

from the novel  
*Bedouins on the Edge*

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Policemen, arriving from the nearby precinct and annoyed by the cold and insignificance of the place, recorded the details of an accident that night: an elegant white car without a licence plate had hit a wooden electric pole. A snarl of wires from the pole lay beside it. No passengers were to be found at the site despite the fact that the car was new. The damage was minimal, and there didn't appear to be any victims.

The policeman ordered the onlookers from the town to leave. Leaving nothing unturned, the police recorded their observations: the number of miles on the car; how much it had sunk into the thin layer of mud; the estimated power of the impact that had caused a petrol leak, preventing them from continuing; the approximate time of the crash; and other details no one but the obsessed would bother with. And despite the weight of their tired eyes, they didn't forget to question witnesses, although no one had actually seen the accident at the time.

Everything was there in front of them: the new car whose hefty tyres had woken them up in the dark of night. Yet there were no passengers. Where had they gone, leaving their car and their belongings behind? Leaving behind warm comfortable seats on an autumn night cold enough to make people shiver under their covers?

Opening up the boot, they found a seed bag, an axe and an odd-shaped hoe. There was also some food and ripped pieces of paper.

A long time had passed and not one person from the town could claim they knew what had happened. But there were those who would narrate the event endlessly, their faces expressing surprise and their eyes ablaze as they scrutinised the details with the mastery of

someone with too much time on his hands. With each new telling, their passion was rekindled anew, proof that desert dwellers compose the music of lies. They mulled over it with profound conviction: Was it the fog that caused the accident? Was it the darkness or booze? Or maybe it was speed? Finally they agreed – after all other possibilities had been exhausted – on the power of the impact, since they had sensed its tremble in their sleep, its echo resonating in their dreams.

The storytellers found the incident entertaining, a pastime to fill their empty, repetitive days. They had become virtuosos in their retellings. One would say, 'Some tourists from Europe came here, they were injured in the accident, but then went back home to their country. They will, no doubt, come back to pick up the car.' And someone would interrupt him, claiming confidently that 'Europeans don't pay attention to money and material goods; it's silly to think they'll come back.' He'd explain it this way: 'They're thieves who came here at peak harvest time for dates. They didn't find the secret spot and they failed to get the people's consent, so they must have been cursed by trying to hide from the law.'

People went on and on talking and asking questions: Where did the strangers come from? What did they want and what was their story? Were they overwhelmed by the serenity of the area as they passed through? And was the accident the price they paid for their stupor? Why did they run away, leaving behind such an expensive car? What were they afraid of? Were they thieves? Who was their leader? Did they treat their own injuries or did someone help them get away? Or was the accident part of their plan, a ruse to divert attention? Maybe they wanted to hide something?

The townspeople speculated endlessly, spending their empty days chatting and arguing about it wherever they happened to be: in fields that had been parched for a long time, taking the opportunity to tie their donkeys to small date palms and sit about, either squatting or stretched out while arguments heated up between them; or dangling their feet above the mud irrigation ditch, moving carelessly from one topic to another, from the lack of water, the effect of which was making them so crazy they would stare out into space absentmindedly, to temptations – like leaving this place, or women; or close to the mud-brick mosque, in front of the clashing tall cement minaret,

where they would sit at the end of every prayer. At other times, at nightfall, some of them – the real night owls – would hurry to the lone grocer to carry on talking and arguing. They'd explain the accident according to their own reasoning, conflating details of it with their own anxieties, some of them garnering encouragement and interest the more they got into it, though this could be interpreted as having a dubious relationship with the strangers. In kitchens, women spiced the pot with possibilities, their eyes huge with excitement, the timbre of their arguments ringing out as the wind carried their words away.

Explaining the accident had become a competitive game among the people. Then *al-mahjub*, 'the covered one', spoke. He had only recently arrived in the town from the desert and hadn't quite integrated into the rhythm of their lives. An outcast, he triggered the most extreme dismay in them. They themselves were surprised by how they could have overlooked the most likely possibility; but now that they were alerted to the danger, they carefully hid their children, now that they were alerted to the danger. When the kids got wind of this, they trembled together and quickly began comparing their hands, reading their palms like fortune-tellers do. Some of the townspeople gloated that the strangers had failed in their efforts. The hash smokers, though, didn't buy into the man's story, and held fast to the one that the strangers had brought the stuff with them. They had got used to them taking a shortcut, walking from north to south and bringing what they needed to ease the journey, which they and their friends could get from most of those living in that well-to-do oasis. So they searched tirelessly for chunks of hash near the car and in the trunk, and some found a bit, the talk having given them confidence. Meanwhile others were only interested in the seed sack, the old, odd-shaped hoe and the axe.

In the end, though, all this talk got the better of them and they gave in to temptation: they stripped the car, stealing the seat covers, the good wires for one thing or another and parts of the engine. They stole the hoe and the axe, and left the car exposed to isolation and cold. During their cozy gatherings at the top of the nearby mountain, they cursed the unfortunate circumstances that made them lose their love for *al-sibsi*, their long-stemmed kif-smoking pipe, the pleasures of burning hash and crumbling it into small pieces in their palms.

*Al-mahjub*, charmed by his own story, didn't stop. He was a gypsy from the desert who had settled in the decrepit old clay castle, which was on the verge of falling down after being abandoned by its inhabitants. They had settled outside on the welcoming expanse of land because without a war they no longer had need of the castle's protective walls, though other transgressions still flared up from time to time. With his thick white beard, resolute eyes and endless tales, he told his own story and explained the accident as he saw fit.

Was anyone interested in all this prattle? Certainly the powerful of the town, that is the 'judicious', were. They are those of land and of rank whose ancestors were the first to colonise the town and who bravely set off to fight in the wars of their time, some of them had taken on the Europeans during colonisation, while others made truces with them, more interested in their money and heirs. They made up the council of notables. They represented the norm, a tradition upheld in complete happiness or sadness. They knew all the thousands of stories, and what was circulated and what ought to be.

For the kids of the area, *al-mahjub* became a game; they would pelt him with stones and swear at him, and no one would stop them. He shaved heads in front of the mosque, split kindling for fires, repaired sandals, got paid, and chattered away . . . His certitude was effective: as far as he knew, there were four passengers in the car. He explained this by the warmth of the seats that cold autumn night and the four banana skins on the road that everyone else had failed to notice. For sure, the driver was the cause: the strangers were on their way, but the driver couldn't resist temptation. He asked them if they could stop so he could take a hit, but they didn't hear him, so he decided to make an adventure of it. He let the car drive them after making sure of a smooth path in the conniving emptiness of the southern road. He took out a small chunk of hash from his pocket and lit it. The hash and the light of the fuel wafted in front of him, creating images. Worlds and dreams clashed in front of his eyes. The car started to play with the wind.

They weren't thieves, and neither did they have rheumatism which the sands of the oasis cure. Nor were they treasure hunters, as was most popularly presumed. Could there be anything other than drought hiding in this oasis? They knew what they wanted. They

were wise and composed, and took orders from an older man, assiduous and well-to-do, and someone who didn't mince words.

Meanwhile, they had stopped off, according to *al-mahjub's* story, many times before arriving at the town. They talked quietly among themselves, checking the maps which they could read very well, and knowing well, thanks to their nous, how hard it would be to get what they wanted. He thought that they were probably travelling by memory to the edge of another time, to an old summit for a saint's innumerable blessings, or to a festival, or a *zawiyya* – a saint's tomb – or to a popular marketplace where people scramble about, whispering among themselves about what they want. To where oaths to ancestors and sacrifices are made; to ancient books where one may learn to be a thief, convincing even arms salesmen and leather vendors. They paid a lot to ensure victory. They spoke faintly, no doubt, like fortune-tellers and scared women, and burnt with a desire to possess maps that would lead them to where they want to go. Patience nourished them as their longing burnt within. How sweet their toil – they made a mockery of distance in the dark of night, in the heat or chill of the day, as they searched for those salvaged maps. Strangers, they were practised in talking to everyone with a false intimacy, in such a way that they could misrepresent what they wanted and mislead the curious. Meanwhile they knew all too well the details of where and how they would take their next step.

He described everything about them, from the colour of their clothes to their preferred food. They loved money. They loved old pots and kettles, craving the vintage aroma of their pallor, its swag making hearts flutter. *Al-mahjub* said that the strangers, without a doubt, made fun of the sleeping townspeople as they passed through, often pitying – this time with a light connivance – the simplicity of desert town buildings. Yet how they loved the gentle tranquillity of the night and the purity of the air. They came determined to win their battle. A desire for money brought them together, only braving the dangers because they could be crushed by their armour: the hoe, the axe and seed which they would scatter, leading them to the site. The map was their only provision; they would solve the puzzles and carry home the prize. Time or place were of no consequence.

All those stories about the strangers that the Bedouin told started to have an effect on him. As if he was with them. As if it was his thing. People were well aware of the levity he brought to reciting those beautiful poems, embellishing them with ambiguity about women and friendships that radiated an aroma of fresh green grass and herbs, and of a scorching heat that had been swallowed up by the sand. They knew he dipped deep into the sea of metaphor, almost to the brink of tears. He was a poet. They knew his stories about the desert, how he mixed seriousness with silliness, and so they weren't very interested. But rumours spread – and there's no smoke without fire – and no one could stop asking questions, even the head of the police force, who spent his time playing cards with the two other night officers of the oasis, drinking strong tea and waiting to leave one day. All the towns around the river were quiet, and the people who lived in them preferred to settle their problems among themselves. They were afraid of the government and didn't have any faith in it. But the story enticed him, and so, according to rumour, he dispatched a storyteller.

Suns set and others were extinguished. Days and nights passed. Between the beginning and the end time stretched, and the policemen never towed the car away. It remained lifeless, like a canvas for those who passed it to contemplate. It had become an everyday sight in the southern part of town, springing up out of the emptiness between the sand and the mountains. Then the children, distracting themselves from the monotony, had adopted it and turned it into a game. They would practise driving, some riding while others pushed, taking turns, but also fighting about whose turn it was each time.

Then the men, after realising how serious it was, started to hide their children as a precaution, because of all that was being said. They gathered in front of the mosque and legislated: there would be no going out after evening prayers. If someone did, then they would be accorded justice; that is, they must feed six members of the tribe in their house according to ancestral law. A surveillance patrol would begin.

Of course, for children, every story takes on a life of its own. For them, the owners of the car were much more interested in children's blood. Blood was their means for discovering what they were looking for. And the elders' warnings and punishments were of no

consequence. So the children continued to play, though they became a bit afraid of any stranger who appeared to be travelling, some of them trembling after sunset as they remembered the words of the barber. They would circle every visitor or stranger, but especially the musk and saffron sellers and those light-skinned passers-by who would complain about the staring and questions.

Every chance he had the man would talk about the strangers who came by car. He would be shaving heads, repairing sandals, all the while rhapsodising: what they drank, what they ate, what they did. No one would stop to ask him where they were hiding because they didn't want to stop the pleasant stream of stories. His status in the town grew, until he eventually became its spokesperson. People would laugh at his seasoned chatter, while others were jealous of the extent of his imagination.

And again, days led people who woke up to create another one. For some of these people the story nested in their minds; the more they told it, the bigger it got. For others, time dragged them along and led them each day to some far-off corner. It is said that a groom took the mirror from the abandoned car and gave it to his bride as a present. The lamppost was repaired and electricity was restored, though with its usual repetitive interruptions. And time erased everything. Yet did *al-mahjub* stop his endless prattle? Of course not. Often, standing in front of the mosque and near the grocer, with a seriousness that diminished anyone who stood eye-to-eye with him, he reiterated that the strangers were treasure hunters and had come to dig nearby, and for a child's blood, the lines of his hand proving that he was the one: they would sacrifice him and spread seeds on the blood which would coagulate at the site of the treasure, which they would then dig up. He added that the driver, high on hash and the youngest of the strangers, caused the accident. Then he would say – to himself, this time – that life, days will soon reveal to the 'castrated' élite of the town, those who didn't recognise the value of men, what they had been ignoring all along.

*Translated by Alexa Firat*