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Short stories

**Something Remains**

The number I dialed was engaged, so I put down my mobile. I was gripping the steering wheel with both hands when a traffic jam appeared up ahead, between the concrete barriers on the sides of the road.

The early summer sun was beating down on the cars travelling the Dammam-Khobar expressway, toasting the asphalt. The restlessness of the drivers and passengers showed in their movements and their eyes, squinting against the dazzling sunlight. I looked at the digital clock. Five minutes of my lunch break gone, forty left.

To break up the long hours of work and to escape its monotony, I had made a habit of going out for lunch in Khobar, only a few minutes away from my workplace.

Sometimes we would go out for lunch together. He introduced me to some restaurants that had that wonderful European flavor, and in turn was very keen on *kabsa*, the traditional eastern Saudi fish biryani dish my wife prepared. The first time he tasted it, sitting cross-legged in front of the communal dish on the floor exactly like we do, he said, “This is the best *kabsa* I’ve ever eaten in my life.” Then, as if suddenly realizing he’d committed a faux-pas, he gestured towards his wife and joked, “except for the one Janet makes, of course.” Janet was sitting on one of the sofas in the lounge of their apartment in the residential compound of the company’s foreign workers, eating some *kanad* from her own small plate.

I noticed that the cars in front of me were veering off into the two right-hand lanes as the concrete barrier blocked the road on the left-hand side, so I put on my indicator to join them.

I had met him four years ago. He was transferred to the Sharqia branch of the company after he and his wife had spent more than ten years moving around the Kingdom.

“I’ll refuse to transfer away from this area.” It was one of his firm decisions, made after a trip I accompanied him and Janet on to the local villages, and the Thursday market. He was convinced the Sharqia was less frantic and noisy than anywhere else in the country.

I approached the end of the queue of cars. The third lane I was in was even more congested than the others, and I could see the cause of the traffic jam from where I was. The extreme heat had obviously been too much for one of the cars— an older model, judging by the steam rising from inside its open bonnet. A man who had been its owner stood beside it, waiting. A little further on, at the front of the queue, were several state security officers in bullet-proof vests standing at a check point and inspecting the identity documents of everyone in the cars.

Conversations with him used to have a different air to it; I was astonished by the simplicity of the way he presented his convictions. In short sentences and informally.

“It is just a passing phase, nothing more- this country’s the safest place on earth.” he said as he put a spoonful of food into his mouth, and calmly began to chew it. This was his response to the numerous call for foreigners
to leave the kingdom.

The young security officer holding my identity card was scrutinizing my face. I took off my sunglasses so that he could see me more clearly and our eyes met. He looked deeply inside me and I didn’t need to sink into his eyes to feel that trust that once existed had begun to seep away.

Twenty minutes of my lunch break were left by the time I was allowed to leave the checkpoint. I drove faster, trying to make up for lost time. I wouldn’t be able to eat at the restaurant and flick through the newspaper now. A sandwich and a bag of fries were on the passenger seat to my right as I sped back to work.

On the first day of June as we were sipping our morning tea in the company café, he said, “She wants to leave as soon as possible, because of what happened last Saturday and she is insisting that I go with her.”

Then in a strained voice which was nothing like the one I’d become used to, he said,

“The truth is, I can’t stay here without her.”

I shook my head without saying a word, and we both stared into our cups of tea. They didn’t even wait to get their terminal gratuity. They gave me their bank account details and asked me to transfer it to their accounts.

After what had happened, my sense of wanting to do everything I possibly could for them had only intensified.

I was just about to park in the company car park when my mobile phone rang. It was his number, the one I dialed earlier. He said a few words, asked me about Sharqia and then told me that the money had arrived safely. Before hanging up he promised to stay in touch.

“Thank you” he said. Everything is in order, thank you.

His final words of thanks were in Arabic: “shukran.”

*On 29 May 2003 gunmen entered an accounting office of large company and asked several non- Saudi workers about their religion and then shot them dead in front of their Saudi colleagues. Al Qaida was responsible.*
Uremia

"Where is Malinda? Where is she? I told her I'll marry her!!"

"......"

"Whatever she wants ... I'm ready."

When he did not get an answer, he began threatening, swearing that he would have them fired and sent back to Philippines.

It was early morning and the nurses continued their work, paying no attention to his threats. They were busy preparing a summary report about last night so as to deliver it to the next shift team.

In the same nephrology ward he was in his bed, navigating through his mind through his past. He went deep, hunting memories, a dialogue, or even a phrase; then returned back quickly to a year ago, or even less. He toured realms that no one could see but him. Intermingled in the shapes of words or expressions, the threads were difficult to follow. Sometime his voice rose as if delivering a speech to a group; then he would whispered to himself and again talk in a normal tone. But then he comes back to the present, to reality: whenever his eyes are full of the white-clad nurses, he asks about her. His attempts to stand up fail because of his severe dizziness; and his feet are bandaged over his ankles, which means that he can't is made leave his room and reach the nurse station where he can see her among her colleagues. The nurses are careful to approach him because he might extend his hand, whether to hit or to grope them.

Chronic cataract is causing his sight to be weak, but he has learned to discover details by listening carefully. New nurses from the day shift team were arriving to the station, as he discovered from the scraping of the chairs. There is friction on the ward, and voices are raised. He realized she had arrived when a fat nurse with short Philippine-style glossy hair and a less flat nose said something.

A flood of laughter rushed from the nurses like a comment when he started to shout:

"Malinda... Malinda..."

Then he repeated his previous generous proposals.

The first act by Malinda after she had examined his file was to make a telephone call. A few minutes later, a tall young Filipino man in a green shirt and trousers appeared and went directly to the patient's room. When he saw him, he cried:

"Juel, put me in the wheelchair."

Juel turned his back, and held him in a professional manner, under his armpits, to avoid the front of his right hand, where a large arch shaped catheter was settled under the skin. He put him carefully into the wheelchair. On his way out, crossing the hallway, he turned toward the station. For seconds, he saw her as clearly as possible before Juel pushed the wheelchair inside the elevator, on the way down to the ground floor and the

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1 In uremia, which accompanies renal failure, the nitrogenous waste products in the blood cause hallucination.
dialysis unit.

Even after Juel inserted two large bore needles into the catheter-swelled arch and laid him down on the unit bed, he was still appealing to him to run interference for him with Malinda. Soon, however, the persistent sound of the kidney machine rollers that were chewing his blood started to drown out his fading voice, prevailing over its surrounding.

In the afternoon, on the way back to his floor in his wheelchair, he was no more than a pile of rags without a skeleton. He nearly fainted as Juel transferred him to his bed.

Malinda tied firmly a sky blue mask over her nose and mouth, put on rubber gloves and a blue apron. The nasty smell coming from his feet as she took off the bandages drove Juel out of the room. And now nobody was between Malinda and..... him.

With sharp scissors and tongs, she began to excise the rotten skin layers off his engorged feet, resembling two round stumpy blocks now that his toes had been amputated. She cleaned them with antiseptic and an antibiotic powder, then wrapped them in clean bandages before resting them on a pillow at the foot on his bed.

When the evening approached, Malinda put her bag on her shoulder and took the lift down to the ground floor. At the door of the dialysis unit, Juel was waiting. In the crowd ending the day shift, they walked side by side, fingers entwined, returning to their apartment.
Density

Approaching the bridge gate, he was carefully re-counting the cost of the trip ahead:

“Twenty riyals for the gate fees, fifteen riyals for the car insurance, twenty riyals for the return gate fees.” Thirty riyals for the movie film ticket, an action film of the sort he adores. The hero of the film can be Steve Segal or Jackie Chan, no complaints, either will restore life and liveliness to the blood swamp in which his depression has nestled. What would remain was enough for a fast food meal, making his enjoyment complete, giving him a marvelous day’s escape from this atmosphere of dense, smothering humidity.

Repeating, re-counting, he tried to kick aside the uncertainty about his hopes being fulfilled. He realized that where he lived there was no guarantee of anything, even of anything this simple. His experience was to expect anything to go bad at any time.

He wished the idea of crossing the bridge to Bahrain had come to his mind before he wasted his time driving around that long lifeless corniche, increasing his boredom and malaise even more, not to mention how much gas it wasted. Now next to the pay window, he pulled from his breast pocket what money he had at the moment, a worn hundred-riyal bill.

- "Bahraini dinar," he replied to the customs officer who asked about the currency of exchange he wanted. Why did he choose the Bahraini dinar although the Saudi riyal usually has the same value in Bahrain?

To reach the next window, where he would need to show his ID card, he drove on a rising bridge ramp, which split the gulf sea into two sides. At its high point height he felt sophisticated, like a ship captain.

At the next window, he waited for the customs papers. But there was going to be no forward move: he was going back to where he came from because the employee checking the drivers’ licenses told him his was invalid, and he needed to renew it before he could pass.

Bitterness, disappointment. Adding to previous bitterness. More disappointments, more concentrated bitterness.

Driving back he saw the Al-Rashed Mall standing tall, but didn’t stop until King Fahd Park. A sign made him think he could spend some time there. The fuel gage was flashing, so he stopped at the nearest petrol station: “Fill it for ten riyals,” he said to the attendant but in his hand was a Bahraini dinar note. The boy said that one dinar equals only nine riyals. He took a few seconds, then nodded, agreeing. At the grocery store he was careful to pick what he wanted because the grocer would value the dinar the same as the station boy.

He toured the park searching for a place to eat the food he had bought and to read the sports page. The park was quiet, except the voices of little children playing.

The wet evening approaching and the park’s green grass was moisten from the dew. It was difficult for him, a single man, to sit on the big five-person bench close to the light where he could read, because girls, though sometimes one girl only, occupied them. Sitting beside them would be considered ugly mixing. On the other hand, the benches that were free were dim. Finding a seat that would protect him from the drizzle was out of question. He put down some of the more boring newspaper pages on the grass and sat on them. After a few minutes of skimming the news the light faded and he could barely read.

When he stood up, there was a spot of wetness, like a camel’s hoof, at the back of his robe. He left the park
holding the rest of the soggy newspaper. In his breast pocket were a few worthless Bahraini notes. Hiding behind them, depression and a haunted heart.
The Equation

The elevator door of the main lobby in the hospital had not fully opened yet when she hurried in and settled inside. Today the investigation results of her mother sleeping on the fourth floor will show up. The folding lift door closed quickly, and she couldn’t retreat when she discovered him inside. Behind her dim veil, she saw only the flashing numbers reflected in the floor boards. The button lit was number 4, so he is going to the same floor. Sadly she repeated, a feeling of guilt haunting her:

- "I'll be alone (with a man). The time it takes for the lift to ascend four floors. Allah is the only help."

He and she are alone behind closed door and there is no third person. *** “Definitely Satan will act soon, to take a chance,” she was thinking, wishing the lift to stop and somebody would enter to break such a devilish equation. With her fingers she drew her robe sleeve to cover what had appeared of her palm, which seemed to be whiter and shinier than usual. Then she commended her arms to control the whole robe. “I shouldn't be the cause of a seduction,” she thought.

From the far corner where she was standing, a faint sigh was heard. She glanced at him as he directed his face toward the horizontal indicator of the floor numbers on top of the door...

- "He seems to be a doctor over forty. But Sins may occur at any age. Allah make us firm in your religion,” she prayed.

The lift jerked slightly, the indicator over the door lighted on number 2, then the bell was heard. Nobody was there in front of the open door. Her mind worked quickly so she stepped out, continuing her way to the stairs. “Divine reward deserves hard work.” she whispered to herself as she depended on the stair rails to draw her body after she had felt heaviness in her steps. As soon as she reached the 4th floor she directed herself toward her mother’s room, opened the door and stepped in. She heard mixed voices behind the curtain surrounding the bed. From an opening in the corner of two parts of the orthogonal curtain rack she saw a doctor’s back; on the opposite side a nurse was fixing X-ray photos on a lighted whiteboard. The doctor bowed a little forward. She advanced, looking over his shoulder. She saw her mother closing her eyes, surrendering; a white sheet was drawn to the top of her belly. She advanced to where she could see the scene better. She was about to sniffle when she saw her mother’s breasts, naked, and the right hand fingers of the doctor was pressing and palpating in a circular pattern over the nipple, his left hand palpating inside her armpit. Embarrassed, she retreated and sat down. After a while, the nurse drew the front curtain.

Her embarrassment increased when she discovered that the doctor was her companion in the elevator !! In her abaya*** she shrank like a withered onion inside a black skin. Because she had been so embarrassed, she did not realize his smiling address to her mother. He passed on a smile for her too as he turned to go out, with the nurse behind him. She settled on a chair beside her mother; the mother’s face was shining pleasantly. She hugged her joyfully when she told her what the doctor had said: that the swelling in her breast was a fatty cyst that sometimes develops in women her age, and is not malignant.

She raised her hand to wipe her tears of joy. She discovered that although there was only she and her mother, she was still keeping her veil on.

* A veil is the black face covering used by strict Muslim females.
** This is excerpted from the religious saying “When a woman and a man are together alone, Satan is the third in the room.”
*** Abaya is the black full body covering used in some of Arabian Gulf countries.
The Ice Cream

Waiting for her mahram, she looked out from the two holes of her cover which she had grown accustomed to seeing the world through, and saw the young man. He had jet-black glossy hair and western features. His smiling eyes, despite their stillness, shone with passionate desire as they beheld a cone of brightly colored ice cream, piled high. Persuasive words of an enticing offer were at the bottom of the ad.

Although the sun had set almost completely, the air still felt hot. She headed for the ice cream shop to quench her thirst. Once the cone was in her hand, its drab colors confirmed what she had suspected when she saw that the shop assistant’s only similarity to the man in the advert was the uniform he wore.

Now that she was outside the mall, she didn’t know how she had ever been able to ignore all those staring men, sitting in their cars in the car park, who now focused on her more than any of the women waiting there.

She considered licking the ice cream when she felt it trickling down her hand in a cold sticky dribble. Then she changed her mind: it would be a difficult procedure without lifting the niqab that covered her face.

Noticing that the ice cream had melted so much that its peak had become rounded, she went back inside the mall, hoping she might be able to locate an isolated spot but it now seemed even more crowded than before. She went into the bathroom but she was nauseated by the sight of the dirty floor and the stench, so went back outside.

Sticky streams were now running down from the cone, so long that they began to drip onto the marble floor of the mall. The ice cream continued to disintegrate and the cone was heading for total collapse. Fearful of getting dirty, she held it further from her body.

Her mahram was bound to be waiting for her outside by now. She looked around and in the distance spotted her source of salvation. She hurried sedately towards it, holding her abaya securely around her body with her free hand. Afterwards, cleaning her hands, she felt great relief at having thrown the ice cream in the bin.

mahram: any male in the close family circuit.
The Leader’s Motorcade

His mother was wrapping the iqaal which his father had chosen for him around his new white ghutra, keeping it a little spread out so as to hold the cloth firmly in place. In the five years of school he’d been wearing it, he still hadn’t learnt to put it on himself. She began advising him on various things and especially, once again, to make sure he was in the front row. He saw his sister leaving for her school in her dark blue pinafore dress, her collar sticking out like white petals, and he felt full with pride: she would not be able to see the leader’s motorcade. It was only the boys who would be there to welcome him when he landed at the airport.

He made his way from the house, winding through the little alleys of his neighborhood and then out into the big square where his school was. His sense of uniqueness diminished the closer he got to the school, and the more of his peers he saw. They were all dressed in the same uniform as him-- white thobe, white ghutra with the iqaal on top – but at least he was the only one in his class who had the same name as the leader.

The buildings of the city were soon left behind as their big yellow bus drove out of town. He was not as interested in the loud conversations of the other students as he was in memorizing the answer his mother had specified to the questions the leader might ask. Most importantly, if the leader asked his name, he was to reply, “May you live long.”

He was to say this after every answer – that was her most important piece of advice.

The road turned into two faded black lines over a vast area of dusty ground. There were no more buildings to be seen now that the bus had left the city limits. After a while it slowed down. A massive crowd of white came into view and its brilliance increased with sun’s glare.

He gripped onto the seat in front of him as the bus turned off the road onto unpaved ground with a violent jolt. The rising dust added a layer of grime to the prevailing bright whiteness.

“I want you all to line up two by two.”

These instructions from their Egyptian teacher Mr. Rushdie were closer to a shout. He had spent the journey standing at the front of the bus watching the road through the windscreen and talking to the driver. He looked strange with the sides of his white ghutra tucked behind his ears.

He took his position at the head of the line, moving to where the groups of students were standing on either side of the airport road. The teachers in charge were spread out at the front of the white crowd, which was separated from the road by a green shield of soldiers. The nearest part of his formal outfit began to deteriorate, rebelling under the pressure of the long wait in the crowd. The disc of the sun rose higher and its all-pervading white glare kept him from fully opening his eyes. He was at the point of asking the teacher’s permission to go get a drink of water from one of the big coolers at the back of each bus, but decided it would be wiser to enjoy his dusty spit than to lose his position at the very front of the line. The restless little bodies fidgeted, and the teachers in charge tried their best to get them back into a neat formation. For a fleeting moment the sound of speeding engines roared at them, as black cars with tinted windows flashed past at lightning speed.

Little hands reverberated, applauding in imitation of big hands, and then the white formation broke up entirely and chaos reigned.
On the way back the bus wasn’t filled with same clamour it had been on the way there. Sleep captured some of them at once, and snuck up stealthily on the others.

October… war… leader… us… Israel…

These were some of the words he’d heard his father saying to his mother as he had been feigning sleep that morning. Now he could hear a discussion, more like an argument, between teacher Rushdie and the Syrian teacher Mr. Ghassan, who had decided to join them for return journey.

He walked home, sticking to where the walls cast noon shadows. His outfit was no longer neat and formal at all. His white ghutra was in one hand, his iqaal in the other, his white cotton skull cap back on his head; two buttons had come off his thobe.

He hadn’t even entered the house before his sister accosted him. He was surprised by her shouting, and that she had gotten home before him.

“Faisal ..... Faisal”

She came out of the house towards him and when they were face to face she asked:

“Did you see him? Did you greet him?”

Her questions surprised him. And confusion persisted.

“What did he look like?”

He would have started sobbing if his memory hadn’t come to his aid.

He summoned his mental image of the schoolbook picture of the leader, and before he went into the house he answered her:

“He was wearing an iqaal embroidered with gold and silver thread.”
The Wager

The gallows had been set up that morning in the middle of the city, causing fear and provoking question about who might fill the noose’s swinging vacancy. The setting sun seemed to be warning the ruler against going back on his word. The accusations were still swinging between the rider and the groom, barely setting on the one before flying back to the other.

When our delegation came back from the race, held in a neighboring state, the result they brought back was basically a disgrace. We had come last, even though our entrant was the fastest runner of all of our mules – the ruler’s very own. This made the ruler even more angry, and he swore a scared oath: “The one who has caused this will most certainly pay the price before the sun sets.”

And so the predictions continued to vacillate between the ruler’s trusted groom and the favorite mule’s jockey. Until, that is, just before sun set, when a third possibility emerged. Little by little the accusations began to focus on this new suspect, and our ruler became increasingly convinced that this was where the responsibility for the great shame that had befallen us lay. And so our town went to bed that night certain it would be the mule that would pay the price of defeat.

Dawn had hardly broken when the townspeople gathered in a big circle around the gallows.

The noose was not empty, as it had been: hanging in it was a horseshoe, swinging in the morning breeze rapidly growing hot. Our eyes, which we were trying to keep fixed on the center of the circle, stole furtive glances over to where the groom and the jockey stood on each their side of the ruler – mounted on his favorite mule.

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