

The sky and two bridges

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Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think. Enjoy yourself whilst your still in the pink. Hagar spent her first month in Kuwait tuning into foreign TV channels, Nigerian comedies, Chinese folk dancing, American cartoons. This one was British, a music show screened at midnight on New Year's Eve and that one line of song had remained in her mind. *Enjoy yourself.* That's all Hagar desired since her exile from Iraq.

Saddam imprisoned her for it, for believing that her life was anything more than a patriotic flag wave of the state and her body, a pregnable lump of flesh for its reproduction. But she tried to forget that now, the burning fire she felt in her stomach at the student protests, the appetite she once had to eat *kubba* after a long day of studying, and that one guard, Iraqi like her, who decided to drop his trousers and perforate the only layer of skin between the only character she had created and her country. *Bastard.*

She switched off the TV, threw the remote on the sofa and walked towards the window. Shards of light beamed into her eyes from the newly built shopping mall below. She opened the window, letting the weight of the summer evening sink into the air-conditioned room. Ugly, she thought. Kuwait to Hagar was a city reborn from equal burnings but dampened by modernity, nothing like the glowing banks of the Tigris.

Hagar closed the curtains and made her way into the bedroom, turning down the air-con as she passed through the hallway.

Enjoy yourself, la la la la la.

She lay on the unmade bed, body sticky from the heat, stroking the white lines across her light brown belly from under her T-shirt. It was skin that was once so rounded and tight

that she could hardly see her feet. Why did Fahad want to marry her with such embodied reminders of her past, she wondered?

The white cotton sheets crumpled as she moved. Hagar rolled off of the bed and onto the tiled floor. On her knees, she reached her hand far underneath the mirrored wardrobe that stood opposite the side of the bed that she slept on. *Tap, tap, tap*, her fingers disturbed the dust. A notebook, wrapped in a cheap purple scarf and wedged at the back of the perfect sized gap between the back of the wardrobe and the wall. Black leather, thick and almost in pieces, but all hers, her words, her memories, the world she once was. She opened it and flicked through.

*they beheaded
love's breath
now I rest a slave
to a dry bed
no drop of oil
sweat impossible
cold little...*

Hagar heard the elevator door open outside the apartment. She closed the notebook, wrapped it, and skidded it with force across the white tiled floor, the notebook disappearing just before Fahad entered.

'*Habibti*, hello, why is it so warm in here?' Fahad was a rich man, a government bureaucrat, a cousin to the ruling Al-Sabah family. He changed his shoes whilst pointedly pressing the blue button on the aircon. 'I pay for this place you know, you just have to keep it cool.' He smiled after catching a glimpse of his immediate frustration in the mirror. 'What are you doing in the bedroom anyway?'

'I was watching TV and the...'

'And did you visit Mohammad today, about your papers?'

Hagar stood up from the bed, subtly checking to see whether the notebook was out of sight. 'I went, but he wasn't in the office.'

'That man, a donkey is more reliable!' Fahad took off his *agal*, throwing it onto the bed. 'And did you cook something my dear?'

Fahad met Hagar on the Iraqi border, on her second attempt to leave Iraq. At that point he was working as an Army officer, controlling the lower ranks, Bedouins who were given temporary citizenship due to a shortage of nationals who were willing to defend the country. Fahad thought Hagar was one of them, a nomad, the daughter of a Bedouin.

'I'm Kuwaiti, travelling to Basra to visit family.'

Hagar lied when Fahad first stopped her. She was a woman, had perfected her Kuwaiti dialect, she could get away with it.

'Do you need a lift to the city? I'm returning soldiers in ten minutes.'

That was another benefit of being a woman, outlawed from driving, free lifts are offered.

'Perfect, thank you.'

But during that journey, Hagar's tongue slipped. One word, unmistakably Iraqi, *quzzurqut*, spoken in instantaneous reaction after the soldier sitting beside her burped.

And it was then that Fahad realised where she was from, began feeling sympathy for her and saw instead a victim of his country's corrupt neighbour.

'I have a place to stay', Fahad whispered just before Hagar stepped out of the army truck, 'and don't worry, I know you're Iraqi.'

So of course Hagar had cooked something. Except the rare nights when he felt eager for her, Iraqi recipes were the only thing she could offer Fahad in repayment for helping her gain Kuwaiti status. '

'A woman can usually get it after five years of marriage, but I know a person who will help us,' Fahad once explained.

And a cooked meal was a mutual exchange in Fahad's eyes too. Besides, he had saved her, given her another chance to enjoy it, making her soon to be the first Iraqi to be granted asylum in his oil-rich homeland. Hagar a refugee for now, certainly, but soon to be married, comfortable and safe as the wife of the Emir's cousin.

'Quickly, they've seen us!'

Bader threw the last of the oranges into the back of the pick-up then jumped in. In a yellow cloud of dust and sand the truck pulled away and him and his cousin Nassir headed North towards the desert. It was dusk, too late and dark for the police to follow them out of Al-Jahra and besides, the money gained from fining two fruit sellers was a small sum against their wages.

Bader climbed over from the back and into the passenger seat from the side-window, unknowingly chipping away a flake of white paint from the edge of the truck door.

'That was a close.'

As he continued to drive, Nassir, looked over to Bader shaking his head as he had done a thousand times before. As the older cousin; it was easy for him to blame Bader for their risky escapes. Nassir then pulled out two cigarettes from the pocket of his *dishdasha* and passed one to Bader. Bader accepted, without looking. Hardly shaken by the event, Bader remained silent the entire journey.

The truck pulled off of the road and onto the desert, slowing whilst nearing a spot to park. It was their usual place, the wadi where they had gone to watch stars together since they were children. Nassir turned off the rattling engine and the desert silence loomed thickly in the air between them.

'Will you ever leave Kuwait?'

Nassir turned, surprised simply by the fact that Bader decided to speak.

'What?' But Nassir heard him the first time.

'Will you ever leave Kuwait?'

'Stop dreaming, we're stateless. Anyway, uncle Salman's ill, these thoughts only waste time.'

Bader took a long breath then returned to silence. Only the sound of the desert winds through the truck window soothed his mind.

‘But aren’t you tired of all this?’ Bader flicked his half-finished cigarette out of the half open window and onto the sand outside.

‘All what?’

‘Being illegal, running away from police for selling a bag of apples?’

‘It’s the life Allah gave us, what are you going to do about it?’

It was with this question, just as the evening stars above brightened, that Bader burst from silence and into a thousand fractured pieces.

‘It’s suffocating Nassir! I mean we’re young and have nothing, but I want to work, you know, a real job, earn money, this government treats us like shit.’

As though they were still driving, Nassir remained staring ahead. ‘Your anger will conquer you one day brother, think slower and act faster.’

‘Sure Nassir, I will.’ Bader then lit another cigarette, stepping out of the truck to urinate.

A month before their wedding, Fahad was working away in Bahrain. Urgent calls for support from the Bahraini government had arisen due to the recent awareness of underground leftist organisations planning to protest. Hagar remained at home, watching television, writing, satisfied with never needing to fling the notebook into the dusty gap beneath the wardrobe. She took out her pen.

*turn towards
a vacant saviour
of lonely toy town
war is a whore
and so am I
for lying*

Not enough. *Scribble out.*

‘Words’, she muttered, ‘how can they capture death?’ Hagar couldn’t remember when she first started talking aloud to herself. She had sung to herself when she was in prison, in the early mornings when the guards would leave for *salat* and the other women in the cell were sleeping. But even then, she knew that someone was listening. An older woman maybe, drifting peacefully through a dream of natural wonders. Or her children who she felt, only hoped, were so close to her, somewhere in the adjacent block. ‘My boys.’ Again, Hagar tugged the hem of her grey T-shirt. ‘Bastards.’

*orphans falling
amongst ruins
of a home and
myself alone
in toy town
and freedom?
dust filled dreams
to him despondent
war is a whore
and I am also
for lying*

Useless, *turn page.* A blank page, to start over.

*war is a whore
despondent saviour
dust-filled dreams
and freedom
orphans falling
amongst ruins
and prayers
let go let go
bury...*

‘Bury?’ Hagar placed down the pen and turned to the first few pages of her notebook.

*death to words
death to death
bury everything
that left unsaid*

As though a ghost to herself, Hagar’s wrapped up the notebook, put it in her bag, pinned in place her hijab and then slipped on her leather sandals. She took the remaining money Fahad had left for her on the kitchen side, and the keys and then quietly left the apartment as though once again escaping a country that had betrayed her.

Ding. Ground floor. Bus 103, evening rush hour, traffic.

Daily life passed so quickly outside of the window – Fruit sellers on the streets, school children crossing, *galabiyahs*, gold chains, Philippino, Indian, flat caps, people everywhere – So quickly that she almost missed her stop.

Ding. *Fursa coffee shop*, Atraf Street.

‘Thanks.’

The bus driver nodded in response.

Hagar wanted to reach the border, the same sands that she had grown from, but Al-Jahra was as far north as the bus would take her. She tilted her head backwards, the evening air cooling and a pale orange filter tainting the sky. Ethereal, she thought, a colour that reminded her of her younger days, walking to mosque, bags of dates in hand, talking of small things and school lovers with her older sister.

‘Focus Hagar,’ she told herself.

Small birds chirped and flitted into the few shrubs that had managed to grow roots wild enough to grasp onto the fine grains of desert sand. Some birds had feathers that were beige and others, feathers that were grey, the same colour as her T-shirt, and the backing of mirrors. Funny, Hagar thought, such slight variation, such difference in circumstance...

She continued walking north for almost an hour, until the main road eventually became a thin line and the two oil towers ahead became only etches on the horizon. She peered back to notice them. They were her markers of how far she had come and reminders of where she really was; a wild place, forever beyond her control. Her stomach churned. She heard it but instead continued to concentrate on the air that arose upwards, from still warm desert sands beneath her feet.

The evening sunlight was sinking behind Maliya church, dusted pigeons cooed on the surrounding rooftops. Bader sat alone on the roadside, watching people of all nationalities enter through its open, oblong doors.

‘Maybe everyone desires what they can’t have.’

Unlike Hagar, Bader remembers the first time when speaking aloud to himself became a normal thing. He was eleven, planning him and his best friends’ day trip to the city centre and speaking to himself he realised, gave him a great comfort in his own imagination, a security and magic in thinking of a future plan. First, he remembers saying, they’d tell their parents they were ‘spending the day at mosque’. Second, they’d tell the local shop owner that they ‘had to travel to collect an important medicine for their uncle’. Then third, well the rest ‘was an adventure.’ Maybe they’d walk back, or even better never come back? Maybe the two pointy giant towers they’d only seen in advertisements on the roadside would engulf them forever? All young Bader knew, and said aloud with confidence, was that they would go and talking about it, alone or with his friends, was something that he enjoyed, especially during the longer, empty days.

More people entered through Maliya church as the evening breeze cooled Bader’s salted forehead. He watched one woman, Malaysian he guessed, taking a photograph arm in arm with another younger woman, wearing a red dress. *Mercy, pray for us* was written above them both on a large plastic banner. Bader wondered whether unlike him, they felt at home in Kuwait, under the house of their God, working, smiling, settled for what they had, for heaven or else. ‘For heaven or else’, this one Bader liked and made a note of it on the screwed receipt he had in his top pocket. He felt that, just as the image of those two women, it may one day help him on his journey.

A white Mercedes suddenly pulled up beside the road. A Kuwaiti driver, Bader could tell by the sunglasses and *dishdasha*. Without greeting the man, Bader got into the back of the car and closed the side door.

‘*Assalam alaykum, sloonach?*’

The radio was playing loud, so loud that the driver didn’t hear Bader. ‘*Rahalta, Rahalta,*’ it was a recent Abdullah Al-Rowasheed song. Bader liked it, the lyrics, *my journey, my journey*. It was a coincidence, he thought.

‘*Ahlan, sloonach?*’

This time Bader waved his hand in the reflection of the rear-view mirror. They the driver still didn’t react his head instead continuously nodding to the Khaliji rhythm.

Without looking around to Bader, the driver then opened his hand and gestured with his fingers. Bader, giving up on talk, pulled out the folded dinars from his side pocket and passed them over. He watched the driver slowly to count them.

‘Good luck my friend, may God be with you.’ Still without looking to Bader, the driver passed over a white envelope.

‘Many thanks brother, take care.’

The car already began moving as Bader stepped out and returned to standing on the roadside. So quickly, the church crowds had now disappeared through the wooden doors. But still Bader double checked that no one was around before opening the sealed envelope. Then finally, there it was, in his hands. A passport, fake but official looking, and spoiled enough not to appear suspicious to border guards. And the photo inside? Perfect, captured the most obvious features of Bader’s face, long, high cheek bones and a

nose which hooked slightly over his thin moustache. He looked at his new portrait as though a small mirror. Definitely Kuwaiti, he thought, certainly passable.

The sun finally vanished behind the church steeples. Bader pocketed the envelope close to his chest and began walking home as the desert winds awakened him to what lay ahead. When would he leave, he wondered, tomorrow? That didn't matter. What mattered, he thought, was that for the first time in his life he had the choice to. Night ascended and the moon appeared, full and complete. Bader, louder than he realised, was singing past the patch of green his childhood self once played on.

'rahalta, taraktini shamata, taraktini shamata.'

My journey, you left me gloating.

Daylight was defeating Hagar. She had sat for an hour, staring at the hole she had carved into the sand, a chasm deep and significant enough for her words to be lost forever. However, her notebook remained wrapped in the purple scarf and tightly held within her fingers. Dusk was approaching and both her and the desert knew that it was now, or never.

'Ok, one last thing.' She reached into her bag for her pen.

*to breathe the air
of what is dead
chokes the chance
of surviving now
a tongue in exile
buries and bleeds
amongst the fallen
sand of her children*

'Done,' she said, tearing the back page of the notebook, folding it, then placing it into the side pocket of her bag.

Then, with a few tears clumping together the grains of sand between her legs, she placed the notebook in the hole and with eyes closed, pushed the surrounding sand on top. 'And breathe, and gone.' She placed three flattened stones on top, a security that no desert animal would ever dig up the discarded leather. She patted it, right hand, and bade her farewells to the graveyard of her sentences. Although still, she noticed as she began walked away, a familiar emptiness resided in her lower stomach, the void she so wished she could also entomb.

Fahad adjusted his *agal*, 'sir, you know a good place to eat around here?'

Fahad had only visited Bahrain once, on another government trip, and with the city's absence of ring roads he found Manama compared to Kuwait, difficult to navigate.

'We're going to the Golden Tulip, for Japanese food, sushi.' Bassam's rounded face was sharpened by the angles of his beard.

'Never tried. May I join?'

Bassam, the soon to be Bahraini minister of Culture, looked up from his phone screen and to Fahad, pushing his sunglasses onto his face as he did so. 'Welcome!'

Fahad was distant, tired from the early flight. His eyes wondered towards the two Japanese men who, head's down, and in calm composure, were preparing their dishes. Sushi, is it warm, Fahad wondered, spicy?

'And how's Kuwait these days, Fahad?' Bassam asked.

'Sorry?'

'Ha! You're hungry it seems,' the two other Bahraini's scoffed in agreement.

'Good, progressing, I mean, oil prices have increased since last year.'

'And Iraq? I heard that Saddam is still in debt to Al-Sabah?'

Fahad adjusted his *agal* again. He was given strict orders from the Emir to keep Iraqi relations confidential.

'Sure, but that's old news, since the days when Britain drew the border between us.'

'Ahh, a Kuwaiti blaming their problems on Britain, now that's old news!' Chuckles again circled the table as the smells of fish from the kitchen became stronger.

'What does that mean?' Fahad replied, leaning forward.

'Well I never hear a Kuwaiti blaming Iraq! Saddam is an ass,' Bassam's voice lowered, 'have you seen what he's doing to Shia' in the south?'

The waitresses began laying the dishes on the table. Conversation paused in order for the four men to decipher whose order belonged to who. Fahad leaned back in his seat, 'looks good,' he said '*b-il-hana wi-shifa*', hoping conversation would change to lighter topics since the arrival of the food.

'But Saddam could easily enter Kuwait, don't you think? I mean he claims the country is under American influence anyway.'

Fahad inhaled deeply, obviously. He wished that he had never agreed to sushi and besides, it was hardly satisfying his hunger.

'Yeah,' another man joined in conversation, 'Kuwait could hardly match Iraq's forces.'

Fahad wiped his hands on his serviette then took a sip of water. 'Look gentlemen, I worked on the border for three years. I have met Iraqis, Shia', Sunni, we are all against Saddam.'

'Are you sure Fahad, you're not one of Saddam's faithfuls?' Sniggers arose again. Did the men know about his marriage to Hagar? Her face came to Fahad's mind, he wondered, what would she say to these men? Sweat ran from Fahad's thinning hair and down the side of his neck, luckily his *ghutra* covered it.

'I hold everything against Saddam and nothing against Iraqis and, gentlemen, I suggest you do the same.' Fahad took a sip of water. 'Shall we enjoy this food now?'

The table quietened, giving way to the Japanese music.

The sun was small and floating, the last of daylight bleeding into the desert sands. The smell of frying onion and garlic thickened the evening air, a sign that the land, as dry as it

was, was still producing enough food for those on the outskirts of the city, Al-Jahra. It's a temporary magic, Um Dalal thought, falling in perfect amounts like the first sight of rainclouds after a long hot summer.

It was Friday, Iftar. Um Dalal and Bader's sister, Amina, were preparing *Machboos* - rice, mutton, almonds, in a spicy tomato sauce –another of Um Dalal's family favourites. From a covered pot into two small aluminium dishes, she spooned two bigger than normal portions of purple chutney, an Afghani recipe, taught to her ten years ago by a woman she had met in the local market. It was sweet and she had made a promise to herself to never to reveal the secret ingredient.

Amina checked the rice and then turned to Um Dalal, 'will Uncle Salman join tonight?'

'No, he's ill, remember? But Abbas and Ilaf will come.' Um Dalal was standing over the aluminium pots, debating whether to serve four dishes of chutney instead of two.

'And Bader, where's he?'

'God knows,' Um tutted, 'that boy is useless, twenty something and not married! Shame.'

'Ya Umami, it's his short legs and skinny arms.' Amina laughed, joking as sisters do.

'Enough Amina, pass me the lid,' Um Dalal finally decided that two dishes would be enough.

The yellow ball on the horizon sank and Abbas arrived just after, along with two other unexpected family members. For this reason, it was the most exciting part of the day for Amina, the only time when anyone could walk into the house, the only time she imagined strangers, boys and girls her age, wandering through the back gate, asking her half-romantically for a tare of bread and a taste of her mother's recipes. She just desired company, of her own age. Then she heard the corrugated metal of the back gate.

'Bader, where have you been?' Amina asked, 'we are about to pray.' Bader joined the men as the women separated into the other room. Then afterwards, Amina laid the dishes onto the carpet of the men's room.

'Enjoy, *b-il-hana wi-shifa*,' Amina said as she placed the dish of chutney onto the carpet. 'But not you, loser.' She whispered, turning to Bader and playfully hitting him on the shoulder.

'Sure,' Bader replied half noticing, still sweating from the walk home, 'and you enjoy your meal too sister.' Amina then shook her head trying to hide her disappointment that Bader too didn't feel like having fun. She then left the room to join the women.

Before tucking in, Bader checked his pockets for the envelope ensuring it hadn't fallen out during prayers and moreover, assuring himself that what happened in town had *really* happened.

'Lost something?' Abbas said, sitting next to Bader.

'Just cigarettes,' Bader replied, finally feeling the rectangular outline of the fake passport. 'How are you doing these days,' he asked, 'how's Ilaf and the children?'

'Everything's fine, thank God, Ilaf is looking after the children, but you know Ahmed lost his job yesterday?'

'Really, why so? I thought he only just started?'

‘KOC are employing cheaper labour instead, Pakistanis, Indians, it’s the same everywhere, *bidun* are becoming Kuwaiti cockroaches.’

‘*Bidun*? Like *bidun jinsayya*?’

‘Yes, *without*s, that’s what they call us now.’

Bader dipped his bread into the chutney. ‘You know, the police chased me and Nasser again last week, I swear it never used to be this bad.’

‘You’re right,’ Abbas replied, ‘when I was younger, the government wanted to give us jobs, I mean, look at your father, he was in the Army, defending Kuwait! Imagine that now, a stateless chasing a stateless man for selling a bunch of bananas!’ Abbas laughed, his madly waving arm lowering as Bader continued.

‘You think it’s the Americans, or British?’ Bader tore another piece of bread, this time pausing before dipping it into the chutney.

‘No no, that’s old story.’ Abbas lit a cigarette, then offered Bader one.

Bader shook his head, almost aggressively, ‘who then?’

‘Who you do think?’

‘Al-Sabah?’ Bader replied, mouth full.

‘He shoots, he scores!’

‘Yes?’

‘Of course, you should have seen the old days, Kuwait was for everyone, pearlers, merchants, even us Bedouin traded inland. You know Safat Al-Safah? That was a Bedouin market, imagine! It was only in the seventies, when Al-Salim brought it all that we were forced out of the city.’

‘But they’ve been here so long, right, the rulers? I thought they were good, I mean, destined to rule?’

‘That’s what they *want* you to believe.’ Abbas flicked his cigarette into the metal ashtray. ‘Young man, sometimes men use the word of Allah to excuse them of their greed, remember that.’

‘I will, I’ll make note,’ Bader replied, feeling for the screwed-up receipt in his top pocket. ‘You have a pen?’

‘Here, keep it, for when you one day take over the country.’

They laughed, ‘God willing,’ Bader pushed the empty dishes away and re-folding the receipt into the same pocket which held his ticket of escape.

Hagar spoke into the winds that pushed her back towards the desert. ‘Ha-ga-ra, she whispered, *ha-ga-ra*.’

It was the root of her name, meaning to take flight, abandon, flee, her only strength to continue walking towards Al-Jahra without thinking of what she had left behind. Although soon enough, with the desert winds strengthening and her hijab failing to cover

her eyes from the sand, her voice was lost and thoughts of her past arose. She remembered her mother's wrinkled lips, moving slowly, telling her the story of her name, Hagar, the wife of the prophet Abraham, the mother of Ishmael.

'Allah ordered Ibrahim to take Hagar and Isma'il into the Faran desert and leave them there under the only tree in the land. They had only a little water and no food, it was Allah's test on them and, peace upon them, they accepted.'

'But wasn't she scared and didn't they die without food?'

'*Habibti!* Slowly, slowly,' Hagar's mother patted Hagar on her head. 'But you're right, after all that time in Faran, Hagar did run out of water and baby Isma'il began to cry so much that Hagar worried and became thirsty herself and so Hagar left the tree in search of water.'

'And did they die?' little Hagar asked, raising her head.

'Slowly! No, they didn't die. With faith in God, Hagar ran seven times between two hills called Al-Safa and Al-Marwah. And then...'

'She ran out of breath and died.'

'No Hagar, stop now or I won't finish.' Hagar apologised slumping back down against the wall, her head resting on her mother's shoulder.

'So Hagar ran between the mountains and then on the seventh time, Allah sent an angel to Hagar and, with a little tap of his heels he created a *beeeautiful* spring for Hagar and Isma'il so they did *not* die. When our countries fixed and you are a little you're a little older, I will take you there.'

'To the spring? You mean it's a real place!' Hagar remembered her excitement, how her curly hair flicked up, brushing her mother's face.

'Of course, the Zamzam well, it's as real as you are my darling.'

Hagar's dry eyes began watering. The evening sky had darkened and the wind had dropped. She could hear the rumbling of oil tankers on the tarmac ahead, a sure sign that she had almost reached the main road. Hagar looked up hoping somehow, magically, the emptiness of the night sky would soak her tears. 'Ha-ga-ra', she repeated but again her mind drifted, this time revealing the faces of her two sons. They were beautiful, as clear to Hagar as her mother's voice, yet as distant as the stars above.

Bader and Nassir were driving from the market to Al-Jahra, the back of their truck rattling with half-filled boxes of fruit.

'I'm leaving next week.'

'Ay?' Nassir turned down the radio, ironically Abdullah Al-Rowasheed's song was playing, the synchronicity that confirmed to Bader that it was the right moment to admit his plans.

'I'm leaving, I bought fake I.D.'

Nassir turned the radio off, 'you're joking?'

'No, I decided to act fast, to travel West.'

Nassir pulled over to the side of the road, the sharp turn almost throwing out the box of oranges. He turned the engine off.

‘And what about Uncle Salman, your mother?’ Nassir looked over to Bader who was looking into the wing mirror, half-heartedly checking the fruit was still there.

‘I’m doing it for them, to earn money, get a proper job.’

‘You think the West has money Bader, how do you think they function their machines? With our oil! And anyway, look at us, we’re stateless, not peasants!’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Bader finally looked to Nassir whose elbows were locked and hands gripped firmly onto the steering wheel in front.

‘It means you’re stupid to think that more money will save us!’

‘But the pursuit of our freedom might.’

‘And that’s a reason to give up is it, your own freedom? Selfish ass.’

‘You’re jealous’ Bader retorted, surprised by his own words.

‘Of what, ignorance? Not caring for my family?’

‘I care, I just... Nassir, a woman...’

‘What?’ Nassir turned to see a woman, tall and slim with a strand of dark hair showing from her hijab, gently knocking on the half-open window of the truck door. ‘Shame on you both!’ He cursed, his hands surrendering to the sight of the road ahead. ‘Look Bader, just go for all I care but don’t expect a welcome back when you realise your happiness was here all along.’ Nassir then rolled down the rest of the window, ‘and what do you want?’

‘Is this the direction to Al-Jahra?’, the women asked pointing ahead.

‘Where are you going?’ Nassir replied, his temper calming in the strangers’ presence.

‘Atraf street, to take the bus.’ The woman noticed the strand of hair falling from her hijab and tucked it within.

‘Yalla, get in,’ Nassir ordered, already turning on the engine.

‘Thank you,’ the women replied.

Nassir turned on the radio and lit a cigarette, tapping every one of his fingers madly on the steering wheel. Then, trying to forget the conversation with Bader, he glanced into the rear-view mirror.

‘Woman, where you from?’

‘Kuwait,’ the woman replied.

‘Funny, your face looks Iraqi.’ The woman nodded her head and remained silent.

‘You like Abdallah Al-Rowasheed?’ Nassir turned the radio up a little.

'I prefer traditional songs.' The women spoke a little louder yet tried carefully to tame conversation.

'Oh, my friend here likes poetry too.' Nassir turned smiling wildly at Bader, 'isn't that right Mr travelling man? You especially like patriotic Kuwait songs, don't you? Go on, why don't you entertain us with one of your favourites?'

'Sure,' Bader replied, knowing fully well Nassir's intentions. Then waving his hand, in the air and lowering his voice, he began recalling the national anthem.

'Blessed be my country, a homeland for harmony, Kuwait, Kuwait my country, *fencing us* all fairly, with *warm love and verity*, Kuwait, Kuwait, I love my country! How's that?' Bader turned to the woman, 'traditional enough for you?'

With a smirk on her face she nodded, 'it's very nice.'

'Well at least someone likes this country!' Nassir glanced again into the rear-view mirror, 'woman, are you stateless too?'

'No, I mean, why?' The woman was obviously thrown off by the question.

'I was just wondering what you were doing in Al-Jahra desert so late?'

'Visiting friends.'

'Who, the desert rats?' Bader and Nassir laughed, temporarily forgetting their earlier disagreement.

'Leave me! I'm tired,' the woman hastily replied, turning her head to face the side window. She noticed the street lights ahead, a sign she was close to town.

Nassir turned up the music again and lit another cigarette, the white truck increasingly submerging into the orange pools of street light.

'By the bus stop, right?'

'Yes, just here is fine.' The woman then said her thanks and hurried to the bus which, to her luck, had just arrived.

'Wait!' Bader shouted, already opening the truck door. He had noticed something fly from the woman's bag as she ran, crossing the road to catch the bus.

'You can walk from here too!' Nassir yelled, leaning his head out of the window, 'preparation for your travels!'

Bader, without turning around, carelessly waved his hand behind him. He then caught the drifting paper and continued running across the road. But the doors had already closed and bus, pulling away. The woman, adjusting herself in the back seat, looked out to see Bader standing the other side of the dusted window, holding onto the very last words she had written.

Hagar was certain she remembered what was on the paper and wrote it down as soon as returned to the flat. She then switched on the TV and using the remote, scrolled through the channels. News, no, shopping, no, Sudanese music, a young man playing a *tanbour* and singing of his lover's pearly teeth. Click. She then rested her head on the cushion beside her and fell asleep almost instantly.

‘Darling, Hagar, good morning.’ Hagar awoke to see Fahad’s legs in front of her and feel his hand shaking her waist. ‘You slept all night with the TV on and the window open.’

Hagar knew Fahad was returning from Bahrain but didn’t expect him to arrive so early. ‘What time is it?’ She asked, her eyes still swollen from the humidity of the room.

‘Close to eleven, what time did you sleep?’ Hagar noticed a sudden sternness in Fahad’s voice.

‘I don’t know,’ Hagar replied, truly uncertain of how long it had taken her to return from Al-Jahra.

‘What do you mean you don’t know? And anyway, what were you doing to make you pass out like that?’

Hagar finally sat up, rubbing her eyes with her hands and then moving them to touch to her abdomen. ‘I’m sorry my lover, it’s the time of month, it’s tiring in this heat.’

‘Yes, and that’s why most people close the window Hagar, what are you going to do when we have children? Are they going to have to wake you up for lunch?’ Fahad threw the keys onto the kitchen side and poured himself a glass of water. Hagar remained silent, sitting on the sofa. They’d spoken about having children two months before but now, with their wedding only a few weeks away, the reality of it suddenly felt inescapable to Hagar.

‘And what about when you are a Kuwaiti, when we finally start living a normal life and I can carry on with mine instead of dealing with yours?’ Fahad continued after taking a sip of water, ‘what time are you going to wake up then?’

Hazy and weighted by yesterday’s emotions, Hagar remained irresponsive. Instead she stood and walked over to the window, hoping to find a sight from below to distract her thoughts.

‘Talk to me Hagar’ Fahad slammed the fridge door, finishing with the water.

Hagar looked down, outside of the still open window, to see two men outside of the mall, talking, waving their arms at each other as they exchanged words. She imagined their conversation.

‘Hagar?’

‘I told you I’m sorry and you know that I love you.’ Then suddenly her stomach tightened and her lips curled under her teeth. Fingertips dug into the muscles of her shoulders. She closed her eyelids, hoping they would encase her composure as Fahad’s breath cooled over the skin of her jawline.

‘Then show me it.’ Fahad jolted his arms, causing Hagar’s spine to stiffen and eyes open. She was sure Fahad could never hurt her but not enough for her to fully surrender to his presence. He loosened his grip and walked into the bedroom, speaking louder to her as he disappeared. ‘Anyway, I need to visit Mohammed again today, to ask him for your papers, then I’ll be back at maghrib for dinner, it looks like you need to visit the market.’

‘I will,’ Hagar responded finally, her mind unexpectedly drifting, thinking about whether she could really undergo the experience of childbirth again.

‘And you’ll cook?’ Fahad was changing his clothes in the bedroom, getting ready to go out again.

‘Of course.’

‘And the bedroom could do with a sweep,’ Fahad scuffed the tiles with his foot.

Hagar walked to the front door and neatly arranged the four pairs of shoes on the entrance mat. ‘I know.’

Men wearing white stood silent – thick, black moustaches, sturdy – behind their stalls looking proud of their arrangements. It was late afternoon and crops were being restocked, piling high in ways which defied natural orders. Aubergines, oranges, pomegranates all tilted upright, upheld by the cardboard boxes and wooden crates beneath them. The stall owners, with enough daily practice, had come to know the exact angle to steady their colourful displays, considering even the most fastidious of their customers.

Hagar passed the fish stalls which were similarly arranged in ways which fascinated her. Fins and tails fanning the edges and fish bodies slumped over one another forming beds of wet scales. She bought three mackerel from the usual stall, knowing it was Fahad’s favourite.

‘Here you are, Miss.’

‘Many thanks.’

What else, Hagar wondered. The usual, she guessed. She added the fish to her larger shopping bag and walked on towards a fruit and vegetable stalls.

‘No coriander, sorry.’ She moved ahead, onto the next.

‘Excuse me, you have coriander?’ Thinking through a recipe, Hagar was oblivious to other customers bustling around her. On request, the stall owner pointed her to the greens on the other side of the stall.

‘We meet again!’ Hagar, unaware, continued to count the change in her hand.

‘Hey, lady,’ Hagar finally sensed his presence beside her, ‘I have something of yours.’

Hagar looked up and turned to see the familiar face. His moustache was thin, hooked just slightly over upturned edges of his mouth.

‘I added to it, it’s nice writing.’ The man passed her the folded paper and continued smiling.

‘Thanks,’ Hagar responded, still adjusting to the unexpected occurrence. ‘You also write?’

‘Sometimes,’ he said, seeming embarrassed. ‘Well, I make notes.’ They laughed in mutual understanding. ‘And writers also have to eat!’ The man looked towards the stall owner who was stood, hand out, waiting for Hagar to pay.

‘You’re right and greens are good for the mind.’ Hagar held up the coriander then passed the stall owner the money. ‘Is the note-taker shopping too?’

‘Yes, getting fruits from this good man Asif,’ the man in front of Hagar flicked his head towards the shorter man standing behind the next stall. His hair was greying and the skin around his eyes was thick and creased. ‘He’s a good friend, gives me a good deal, then I sell them in Al-Jahra.’

‘Ahh, that explains the oranges in your truck,’ Hagar said, again laughing together in similar minds. ‘Anyway, thanks for this.’ Hagar flashed the folded paper then tucked it away in her bag.

‘My pleasure and really, it’s beautiful.’

Hagar held eye contact with the man for longer than a woman should in public. His eyes were gentle, honest.

‘They’re nothing, only notes.’ Hagar smiled, quickly turned away, ‘Anyway, nice to meet you.’

‘One second!’ The man darted around the side to catch her, ‘what’s your name?’

‘Hagar.’

‘Ah, the one that fears.’

‘No,’ Hagar replied, ‘the one that flees.’

‘Well I’m Bader, the full moon.’

‘Well take care and nice to meet you.’

Hagar turned again, leaving Bader hanging in the air between them. ‘And you, stranger.’

Mohammad shuffled the files that sat on his desk. His teeth were stained yellow by the large quantities of coffee he drank. ‘We’re almost there Fahad, all you need now is something to prove that she’s been living with you for over three months.’

‘And how am I supposed to prove that?’ Fahad was rubbing his hands together, a sure sign of impatience.

‘It’s a tough one,’ Mohammed replied, ‘especially as you are not married yet. How about some sort of letter, from the Emir maybe, or your landlord’s recognition?’

‘You know I own the flat and I’m trying to keep her origins a secret.’

‘Ha, you’ve made your life difficult Fahad!’ Mohammad quietened his laughter as he quickly realised that Fahad was not amused. ‘Ok, what we have already should suffice, I’ll see what I can do.’

‘And make it quick this time, please.’

‘How is she anyway?’ Mohammad asked, trying to soften Fahad’s agitation.

‘Fine, well, things will improve once all this is over.’

‘That’s what most people say.’ Again, Mohammad quickly paused, realising Fahad was not in the slightest mood for joking. He changed the topic. ‘Does she ever talk about Iraq?’

‘I’ve found notes she’s written but we’ve never talked about it.’

‘It must weigh.’

‘What?’

Mohammad sipped the coffee and reached for the pot realising that Fahad’s glass was already empty. ‘You want another?’ He asked.

Fahad tutted and shook his head, ‘what weighs?’

‘The past, the dead children, Saddam.’

‘Possibly,’ Fahad replied, suddenly wondering about Hagar and where was at that very moment. Mohammad took another sip from the small cup.

‘And you know, last week, there’s another Iraqi who was identified at the border. Her case was terrible, she claimed to have been raped by Saddam himself.’

‘And she is applying for asylum too?’

‘Without a Kuwaiti husband? Wouldn’t dream of it. You’re doing a good thing Fahad.’

‘My friend, you’re kind.’ Fahad sat back on the sofa chair, releasing a breath, ‘I just wish it was easier.’

‘If God permits, another week, it will be done.’

‘God willing.’

Nothing, not even a window. Unpolluted, air-conditioned, passionless. No ornament or trinket to mark a special occasion, no photograph to stain the wall or mind. Their bedroom of impersonal love, filled with artificial light, sterile, several pin-pricks of spotlight mounted perfectly into the ceiling, reflecting on the white tiles beneath. A cold and empty laboratory of modernity to research post-oil family life.

Hagar reached her arm underneath the wardrobe. Dust still collected there despite the absence of her notebook and the constantly renewing air of their bedroom. She cupped her hand, sweeping the cloth in curves, creating small piles of grey matter and brown hair. She wondered just how many times she had reached under the wardrobe, aching to write, insensible to the dust.

‘I added to it,’ she thought, recalling what Bader had said earlier that afternoon. What did he mean? She abandoned the grey formations, leaving the yellow cloth crescent shaped under one corner of the wardrobe. She opened her bag and unfolded the letter.

*they once sang of he
who permitted greed
and the forgotten who
never ceased trying*

Hagar inspired, took the pen from her bag and began to write, adding to his words.

‘Shit!’

Hagar ran to the kitchen, leaving the unfolded paper on the edge of the sofa. The walls were dirtying with smoke as the burning rice continued to cook. Hagar saved the edible remains, wetted the pan with water, and already began scraping off the thick, blackened

layer on the bottom. The damage was retractable, concealable she thought. If only... Her head turned; the door opened.

‘What’s happened!’ Fahad entered the kitchen still wearing his shoes.

‘I was...’

‘And look at the walls!’

‘They will clean, I’ll clean them.’

‘You’re mad, woman.’ Fahad retraced his steps back to the front door and slipped off his shoes. He was too exhausted to show further concern.

‘And how was it seeing Mohammad?’ Hagar saw it as a chance to quickly change the subject.

‘Useless,’ Fahad replied, taking rest on the sofa, ‘still no papers and he told me he’ll sort it next week, always next week.’ Fahad picked up the paper resting on the sofa armchair. He recognised Hagar’s hand writing. ‘Did you write this?’

Hagar stopped scrubbing the pot and without drying her hands took the paper off Fahad. ‘It’s nothing, just notes.’ Her wet finger marks trailed down the paper, already smudging the ink.

‘But did you write it?’

‘A while ago, really it’s nothing.’ Hagar folded the paper and again tucked it into the side pocket of her handbag. Heart racing, she returned to the pot in the sink.

‘And who else wrote on it, Hagar?’ Fahad stood up, furtively tracking Hagar’s steps and retrieving the paper from her bag.

‘What do you mean?’ Hagar turned to see Fahad holding up the paper.

‘This,’ Fahad pointed, ‘who wrote this part?’

Hagar stumbled, noticeably showing her lack of confidence.

‘A friend from Iraq, a woman. My friend!’ Hagar’s heart throbbed; she worried Fahad could hear it.

‘And why is it in your bag?’ Hagar kept her head down, eyes on the dish, hoping this would hide her colouring cheeks.

‘It’s old, I just wanted to remember...’

‘Remember the men that raped you? Mercy on you Hagar! Do you know how much I have done for you? And how much you are still stuck in your own mind!’ Fahad screwed the paper and threw it into the charcoaled water of the sink. Hagar’s salvaged it instantly, hiding it behind the dishes on the side. She heard Fahad in the bedroom.

‘Selfish whore.’

She remembered the cloth and the small mountains of dust she abandoned. Leaving the pot, she walked into the bedroom.

‘Fahad, *stop!* What are you doing?’

The blue *abaya* Fahad had brought her, the scarf she wore on her journey from Iraq. Fahad was pulling items of Hagar's out of the wardrobe.

'Take it and get out.' Hagar's eyes widened.

'I can't! What do you mean?'

'I mean enough, get out.'

'Can we talk, the letter, really it...'

'No Hagar, *get out*.'

'But I have cooked fi...'

A flash of Fahad's eyebrows and a stinging marking only an instance of time. Searing. Hagar silenced, too stunned to look away from the silver pen that was hooked upon the top pocket of Fahad's *dishdasha*.

Hagar picked up the plastic bag that Fahad had thrown onto the floor and, on the cold tiles of their bedroom, began packing away her clothes.

Step by step, box by box. Bader hadn't known any other place better than he knew the market. Since the age of eleven, stacking and re-stacking, he doubted that his hands could be useful for anything else. And he will miss it, he thought, as he turned to see Nassir waving his hand, agreeing with the bedouin woman who was selling homemade perfumes and jewelry. He'll miss the chaos of it, the police runs, the awkward mosaics of Kuwait's newly developed landscapes, layers upon layers of unfinished foreign foundations, architecture that had flattened the mud houses of the old port and the small twisting alleyways beneath. He wanted to see his country grow, like his own child. To witness the disappearance of the very last glimpse of the organic logic of the old city, to watch Kuwait become smothered by the widely spoken of blueprint of progress. A miracle, he thought, uncertain change. Although certain that he would miss it.

Nassir returned with something in his hand, a small item grasped in his fist.

'For you.' Nassir passed the item to Bader, 'for your travels, for protection.'

Two silver scorpions, each enclosing upon a sharply cut black stone, their tails hooking back on themselves and facing the other. Bader pushed the ring over the knuckle of his middle finger. It was a perfect fit, heavy yet in place.

'Thank you, it means a lot, really.'

Nassir placed his hand onto Bader's shoulder. 'I'll think of you, promise you'll keep safe?'

In silence Bader nodded, smiled, then loaded the last of the fruit into the back of the truck. Nassir turned on the engine. Bader closed the truck door, leaving behind more white flakes of paint upon the grounds of the market. They drove home together, windows down, for what they both knew would be the last time.

The shoreline was expanding, growing golden as the sun lowered behind the tower blocks. Rising to the east, setting to the west, cyclical, holy. The colour of the sky was so gently melting into the blues of the ocean. Hagar felt comforted by it, to realize that despite everything, the rivers of the Tigris ran endlessly into the water that softened her feet.

It was unusual to see a woman alone on Mahboula beach but that didn't matter to Hagar. She was alone, it was Monday, she imagined that the other women in the suburban district were preparing food, like she too would have been, only in another universe.

She wriggled her toes. Small shells emerged around them as the waves inhaled, cradling her ankles. She was surprised at how sensitive they were, assuming instead that by now, taking her across borders, they would be tougher, stronger. She splashed them, her feet flicking, sprinkling ripples across what otherwise would have been calm evening waters. She wondered if she could sleep there for the night, safe under the stars, in the romance of herself, drifting away to natural sounds, more consolatory than the breathing of a man.

Her stomach rumbled. Could only the ocean appease this moment of solace wondering, a moment so raw and tender just as the night she first escaped Iraq? Beyond the shoreline there was a radiance, now shining brighter than the twilight sky. Hagar walked out of the ocean lowering, with grace, her skirt and slipping on her sandals. She looked up again. There, glowing wholesomely, the full moon and once again, a bittersweet confidence inside of her.

The market was dismantling. The cool evening air was a time to enjoy. Stall owners were stacking away what remained to be sold, placing the cardboard boxes beneath the wooden frames. Rhythmically, with clanks and squeaks, the working day was ending.

Bader caught sight of Asif on the corner of his stall. He was crouching over a box, sorting the rotting bananas from the ripe.

'Asif, my brother.' Bader surprised him, interrupting his final duties. He stood, pulling the waist of his trousers up with him. His legs were thin and bowed but usually unnoticeable, hidden under a loose fitting *izhar*.

'My friend you're late! I've packed away already.'

'It's ok, we have fruit. I came to say goodbye and thank you for helping me all these years.'

'In the name of God, don't mention it.' Asif crouched back down, turning to continue sorting the bananas. 'Anyhow, where's a stateless man like you going?'

Bader looked around then squatted, helping Asif to sort the fruits. 'I'm going west, Turkey then maybe even the UK. I bought myself a fake passport, I'm going to find a real job.'

'*Mashallah!* It's good to travel, I remember the feeling.'

'You travelled too?' Bader stopped sorting the fruit, amazed and almost disappointed by Asif's lack of reaction.

'Of course. Before I left Yemen, I tried for Germany. It was exciting, especially in the seventies.' Asif stood to collect the next box of bananas.

'And what happened, you didn't make it?' Bader shouted to him as he walked away.

‘No, I made it. Besides, it was easy back then, borders were like garden gates.’

‘So why didn’t you stay?’

‘Well it wasn’t what I expected, the money wasn’t good and no one believed my story.’

‘That you were Yemeni, you mean?’

‘No that I was a human. That I did good things and bad, fell in love, got angry. I realized that I was becoming what people in the west wanted me to be, either a victim or a thief, and that wasn’t me. Well, not all the time at least – ha! – so I left, and now look, I’m living a dream, sorting out rotting bananas and talking to an adventurous young man like you.’ Asif smiled wildly, displaying the two gaps which over time, had replaced his canine teeth. He looked up, noticing the sudden distance in Bader’s gaze.

‘You think I should leave Asif?’ By now Bader had forgotten about the fruit and was sitting, holding a banana in his hand, eagerly waiting for Asif’s words.

‘That one’s not my story to tell. Anyway, I thought you came here to say goodbye?’ Asif stood up before Bader had time to reply.

Bader grinned, his heart filling, understanding exactly the answer to his question.

‘Words cannot express my thanks Asif. You’re a good man.’

‘And a bad man too, remember!’ Asif winked, saluting Bader with his right hand as though an army cadet. Bader’s mouth, yet for him to realize, remained wildly grinning.

‘Hey, are you driving to Al-Jahra?’

Bader turned, his senses still glowing from Asif’s words.

‘Well peace be upon you too sister!’

Hagar knew she’d find him there, at the market. The full moon, everything in alignment, too perfect for the circumstance not to offer her what she needed.

‘Are you, or not?’

Bader was pleased to see her, himself also elated in his own spirit and ready for the world to enter.

‘Well Hagar, stranger, I am taking the bus.’ Hagar laughed, almost rudely.

‘You don’t drive? I knew you were young!’

‘I’m stateless, it’s difficult to get a license.’

Hagar was jarred, less by his words, more through realizing her own abrasiveness. ‘Sorry, I mean, I’m in a rush.’

‘To meet the desert rats?’

‘Touché.’

Bader, stroked down the thicker hairs on his upper lip.

‘Ok, let’s take the bus’ Hagar claimed before Bader had the time to suggest anything else. ‘Anyway it won’t...’

‘Wait there,’ Bader interrupted, ‘I’ll ask Asif...’

‘Just here,’ the truck pulled over on Hagar’s request. Asif saluted Bader for the second time, flickered a wink. Bader smiled and left the truck, swinging his legs off the leather seat as though a boy leaving the bus for the school gates.

‘What are you doing?’ Hagar turned as she heard the truck door close.

‘Joining you.’

‘No, I need to go alone.’

But already, Asif had pulled away, only a silhouette of his waving hand remained shrinking into the distance. Hagar rubbed her forehead, meticulously tucking in the several strands of hair that were again escaping from her hijab and into the subtle eastward winds.

‘No, please leave, Bader.’

Bader kicked the sand underneath his feet, the grains emerging then uniformly falling.

‘Well, at least tell me where you are going.’ Hagar turned and began walking, unwilling to respond to his calls.

‘I can’t, please go now.’

‘Just tell me and then I will go.’ Hagar turned to see Bader’s skin lightened under the moonlight, his eyes were wide and eager.

‘Why do you care, I’m a stranger to you?’

‘Because I feel you are hiding something that will help me one day.’

Hagar closed her eyes, gathering the strength to locate herself amongst the stars. She inhaled the stillness of the desert night.

‘Come, but please don’t speak.’

‘Ok, agree...’ Bader’s paused then slid his thumb and forefinger across his lips. He silently nodded then began following Hagar’s footsteps.

The desert muted their tread yet their pace was rhythmic, in sync, right, left, right, left; a metronomic ticking beneath them, beyond each of their thoughts. Never did Hagar turn to face him and, following his promises, Bader never spoke. Their only quiet company was the moonlight that illuminated the surrounding land and of course, the scurrying desert rats, *Sundevall's jird*.

Hagar peered into the distance towards the two oil towers ahead. Sixty degrees to the right of her, she measured, they were close. And the road? They could no longer see it, nor hear the sounds of the tankers rolling across the tarmac. Bader noticed her, head down, scanning the ground beneath.

‘Can I help, have you lost something?’ Bader thought it was an appropriate time to break the silence. Hagar seemingly agreed.

‘I’m looking for three stones, triangle shaped.’ Hagar responded, still inspecting the sands around.

‘There?’ Bader pointed towards a dark lump on the near horizon.

‘No, too big, they were flat.’

‘Three flat stones, in the desert, in the night,’ Bader laughed, the sound quickly absorbed by the surrounding silence. ‘Are you mad stranger?’

‘Possibly, but you’re crazier for following.’

‘Following the moonlight,’ Bader turned over a stone on the ground. *‘If the moon be with thee, thou needest not care about the stars.’* Bader flipped the stone back over. ‘You know this saying? Its Egyptian I think.’

‘Yes, *and who wants a thing is blind to its faults.* Yes, I know it but now’s not a good time for poetry.’ Hagar gestured for them to keep walking north, further from the main road.

‘But I thought you were a writer, what writer doesn’t enjoy poetry?’

‘I do, but not right now.’

‘So, what are you searching for again?’

‘The same thing as you,’ Hagar replied, ‘three flat stones in the sand.’

‘Take my hand.’

‘What?’ Bader knew she had heard him.

‘Just take it!’

‘No, I’m looking...’

Bader walked in front, pausing Hagar in her tracks. He looked into her eyes: the first moment her gaze felt present, with him. He felt them mirror, everything in his life that had led him to standing there with her and all it could mean amidst his own journey. The comfort of familiarity, all that had made him yet never belonged to him, or anyone, and the pain of confronting it, letting it go; departure, growth, another soul searching for the place that he too desired.

‘He who fled from death, fell into it, you know that one?’

Hagar’s breath slowed. ‘No, I don’t, Egyptian?’

‘No, my own.’ Bader looked down towards his open hand then back towards Hagar. She placed her hand gently in his, their fingers at once curling tight around each other’s palms.

‘Let’s keep looking.’

The sand remained warm from the daytime heat yet the night air was cool, enough for their exposed skin to become dry. The three flat stones had been forgotten. Instead they sat together, crossed legged, under the stars, rubbing their fingers through the fine grains. Their hands and minds becoming dusty, talking about their pasts.

‘There over a hundred thousand stateless people in Kuwait,’ Bader told her, ‘young, old, families, children, so many.’ Hagar was unaware of just how many, or in fact any. He told her that before, these people, like his father, had served in the army and were bought-out like cattle by the ruling family in times of their own political need. ‘Now we’re useless to them,’ he said, ‘they call us illegal, force us to be bodies between the sky and the earth.’

Hagar too spoke about her life, the stories she admitted she had so recently buried. She told Bader about Saddam, what he had done to the Shi’a, her mother and sisters, in the South. How his guards had imprisoned her, raped her, just because her father had some minor political standing in their village. She told him the pain of giving birth to the twins knowing only minutes after, they would be taken from her, never hers instead vessels of Ba’athist regime. She felt shame, shed tears which her hand immediately wiped away in reticence. Nothing could give comfort and Bader knew that no words, poetic or not, would suffice. He could only listen, so intently, and place his hand on hers when the emotions ebbed, until the back of her moistened hand eventually rested upon her knee.

‘So my plan is to leave Kuwait in a few days.’

‘Where are you going?’ Hagar, caught up in her own stories and the skin on her cheek tightened by tears, almost forgot Bader’s presence, that he too was navigating a life, whole and separate from hers.

‘I’m going West, to start again.’

‘Brave!’ Hagar suddenly noticed a lightness, how words could slip so easily from the mind to tongue. ‘Are you scared?’

‘Of course.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of forgetting who I was, the people who created me, the face of my mother.’

‘They will travel with you, undoubtedly, your memories. I mean, look, even an empty desert didn’t allow me to escape them!’

‘And what will you do if we don’t find it Hagar, your diary?’

‘Write it all down again, exactly what I just told you, write it all down.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes! And then bury it. In fact, I will spend my entire life doing this! I will start my own business, call myself the mortician of memory but don’t worry, I will not be tearful like this, I will feel free and hopefully become rich doing it too.’

‘Paid by the ruling family?’

‘Yes, of course, I will bury the Al-Sabah’s memory quite happily and wrapped neatly in a Kuwaiti flag... And you will return just to see it, to sing the national anthem in your best voice...

‘Blessed be my country a homeland for harmony, Kuwait, Kuwait, Kuwait!’

They laughed loudly, knowing only the small desert creatures around them would hear. Just them and the creatures, witnessing their unity at the crossroads of their lives, together, silently, wondering whether these moments really should happen to people like them, whether, people really do come into your life for a reason, just at the right moment, as though destined by some greater force?

‘How long until the sunrise, do you think Bader?’

Bader jocosely held his fist to his chest and turned to the moon.

‘Oh full moon my brother, when will the sun brighten your skies?’

Hagar cracked in giggles, seeing a face so kind suddenly pretend an unnatural seriousness.

‘*Shh* Hagar! He’s speaking to me...’ Bader whispered, ‘He says... he says... three hours! Three hours till the sun rises and that with light, you’ll find everything that you’re looking for.’ Bader opened his eyes and smiled. *‘If the moon be with thee, thou needest not care about the stars.’*

‘Thank you, Bader, thank you for listening.’

‘And thank you for finding me, stranger.’ Bader lay on his back, arms folded and reaching for the cigarettes in his top pocket. ‘We will continue our search in the morning, right?’

‘I will and you’re welcome to join.’ Hagar joined Bader laying, she rolled over to face him, kissing him on the cheek as he drew from his cigarette. ‘Goodnight Bader.’

Bader turned to see her, the side of her body adjusting into the sand and curving out from the barren flatness surrounding them. It too sacred to touch, a womanly figure, so grounded and whole. Bader rolled over again to face the stars above.

‘May you awake to goodness.’

Glinting, was it dawn? The stars were falling from the sky. But really were they stars? Hagar rubbed her eyes. They moved above, freckles of light, like small flies, hundreds of them buzzing, no, thousands, helicopters. Thousands of helicopters, flying southward, their noise dissecting the inaudible air that blanketed a city of awakening bodies and the humming of more in the distance. How many had already passed over their dreams, their fleeting experience, without them realizing? Hagar sat up to see more flecks of light on the horizon, unholy phosphorescence, she recognised them instinctively. Metallic insects gliding along the main road, tanks, Iraqi, machined ghosts floating in the distance.

‘Bader,’ Hagar shook him, his sleeping face holding the same gentle demeanor he has when awake. ‘Bader, wake up, I think it’s a war.’

‘A war, what?’ Bader stretched his body, the words not settling into his still unconscious mind.

‘I think it’s Iraq.’

Bader’s eyes finally opened, squinting into the twilight ahead. ‘Are they, tanks?’

‘I think it’s Saddam.’ Hagar stood and at once and began walking North, her black *abaya* flapping, like the wing of a bird, with each footstep.

‘Hagar!’

Bader noticed fire ahead, flames arising from the two oil tanks in the distance, their smoke tainting the glow of morning light. ‘Hagar!’ A jet plane flew overhead, dipping its flight path as it neared the city. Bader ran to her, covering her with his body and causing her to fall onto the sand beneath. She pushed him away, deafened by the noises of the helicopter rotors above.

‘Leave me, Iraq’s already killed me!’

Hagar walked faultlessly, mission-like, as though she knew exactly the destination she was heading, the very place she had longed to be all along, not the diary, or the stones, or her children, but place where the fire burned within her stomach, the very thing that once told her to press pen to paper, to leave Iraq, escape the prison, bury her words, to find Bader at the market on yesterday’s moonful night. And she saw the flames ahead, the jet planes in the distance still coming, but still she continued, headstrong but not in spite, only certain, for the first time in her life, that everything that had happened to her, belonged precisely to her. Every decision she had made, suffering felt, smile, all hers. And it was untouchable, indestructible, a sanctity that not even time nor a fire could reach.

But then, ‘Hagar!’ She saw deep purples suddenly filtering behind her eyes. She could still hear Bader, faintly in the distance behind her. Was it dawn now, she hoped? Her heart slowing, he felt her neck, and arm twitching, her blood pouring onto the golden sand of morning’s sunrise. And all because of one distant decision made by a man, once a boy – ‘*bastard!*’ – who like anyone with enough training could be, was, manipulated by the angst of attack, fueled with enough armed emotion to react with a neurotic urge to tense a forefinger around the cold trigger of a gun. ‘No!’ And it just happened to be that the soldier, who in the same day took a cold shower, ate warm bread and molasses, who unknown to them both was the friend of the man who had once raped Hagar, saw beneath him a black moving spec below. An enemy, he thought, running wildly with such conviction, yet cowardly escaping his pointed vision.

And still, if only the true voice of that one man’s instinct had not been inebriated by the same chemical that had caused that black speck to birth now orphaned children and flee its country, she would live presently in peace as an Iraqi, as a human, like he so too wished he could. And maybe, just one afternoon, on the banks of the Tigris, they would have spoken, laughed, held hands even, exchanged their own stories of freedoms and morality, of the inevitable suffering that rest within every existence.

‘I’m here Hagar,’ her vision was now fading beyond the outline of Bader’s body ‘still here, and I’ll find the stones, your story.’ Bader finally returned the kiss upon her cheek, still soft, he noticed. ‘You know more than anyone on this earth, they can’t kill you that easily.’

~

*to breathe an air
of what is dead
chokes the chance
of surviving now
a tongue in exile
buries and bleeds
amongst the fallen
sands of her children*

*they once sang of he
who permitted greed
and the forgotten who
never ceased trying
rebuild rebuild higher
they scream her freedom
is so close to dying*

~

'Good morning everyone. As of this hour, Iraq remains in firm control of the tiny, oil rich country of Kuwait. The Iraqi ambassador to the United States reaffirms that Iraq harbors no special objectives and only wishes to establish neighborly relations. Meanwhile the president today has met with the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, to discuss the need for a continuing western defense presence in the Arab Gulf.'

Bader walked with the same fearlessness, soul alight and body glowing brighter than the sunrise. It was August and morning; the only time of day cool enough to travel. He had packed Hagar's diary and his fake passport into his canvas rucksack and he knew, certainly now, it was the perfect day to leave the country which anyway, for so long, had convicted his every presence.