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Illusive Anchors (excerpt from a novel)

The novel is set in London. A television crew travels there from Dubai to interview Kifah, a Palestinian editor-in-chief of an Arabic daily who had been held captive, then released after his kidnappers tried to bomb his newspaper's offices.

The crew is made up of a Muslim Palestinian news presenter (Shadin), an Iraqi producer divorcée (Solaf) and an Emirati director (Saif). Shadin had had a romantic relationship with Kifah when they both lived in Jerusalem twenty five years ago. Their relationship ended abruptly when she refused to elope with him. Kifah still thinks it was because Shadin's father would not allow her to marry him even though Kifah was willing to convert from Christianity to Islam to do so. The truth that Shadin never told was that she saw Kifah cheat on her with another woman.

Saif has a very liberal and self-serving interpretation of Islam that suits his flamboyant lifestyle. The following conversation takes place between him and Kifah after Kifah invites him to dinner and drinks on the night of the first shoot. Kifah is keen to find out more about Shadin from Saif.

—Have you ever tried hashish Mr. Kifah?

—Please call me Kifah, since I call you Saif... agreed?

— As you wish...

— Yes I tried it many times, and at certain intervals in Lebano, at Baalbak and in the south. I often visited the Resistance camps there... I wanted to try its effect. I didn't like the bitterness the first time.. ..then.... I didn't want my mind to be possessed by others, even if they were hashish illusions... My brain is my only asset, so.. how and why would I waste them?... I tried it again with the comrades and it took me outside and above the nature of things... and when I woke up, I realized the "big deception". You know Saif..! this feeling of flying over and above everything, Separation from the world is beautiful.. but, only for a short while.. because, when you come back down to reality from the world of illusion and distraction, it becomes more difficult to bear... I have borne the responsibility for my family since my early years... my father was a simple house painter whose work halted for most of the winter... The point is: after one such night where I had liberated myself from all repression and broken my own shackles of restraint,.. I danced on top of the table. I stretched my tongue out in defiance at the imagined face of my mother, forever disapproving of my Bohemian whim... I kicked the reasonable boy in me in the ass, I sang, screamed and laughed, and when I came to, I asked myself: where to, Kifah? What is it you want to break? Is there anything left to rebel against? You've had enough Abu Ghalioun..! You'd better stop. Thus, I conquered myself forever..!.. What about you, Saif?

—I gave hashish up forcibly when I couldn't find it..! The dealers squeezed the last Dirham out of me!.. I had to borrow money to buy it... I smoked greedily when it was available.... now, I have become an addict of two things... women...and cigarettes, discarding all else.....you know, I decided to give hashish up if I returned safely from Kabul... I travelled there with the intention of eventual repentance if I succeeded in smuggling it... I was broke, in-debt, and threatened with imprisonment... But God

saved me..! and I thought that what happened to me on the plane was a divine warning, and an inspiration commanding me to settle my debts, and start over... I thought of my wife and children and how they might be sent astray if I were caught... So I stopped. There was no distinct separation line between fact and fiction, in the narrative of this man, whom he met in casual circumstance... so enchanting were his tales that he, Kifah, was distracted away from his initial intention to ask about Shaden...

—Then what happened?

— Ohhh, by God! it must have been my parents' constant blessing!... I tremble, whenever I recall what happened! you know, Sometimes.. you feel like a certain power provides you with protection!.. I was scared and lonely!. my suitcase and overcoat stuffed with small stashes!...but.. The only thing I could do, was give it a try- come what may- in order to bypass the usual dealers' and middlemen's cut, and to settle my debts!.... Back, in those days, the airports were small.. and inspection was manual and did not include dignitaries... I am a well-known figure, and had friends at the airport!.so, Try, I thought, and if you succeed, repent.... I had asked the leader of the Afghans and other Arab fighters for some Hashish, and they gave me plenty and told me ; "sort it out at your country's airport and we'll take care of sending you off at the Karachi airport"... You know that the government of Binazir Bhutto and the American backed them up. I.. myself saw them.. moving in and out of the airport like they owned the place!. My Hashish filled suitcase boarded the plane without inspection!.. me, and my pockets filled with the rest of the stashes, were left in the VIP lounge.

—They still grow and sell it to finance the arms trade.. it's a well known fact.

— Would you believe?.. I asked one of their leaders about this and he said angrily :.. Saif?! only the sons of infidels buy and use Hashish. They pay for it out of their own pockets and we use that money to buy weapons to kill their people and their own kind and followers!... the holy Quran says:

"Prepare for them what you can of might!"... And this is what we have to fight them with !... His answer upset me, and I said foolishly: But the sons of Muhammad's Ummah smoke and pay for it too!...ha ha.. It was as if I had spoken total sacrilege!.. he screamed: if they did?! then they are blasphemous infidels ... and deserve to die... they leave the ummah's causes and lose their mind to hashish!... this is exactly what the infidels and the Christians pawns want. Oh... Oh... sorry.. I forgot you are Christian!! I'm really sorry again sir.. his words, not mine!...

—Don't worry Saif. We hear it a thousand times on TV screens.. go on.

—He said: a true Muslim's faith and religion protects them from temptation, they only think of Jihad and fighting the infidel... Between us, Kifah!.. I was a little afraid to challenge him with the fact that some of his men are users of Hashish, and when they are high, some of their comrades are afraid to bow down in daily prayers lest they attack their asses!.. ya ya... I though maybe he knows, and doesn't care as he thinks of them as the Mujahideen boys! Ha ha ha ha ...The rest of them, when passion overtakes, them run to their caves where their women are, to have sex in a hurry!.. in and out in minutes!... Shame that ... wallahi!.. they are animals!.. women are dolls!.. foreplay with a woman is a holy joy!.. you get dressed up, and perfumed for her!. you shower ... get dressed up before you touch her.. you kiss, smell, hold ..and drink her.. drown in her silk and its warmth!.. These asses forgot the Prophet's orders of foreplay!.. Seriously, when it comes to women, I am a thousand times the Muslim they are.

Kifah laughed so hard tears run down his face, but curiosity got the better of him:

—But how did you smuggle this disaster you were carrying ?

— Aaaah.. how that happened!?. It was unbelievable!.. My saviour came unexpectedly, an answer to all my pleas and prayers!.... I had seen him often in the news, a man of

stature, from a well known family, of great standing in our country.. I approached him as he entered the VIP lounge and introduced myself... he greeted me with great warmth, and told me he knew of me and was a fan of some of my programs... We started to talk... I steadied myself and thought : by God's mercy and my parents' prayer!.. If I get through this, I will repent... I was lost, petrified.. and maybe he felt that I was turning to him for protection against something!.. his kind does not turn away someone who reaches out to them for help or refuge, whether from his people, or be they outsiders... I told him I was returning from filming the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, so he sat me next to him in the plane so as to entertain him.. He was laughing and passing time while I drowned in the depth of the disaster I was carrying until we reached our destination... I had to act wisely.. or, I would've been lost! ... I told him, I want to be seen walking out with him so as to become a sheikh by association.. he laughed modestly, and insisted I accompany him in his car which was waiting at the foot of the plane... he gave my passport and luggage tags to airport staff waiting. We passed through the VIP lounge, and from there left the airport... Within the hour my luggage arrived home. I was still in shock.!

—Unbelievable? With contents intact?

—It's different now,.. everyone is searched thoroughly.. and they imposed the death penalty on smugglers and returning addicts right after this incident. .. I said to myself, God forgave you for the sake of your children!.. so stop.

—but... what did you do with your cargo?

—Sold most of it, smoked the rest, and gave some to my friends, then I repented forever.

—Saif ! .. Do you love you wife?

— Oh, I worship her!.. but , what does she have to do with hashish?

—No, no , just a question... like you, I weaken in front of beautiful and smart women.... I stopped my Don Juan ways after marriage.

—Wrong sir!.. Marriage is one thing and love is another, completely.. only one woman in your life, can have both, all the rest, only get one or the other, love or marriage!.. Do you know what Madame Shaden says about me? That my heart is big enough for a group of women: one in the left chamber and one in the right; another in the left atrium and a fourth in the right. .. My friend!.. the heart is elastic and women are malleable and easily fitted into a small part of it.

Saif's eyes were two red coals, his speech slurring... but he insisted on holding it together in front of a man he admires completely :

—And you, Kifah? Ever been truly in love?

Saif's prize came in the answer :

—Only once.

— Is she your wife?

—No, no , it was in Jerusalem, the only love of my life. But it failed.. the loss was painful for many years.. I was with many women after, but stopped when I got married... You know, Saif, I lived in Beirut and then London, and sex and girls were easy to come by in both..... but I imagine it would be difficult in a closed society such as yours!

Saif chuckled sarcastically :

—That's what you think! yes !.. A long time ago getting a woman was a problem.. today, the country is filled with blondes, brunettes and Asians...The country has opened up to takers.. it's just business.. I swear, they come in hordes... a market of women my friend.. but, that God damn AIDS... we're scared.. and the Bangkok trips have lessened after their hay days when they used to have special flights for young

men, hop, everyone's in Bangkok.. they borrow money to try!.. but, this disease is no joke.

Then, you gave up women, out of necessity?

—No no sir.. I was never a Bangkok customer.. I don't slum it, and am not one for cheap thrills. .. It might be more difficult!. but I cater to the lonely and depraved.

—Are there lonely women where you work?

This is an evil man who has led him down a slippery slope. The alcohol boils up in his brain into a fiery wind... Who the hell does he think he is? He wants to frame him and her with the price of dinner? No one can set him up even if he were all liquored up...

—No no... not all lonely women are easy prey... no no.. women are categories.. some can't bear to live without a man, that's your target. Others you don't dare approach.

—And Shaden? What kind is she?

Seif's rage is calm, abrupt and decisive; he waves his hands in refusal and objection:

—No please... Shaden is one of the guys, she's not a woman.

Kifah laughs and tugs on the line :

—You mean she's butch? Really? All that femininity? Unbelievable! Or do you mean she's a third sex?

He let him finish laughing, then answered, upset :

—No please, she's a thinker.. a cultured brain.. beautiful yes, but different. Shaden is of a category unlike others.. just like that, a group onto her own... unlike other women.

—But, she is divorced! and, alone?

He was rattled, his voice rising :

—Shaden's divorce was her own choice... and so what her marriage failed?.. This is a women content with her success.

—Don't be upset, I meant no disrespect.. but, it's a shame for success to rob a woman such as her, of her life and beauty ... Advise her, if you two are close.

—This is a women who puts up barriers wherever she wants, and she won't let anyone cross them.. Shaden is an unusual woman.

—But you know that when a woman fails in love or in a relationship she develops all kinds of complexes. That could explain her barriers.

—She's not closed up!. and she has no psychological hang-ups!.. on the contrary, she's very natural and outgoing and commands respect from men before women!... and what difference does it make if you fail at love once? Or even twice?.. A person's life doesn't stop!.. man or woman!... I never noticed anything unusual about her... never ever... When Kifah agreed to see Shadin, a ghost that has haunted him for years attacked with such force.. His sky rained down with moments of innocent love and longing, personified in a bitter story he tasted often... She walked into his office another woman, confident and bold, his effect on her unknown to others .

—She doesn't seem to mourn any man, marriage, or even an experience I am unaware of.

" This drink is getting to me, it burns the veins, making my mouth run off"

.. Saif decided to strike while the iron was hot; he leaned forward and whispered:

—You mentioned that your first love failed? How? He unleashed his bomb and leaned back in his seat.

Kifah put out his cigarette in anticipation of a long awaited moment... the waiter interrupted, emptying the ashtrays then walking off.

—She was young.. she wasn't mature enough or up to the challenge, so she let me down.... maybe all the complications required more experience, or a woman of a different nature.. sadly she surrendered.

— But , why would her parents turn down someone like you? weren't you a famous journalist then?

—Different religions.

—But you were ready to convert for love--?

—I told her father I would become a Muslim; that made him even more adamant in his refusal.

—Really?

Humour prevails in an unbearable situation:

—I swear he's crazy!... he could have gotten a free ride to paradise on your back.. increasing Muhammad's Ummah by one.

They both broke out in laughter and Saif went on:

—A fool really, you were an absolution for his previous and upcoming sins... you find the right path, because of him, and become his passport to an eternity of virgins and rivers of wine.

— Yah..Do you know ,Saif, this line?:

ما زاد حنون في الإسلام خردلة ولا النصرارى لهم شغل بحنون

"Hannoun has neither added a tiny bit to Christians, nor taken a tiny bit from Muslims!"

He explained to him the back story of the verse... some of the clientele around them turning at their loud voices... so Kifah murmurs:

—Do you know why he said no?! I bet you can't guess?

—I give up... why?

Kifah whispers to him .

Both burst out in loud roars of laughter; he leaned back in his chair and put his feet up, both laughing so hard they were crying. Saif screamed out:

—Son of a bitch! Where did he get that idea?

All barriers between them crumbled

Saif, still laughing:

—Oh ... Oh ... I remember the day we were circumcised as children.. my God that day! ... I was around eight.. and it wasn't performed in hospitals at birth like today... they gathered children of relatives and neighbours of the same age, and they started going at us in turn... oh my GoOOD, he would just cut and toss, the drums would get louder. Damn him, he didn't wink, so mechanical.. ..he would praise God and cut, as our screams mixed with cries of joy and the drums... then, they made us wear our new kandourah... and taught us how to wave the fabric in front of our wounds to cool it down... we screamed, the incense circulated the courtyard, we walked aaround with our legs apart... those days?! But.. ..did Shad... your beloved... know of her father's request?

—I don't think so... I don't think he had a close relationship with his children...no.. I don't think she knows to this day.

They both know exactly whom they're talking about. Saif asked:

—Why didn't you elope?... I would have!

—She was young .. and refused.

Kifah voice laced with sorrow, he added:

—I don't think she's rebellious by nature... Confrontation.. and going outside the norm and tradition requires a certain mood. and a natural disposition for adventure. And She didn't have it .. or.. maybe she was young and immature! I don't know!..

Saif , shaken by the uncertainty of a man once broken by love... he lit his 20th cigarette.. crushed his empty pack and rubbed it.

— Do you still love her?

The question dragged Kifah away from himself.. he hesitated:

—I don't know!.. for many years I would imagine her walking out towards me from alleys and I would think, what would I do? Then I got busy, my work doesn't allow a lot of time for reflection and staring at the moon and stars for many nights... then.. I met my wife Nihad-- beautiful, educated--- and I proposed the next day... Today I have a beautiful home, an impressive wife and a child who embodies everything I ever dreamed of... do I still love her?! Maybe! But.. to put my life on one side of the scale and love on the other?! No.. I don't think so.

—And what about your son?

Kifah's face lights up like a boy on his birthday surrounded by presents:

—If you only knew, Saif... everything I ever wanted and never had I gave to him... He speaks three languages, knows computers, rides horses, plays the piano, swims, plays football and bowling!.. we go to the theatre together, eat popcorn at the cinema together... I'm sending him to the University of London... you know, it's a well established university, world renowned and respected.

—God bless him.

—Thank you... And you, Saif? What about you?

Saif beats his chest:

—There's only her in here... Nooour, my love, and my wife... I met her the day the TV station advertised jobs for local women, few applied... I saw her and knew she alone was my destiny. I saw no one else... I married her to stop her from working. .. My father went insane and my mother slapped her face... !.what a disaster!. A Howal!?... Ah.. yes... Howal are second class citizens in the Gulf. They say they are Arabs who fled Arabistan back to the Gulf so they were called 'Howal'. The Arab tribes insist they are Iranians who migrated from the other side of the Gulf.... But .. they are some of the richest, most educated, cultured and open-minded families in the Gulf... My parents refused because she is a Howal, and I am old blood!.. who cares, as far as I'm concerned... I married her against their will, so they cut me off.. my mother still doesn't visit me or host my wife to this day, only I and the children visit... but Nour is my life.

—How can you cheat on her then?

—Passing lust I cannot resist... If I stop these adventures I'll die... nothing to do with my love for Nour.... my problem is beautiful women! ...My friend, the holy Hadith says: ... If one of you saw a woman and was tempted by the devil, let him go home and lay with his wife, that will curb his passion... I can't carry Nour on my shoulders wherever I go, because all women come to me in the form of the devil! What am I to do?

—You're right, it is a real problem!

He agreed laughingly.

They suddenly became aware of the fact that they were the only two people left in the place. Kifah abu Ghalioun paid the bill and left a bundle for the waiter.

The London wind attacked them, and they both stood there, thinking who had revealed more about himself to the other.

[...]