, despite our distance from the world of Mubarak and Jadaan, that there was a concealed enmity or dislike between the two men. And we soon noticed that Jadaan never wore the official uniform, but always a coarse *abaya* over a dirty robe that at some time in the past had been white. We noticed, too, that Jadaan refused to sleep inside the neat room, unlike Mubarak, and that he had made himself an extraordinary bed out of three wooden planks that he had pulled from a big box and set up on six legs, covering it with a piece of black goatskin. At the end of the night we would see him fold up his rough *abaya*, put it under his head as a pillow, and doze off without a covering. We never saw him inside the neat room or in the navy uniform with big brass buttons.

It was most likely that Jadaan despised his companion Mubarak in some way, or so we thought, and that Mubarak, in turn, inside that marvellous uniform, felt ashamed in front of Jadaan when he looked him up and down with his small sharp eyes.

This belief was confirmed when Mubarak stopped me one day and asked me to write a complaint for him to the head of the company.

"A complaint against whom, Mubarak?" I asked the question in the correct tone for an engineer addressing a guard six ranks below him, and he answered me:

"Against Jadaan. He refuses to clean the toilets when his turn comes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He used to get your servant to do it and give him three rupees."

"What does it matter to you so long as the toilets are cleaned at the right time?"

He leaned against the wall. He was angry, and he explained excitedly:



"Listen, sir. For a week your servant has refused to do it. Do you know what he did? Well, he asked me to clean the toilets for five rupees."

"And why doesn't Jadaan do the job himself? Isn't it part of his duties?"

He shook his head and brushed the dust from his arms.

"Yes, yes. But do you know why he doesn't agree to do it? Well, he hasn't come here to work."

"Then what has he come here to do?"

He shook his head again, rather confusedly, and continued in a low voice:

"Well, I don't know . . . but I believe that he has fled from his people."

Mubarak sat on Jadaan's bench and, looking at me with eyes full of malice, said:

"It happened a long time ago. He wanted to marry a girl with red hair, whom he saw once near his tribe's encampment with men who had come to hunt the gazelle."

Amazed, I said:

"Jadaan was in love?"

"Yes. Their sheikh ordered him to accompany the men and women hunting the gazelle. Do you know what? Well, he fell in love with her, and when she left he went out of his mind."

Mubarak took a small twig and began to scratch up the earth aimlessly. Then he said:

"You know, they say many things there. Well, they say that she loved him too."

"She loved him! Why didn't they marry?"

"What woman with red hair would agree to marry a bedouin? He was a good man, but it was hopeless. You know what? Well, he divorced his wife!"

I got up, but before I walked away I asked:

"Why does he work here, then?"

"He said he doesn't work here. He said that he merely sits here as a man may do anywhere in the world. Well, he said he had been through a great deal, and here a man can eat sitting down. Well, he said too that he wants to die here peacefully and doesn't wish

to return to his people. He's mad, I say. Will you write the complaint?"

I walked to the door without answering him; then I went up the stairs to my room.

It was not easy to have a conversation tête-à-tête with Jadaan. Despite this I tried several times without despairing. Every time I stood impotent before his harsh, sunken eyes as he drew the barrier of silence over them. When I was at last able to sit beside him on his low wooden bench, I had not in fact intended it. I had arrived late and forgotten my keys at a friend's house, so I sat waiting.

"I should have gone to sleep early tonight. Tomorrow we are going hunting."

"Hunting?" Jadaan asked the question coldly, absorbed in rolling his tobacco in the thin paper.

"Yes. Hunting gazelles."

"How do you hunt gazelles?"

"In a car, as usual."

He shook his head and went on rolling the tobacco. As though talking to himself, he said:

"You overtake the poor gazelle with the car, cut it off from its herd, you hunt it for hours until it is exhausted and stops, you get out of the car and catch hold of it as though it were a chicken. . . ." He lit a cigarette and drew a deep breath from it. He looked straight into my eyes and firmly said:

"It's a disgrace."

I suddenly felt as though Jadaan intended to insult me. I spoke impetuously:

"A disgrace? How do people hunt gazelles? With a gun?"

"No. That's a disgrace."

"Well, then?"

He took another breath and through a cloud of his thick smoke his harsh gaze swept over me. He said quietly:

"You must never hunt gazelles, Abdallah, either in a car or with a gun."

"Why?"

He looked at me suddenly as though my question had wounded him. He shook the cigarette between his fingers in my face and his eyes flashed.

"Have you ever tried sitting in the desert, and the gazelle comes to you of its own accord? It rubs its head on your arm and stretches out its muzzle to your neck. It walks round you, looking at you with its wide eyes, and then it goes away. Have you tried that?"

"No. Have you?"

As though he hadn't listened to my question, he murmured mockingly:

"And you talk of hunting!"

I could bear his pride no longer, and burst out:

"Weren't you a hunter?"

"Yes. A long time ago, Abdallah. A long time ago."

I went a step further.

"How did you hunt gazelles?"

He shook his head sadly and repeated:

"Yes, you catch it as though it were a chicken. Listen, Abdallah.  
..."

He turned to face me. Raising his legs, he sat cross-legged on the bench, putting his rough hand on my knee. Across that darkness the voice came from far away.

"Listen, Abdallah. Twenty years ago I hunted gazelles. I had a wonderful falcon called Nar.\* He was the best falcon the tribe had heard of for many years. When he flew, his wings blotted out the light of the sun, and he would fold them and drop like a stone. People would say: 'Jadaan's Nar has burnt the gazelles.'"

Silence reigned, and I imagined that he had stopped speaking; despite the darkness, I was sure that his face, at this moment, was clothed in the unknown happiness that a man's face wears when he speaks of things that he has loved, and lost a long time ago. But the voice returned, weak and scarcely audible:

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\* Meaning "Fire."

"Twenty years ago . . . I lifted the leather hood from Nar's eyes and he flew off, circling round. There was only one gazelle within reach, and I could make out its color from afar. It was reddish, verging on brown. No! It was the color of a gazelle; you can't have seen that color ever. It's the color of a gazelle, a color that can only be that of a gazelle. Nar had flown very high, then he swooped, like a stone, holding in its wings. When he was close above the gazelle he spread out his wings . . . and froze in the air for a moment. Then he slipped sideways, spread out like a sheet of paper, until he almost touched the earth. Again he circled round, and flew high, while the gazelle stood as though rooted to the ground. I thought that Nar was simply exhibiting his prowess before the wretched animal, as all the strong do, but he made the same show more than six times, with extraordinary violence, and then he began again, circled round, and flew back to me. I saw him stretch out his huge wings, alight with haughty languor on his wooden perch planted in the sand, and close his eyes . . . while the gazelle came after him on its thin legs as though a hyena were after it."

I grasped Jadaan by the shoulder and woke him up, for it seemed to me as though he had been asleep.

"What then?" I asked.

"I went back to my people. At first I thought that Nar did not want to hunt that day. You know, falcons have their particular character. But what happened was more terrible than that. Nar did not leave his perch at all afterwards. He stayed standing with his proud breast and his hooked beak in the shadow of the gazelle, which kept close to him. He did not eat for an entire week, although I tore the leather hood from his eyes; he didn't look at any piece of meat I put in front of him. He didn't even look at the gazelle, which stood motionless beside him, gazing silently at him. Each time I went to try to feed Nar, the gazelle came unexpectedly and hovered round me, like a baby, rubbing its pink nose on the back of my hand, stretching out its muzzle to my neck, rubbing its head on my arm. Then it circled round and came quietly to stand beside the wooden perch." Jadaan stood up, and walked round the wooden bench, bringing out his rusty box and beginning to roll his tobacco again. I could

not distinguish his features in the darkness, but I heard his voice, as if from a distant cavern:

“One day I woke up to find Nar lying beside his wooden perch. His breast was thin and bare and his eyes were closed. I could not find the gazelle. Most likely it had gone away during the night, after Nar had died.”

I got up from my place, and stood in front of him. He had finished rolling his tobacco and I lit a match, asking:

“I wonder where the gazelle went.”

In the pale light of the match I saw his face as it had always been: thin, harsh, cold. His lips moved:

“It went to die among its people. Gazelles like to die among their people. Falcons don't care where they die.”



## 🌸 LETTER FROM GAZA 🌸

DEAR MUSTAFA,

I have now received your letter, in which you tell me that you've done everything necessary to enable me to stay with you in Sacramento. I've also received news that I have been accepted in the department of Civil Engineering in the University of California. I must thank you for everything, my friend. But it'll strike you as rather odd when I proclaim this news to you—and make no doubt about it, I feel no hesitation at all, in fact I am pretty well positive that I have never seen things so clearly as I do now. No, my friend, I have changed my mind. I won't follow you to "the land where there is greenery, water, and lovely faces," as you wrote. No, I'll stay here, and I won't ever leave.

I am really upset that our lives won't continue to follow the same course, Mustafa. For I can almost hear you reminding me of our vow to go on together, and of the way we used to shout: "We'll get rich!" But there's nothing I can do, my friend. Yes, I still remember the day when I stood in the hall of Cairo airport, pressing your hand and staring at the frenzied motor. At that moment everything was rotating in time with the ear-splitting motor, and you stood in front of me, your round face silent.

Your face hadn't changed from the way it used to be when you were growing up in the Shajiya quarter of Gaza, apart from those slight wrinkles. We grew up together, understanding each other completely, and we promised to go on together till the end. But . . .

"There's a quarter of an hour left before the plane takes off. Don't look into space like that. Listen! You'll go to Kuwait next year, and you'll save enough from your salary to uproot you from Gaza

and transplant you to California. We started off together and we must carry on. . . .”

At that moment I was watching your rapidly moving lips. That was always your manner of speaking, without commas or full stops. But in an obscure way I felt that you were not completely happy with your flight. You couldn't give three good reasons for it. I too suffered from this wrench, but the clearest thought was: why don't we abandon this Gaza and flee? Why don't we? Your situation had begun to improve, however. The Ministry of Education in Kuwait had given you a contract, though it hadn't given me one. In the trough of misery where I existed, you sent me small sums of money. You wanted me to consider them as loans, because you feared that I would feel slighted. You knew my family circumstances in and out; you knew that my meagre salary in the UNRWA schools was inadequate to support my mother, my brother's widow, and her four children.

“Listen carefully. Write to me every day . . . every hour . . . every minute! The plane's just leaving. Farewell! Or rather, till we meet again!”

Your cold lips brushed my cheek, you turned your face away from me towards the plane, and when you looked at me again I could see your tears.

Later the Ministry of Education in Kuwait gave me a contract. There's no need to repeat to you how my life there went in detail. I always wrote to you about everything. My life there had a gluey, vacuous quality as though I were a small oyster, lost in oppressive loneliness, slowly struggling with a future as dark as the beginning of the night, caught in a rotten routine, a spewed-out combat with time. Everything was hot and sticky. There was a slipperiness to my whole life, it was all a hankering for the end of the month.

In the middle of the year, that year, the Jews bombarded the central district of Sabha and attacked Gaza, our Gaza, with bombs and flamethrowers. That event might have made some change in my routine, but there was nothing for me to take much notice of; I was going to leave this Gaza behind me and go to California where I would live for myself, my own self which had suffered so long. I hated Gaza and its inhabitants. Everything in the amputated town



reminded me of failed pictures painted in gray by a sick man. Yes, I would send my mother and my brother's widow and her children a meagre sum to help them to live, but I would liberate myself from this last tie too, there in green California, far from the reek of defeat that for seven years had filled my nostrils. The sympathy that bound me to my brother's children, their mother, and mine would never be enough to justify my tragedy in taking this perpendicular dive. It mustn't drag me any farther down than it already had. I must flee!

You know these feelings, Mustafa, because you've really experienced them. What is this ill-defined tie we had with Gaza that blunted our enthusiasm for flight? Why didn't we analyze the matter in such a way as to give it a clear meaning? Why didn't we leave this defeat with its wounds behind us and move on to a brighter future that would give us deeper consolation! Why? We didn't exactly know.

When I went on holiday in June and assembled all my possessions, longing for the sweet departure, the start towards those little things which give life a nice, bright meaning, I found Gaza just as I had known it, closed like the introverted lining of a rusted snail-shell thrown up by the waves on the sticky, sandy shore by the slaughterhouse. This Gaza was more cramped than the mind of a sleeper in the throes of a fearful nightmare, with its narrow streets that had their peculiar smell, the smell of defeat and poverty, its houses with their bulging balconies . . . this Gaza! But what are the obscure causes that draw a man to his family, his house, his memories, as a spring draws a small flock of mountain goats? I don't know. All I know is that I went to my mother in our house that morning. When I arrived my late brother's wife met me there and asked me, weeping, if I would do as her wounded daughter, Nadia, in Gaza hospital wished and visit her that evening. Do you know Nadia, my brother's beautiful thirteen-year-old daughter?

That evening I bought a pound of apples and set out for the hospital to visit Nadia. I knew that there was something about it that my mother and my sister-in-law were hiding from me, something that their tongues could not utter, something strange that I could not put my finger on. I loved Nadia from habit, the same

habit that made me love all that generation which had been so brought up on defeat and displacement that it had come to think that a happy life was a kind of social deviation.

What happened at that moment? I don't know. I entered the white room very calm. Ill children have something of saintliness, and how much more so if the child is ill as a result of cruel, painful wounds. Nadia was lying on her bed, her back propped up on a big pillow over which her hair was spread like a thick pelt. There was a profound silence in her wide eyes and a tear always shining in the depths of her black pupils. Her face was calm and still but eloquent as the face of a tortured prophet might be. Nadia was still a child, but she seemed more than a child, much more, and older than a child, much older.

"Nadia!"

I've no idea whether I was the one who said it, or whether it was someone else behind me. But she raised her eyes to me and I felt them dissolve me like a piece of sugar that had fallen into a hot cup of tea. Together with her slight smile I heard her voice.

"Uncle! Have you just come from Kuwait?"

Her voice broke in her throat, and she raised herself with the help of her hands and stretched out her neck towards me. I patted her back and sat down near her.

"Nadia! I've brought you presents from Kuwait, lots of presents. I'll wait till you can leave your bed, completely well and healed, and you'll come to my house and I'll give them to you. I've bought you the red trousers you wrote and asked me for. Yes, I've bought them."

It was a lie, born of the tense situation, but as I uttered it I felt that I was speaking the truth for the first time. Nadia trembled as though she had had an electric shock, and lowered her head in a terrible silence. I felt her tears wetting the back of my hand.

"Say something, Nadia! Don't you want the red trousers?"

She lifted her gaze to me and made as if to speak, but then she stopped, gritted her teeth, and I heard her voice again, coming from far away.

"Uncle!"

She stretched out her hand, lifted the white coverlet with her fingers, and pointed to her leg, amputated from the top of the thigh.

My friend. . . . Never shall I forget Nadia's leg, amputated from the top of the thigh. No! Nor shall I forget the grief which had molded her face and merged into its traits forever. I went out of the hospital in Gaza that day, my hand clutched in silent derision on the two pounds I had brought with me to give Nadia. The blazing sun filled the streets with the color of blood. And Gaza was brand new, Mustafa! You and I never saw it like this. The stone piled up at the beginning of the Shajiya quarter where we lived had a meaning, and they seemed to have been put there for no other reason but to explain it. This Gaza in which we had lived and with whose good people we had spent seven years of defeat was something new. It seemed to me just a beginning. I don't know why I thought it was just a beginning. I imagined that the main street that I walked along on the way back home was only the beginning of a long, long road leading to Safad. Everything in this Gaza throbbed with sadness, which was not confined to weeping. It was a challenge; more than that, it was something like reclamation of the amputated leg!

I went out into the streets of Gaza, streets filled with blinding sunlight. They told me that Nadia had lost her leg when she threw herself on top of her little brothers and sisters to protect them from the bombs and flames that had fastened their claws into the house. Nadia could have saved herself, she could have run away, rescued her leg. But she didn't.

Why?

No, my friend, I won't come to Sacramento, and I've no regrets. No, and nor will I finish what we began together in childhood. This obscure feeling that you had as you left Gaza, this small feeling must grow into a giant deep within you. It must expand, you must seek it in order to find yourself, here among the ugly debris of defeat.

I won't come to you. But you, return to us! Come back, to learn from Nadia's leg, amputated from the top of the thigh, what life is and what existence is worth.

Come back, my friend! We are all waiting for you.





## ABOUT THE BOOK



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