

Ali AL SAEED

THE RED HAND

PART ONE

You hear about it in the shadows of Bahrain, hushed whispers in the stifling classrooms, nervous rumours in superstitious cliques - the Red Hand that takes away your soul and eats it - hiding in the empty storage rooms, the secluded back-paths, the filthy toilets. You hear about its horrors, about what it does to young, helpless boys like you, how it dooms you to live in a state of uncompromising fear, roaming aimlessly, soulless, like the dead, belonging forever to the Hand. And then one day you see it, right there in front of you, just above the toilet seat as you walk into the cubicle. You feel your pants moistening, as you look at the Red Hand, painted harshly and ruefully, against the filthy, ceramic walls.

Jamal could still remember his first encounter with the Red Hand. Six years old, it had been his first year at the Ottoman Primary School for Boys in early September. The new term had just begun and the remains of another intolerably hot Bahrain summer could still be felt in the sticky, stuffy air. He had walked to school that day, just like any other day, dragging his heavy feet over the light sandways from his house - the same house he was staying in now, on Quds Avenue. He had remembered asking to take his leave during the third period; must have been Maths.

He had made his way to the toilets, the school ground still unfamiliar territory to him. He felt small amongst the strange new buildings. His classroom was the last on the ground floor of Building No.3, the bigger of the two units hosting the different Primary classrooms. He had passed the administration building, the sports hall, and what the chubby school principal, Ostad Majid, liked to call the “multi-task” center, which consisted of a small lab, a carpentry workshop and a big storage room. The pavement was tiled up to the handball pitch where you could always find groups of boys kicking a ball aimlessly. Just past the boxed canteen, he reached the toilets.

As he walked in he held his breath – the vile stench could knock you flat if you’re weren’t ready – and treaded carefully across the water-clogged floor, making sure not to get his new school pants wet.

The toilets were in an awful state. A couple of doors clung to their remaining hinges, one or two others had splinters protruding from broken locks, almost all of them were sodden with tepid grime, colored with ugly graffiti and offensive drawings and phrases - not that he had understood them at the time. He picked the cubicle at the end of the line on the right, he wasn’t sure why. As he approached it he thought he heard a giggle and a creak, but he was alone, and paused momentarily. His bladder ached however, pressing him onwards, and he quickly stepped in and stood at the toilet seat, careful to avoid the filth, holding himself closer together, squeezing in his arms and shoulders. With a satisfying pinch he released his uncomfortable load, and looked up with a deep gratifying sigh.

Then he saw it.

The Red Hand.

It was badly drawn, as if someone had steadied their paint-wet hand on the wall and smeared it away. He squinted at it with vague interest, but no recognition. He had no idea

what it was or meant. Even still, it unnerved him. He found himself squeezing the urine out harder, rushing. The Hand seemed to move, trying to get closer to him, to touch him. He could almost feel its fingertips. Don't be silly, he thought, a forced smile failing to calm him. He shook his penis, zipped up, and left the foul toilet and smeared Hand behind. His pace quicker going out, then coming in.

It was a few days before he learned more about the Hand. He had begun paying attention to the whisperings of the older boys, with their cheeky grins and menacing eyes, listening to their stories. He never returned to that particular cubicle, too scared. Instead he minded the stories about what happened to young boys like him - those who weren't wary of the Hand, who were ignorant to its history - they were too exotic and dangerous to be ignored. It seemed the myth was fast becoming legend at the Ottoman Primary School for Boys. Every senior student seemed to know it, but no one really talked about it openly. So there were no warnings, no preparation. Teachers and parents either kept their silence too, or didn't know about the Hand. It bothered him that they didn't investigate deeper. When young boys turned up crying and devastated, talking of a Red Hand, what was being done? Were they afraid too? Was its power so far reaching?

The Principal had set the tone for any debate, having announced it was just a group of slackers causing havoc, beating and intimidating the younger students. The Principal didn't believe any of the stories the victims would come up with, so incoherent and desperate were some of them. A few turned out really bad, falling into a zombie-like state, Jamal had always wondered why he wasn't affected by it as they were.

One of those was Kareem Hassan. They were in the same class but Jamal didn't know him well, they weren't the best of friends. But Kareem was a bright, lively student. Smart as a whip - particularly religious studies and his Arabic language skills were unmatched. One day though, all that potential seemed to evaporate. He arrived with a sullen, dull face as if life was sucked dry out of him. He remained quiet during all the classes and at recess spent his time in the library, reading, staying out of sight. His marks started dropping significantly. Less than two months later he was moved to another school. The students knew what had happened, what had changed him like that. Jamal didn't like how Kareem had been swept aside, hidden from view like an inconvenience. It almost seemed pre-meditated. Why, he thought, must we fear those things that are most vulnerable and most precious?

As the years passed and Jamal grew, the legend of the Red Hand, once so visceral, began to fade. Although he had seen it a number of times, on more toilet walls, on storage room doors, nothing new presented itself. No new information, no new mystery, just the same hand in the same kind of places. Then, as if on queue, the pattern changed: He was playing soccer, and chased a wayward ball out wide to the very edge of the dirt field. And there it was, hiding coyly behind the rustling branches of a bush, flirting with him. This was a peculiar place for the Red Hand, so random, so visible. He had paused a moment, wondering who the victim was that time, but impatient shouts called him back to play. He left, but as he backed away, carrying the ball, eying the rouge palm and fingers, he felt his insides judder. They would, he knew then, meet again.

Now twenty-three, having spent four years abroad studying journalism and literature, only visiting home twice - too expensive a trip on his means - much to his parent's dismay, Jamal was back. Back to the same house he lived in for eighteen long and forgetful years, back to the scorching Bahrain heat and suffocating humidity, back to the annoying stares of gossipy strangers, to the narrow dirt roads and mad, rude drivers. But also, back to familiarity, to familiar places and faces, to conformity. So much had changed, that he could barely

recognize his own country. Skyscrapers jutted out of the ground where once there was sea, and roads twisted and turned into each other like concrete snakes.

During his years away he had learned many things about himself and saw many things he would have never seen on the island. Yet still he would often find myself in the dark seas of nostalgia while away. Remembering his friends and family, his land, which he thought he would never miss. His early school years surfaced the most, and in particular those he spent in primary school; awkward moments of discovery; placid harmless days; the nasty seniors; the geeky indulgent friends; the lousy teachers. And, also, always, the Red Hand.

It had, he one day recognized, become an obsession. It started with a hungry search for anything related to the supernatural, paranormal and even cult phenomenon. That initial frustration at his school's acceptance of such a mysterious phenomenon had evolved into a rabid curiosity. Where did it come from? What did it mean? No one seemed to bother despite the fact that a number of young boys were "touched" by it. He was a sceptic at heart. There's no such thing as ghosts. No such thing as evil spirits. He may have given such ideas more time when he was younger, but now he knew better. Yet still the Hand intrigued him, moreover it had begun to own him. He must, he realised, unravel the mystery. If only for his only sanity. That's why, upon returning to Bahrain, the first thing he did, was pay a visit to Ottoman Primary School for Boys.

Upon his arrival, a new sign adorning the top of the grey, wooden gate of the school, greeted him. Checking the back gate he found it unlocked. He glanced around, wondering what kind of trespass laws had been passed in his absence. The school was suspiciously quiet. The janitor's booth was empty, but the door open. He entered. He inspected the surroundings, dusty tables, a low-whistling breeze. Then he heard something approaching from behind. When he turned, a man suddenly lunged at him from behind the door.

PART TWO

"I got you now, you little devil!" the man yelled, charging at Jamal.

Jamal dodged to the side to avoid the man's lashing baton. It took the man a moment to realize that he had a case of mistaken identity. He quickly put the baton away. "I am terribly sorry! I had thought you were one of those little rascals, they come in and ransack my office. I tell them to stay out but they never listen," said the janitor.

"No harm done," said Jamal, adrenaline still pumping. "I'm here to see the principal." He said vaguely, not wanting to mention the real reason for his trip down memory lane at his old school. A former-student investigating the Red Hand is not something that would encourage co-operation.

"Oh, of course, I do apologize. His office is just down there on the right," he said, pointing, still keeping the baton out of sight, hidden behind his back coyly. As Jamal headed out, he gently placed a hand on his arm, "Please, don't mention this to the principal. I didn't know, honestly,"

"Don't worry about it," Jamal said, forcing a smile. Young, wearing a shiny, blue uniform and black new boots, this janitor was very different to the old Janitor, Bu Basim, in the old days, who had to settle for a grubby white *ghuitra* and light olive green uniform, dirty and well-worn, with his rubber sandals barely hanging together. Still, Bu Basim's stubbly, wrinkled mud-colored face was brighter and friendlier than any Jamal could remember.

As Jamal looked into the pleading eyes of this new, more desperate Janitor, he remembered the day when he was hurt playing football and Bu Basim had helped him. He had tripped and twisted an ankle so badly that all he could do was clutch it and weep on the

ground. While the other kids stood around at a loss, the dirt gritty in his quietly sobbing mouth, Bu Basim strode forward and carried him in his skinny but muscular arms all the way to the infirmary in the sports hall.

“It’s just pain, my son,” he had told Jamal as he put him down on the gurney, “once it’s past you will forget you ever felt it.” And he had smiled that fatherly smile and patted Jamal on the shoulder.

“You won’t mention this, will you?” The new Janitor asked again, and Jamal found himself feeling sorry for the new students of the school; to have this unfortunate man in place of Bu Basim.

At first, as he strolled through the school, Jamal's impression was that it had not changed at all. Upon closer inspection however, Jamal noticed the superficial new touches - some paintings here, a few strategically-placed sculptures there, decorative plants softening endless otherwise-cold corridors, and a silky new sheen of paint everywhere, the exact same creamy, white colour that every Bahrain building seems to wear. The place, like the new Janitor, looked better, but under the surface, Jamal suspected, things were not so well.

As he approached the head office, he realised a small white lie was required. The Principal would hardly entertain a former-student snooping around for some evidence of a mysterious Hand-shaped wall-marking that had become his obsession. Instead, the idea of a former-student completing a report on today’s generation of young students and their perception of old scholastic and educational ideologies was far more acceptable.

The Principal’s secretary passed on Jamal’s tale, and the Principal himself was out in the hallway greeting Jamal enthusiastically within minutes.

The two men walked around the premises. It was late May and the weather was just warming up. In a week or so they'd have been drowning in their own sweat, but today was a fine day; the ever-blue sky overhead, the heat slapping their skin but not suffocating it. Jamal was wearing a linen jacket on top of his white shirt. He took it off and raised his sleeves as they made their way towards Building #2. Jamal caught a glimpse of a young boy to the far left, hiding behind a bush.

“Yalla, go back to your class. Hurry!” shouted the Principal angrily at the boy. He turned back to Jamal, quickly recovering a greasy kind of composure. “You see, Jamal... may I call you Jamal?” Jamal nodded, suspecting where this was going. “You need discipline in school. These students need order. When I first arrived here four years ago the place was a mess. The previous Principal, well, let’s just say things were getting out of his hands. He’d spent way too long here. He had to go. I came in and did a complete revamp, with one goal in mind: discipline. Now, well, just look around. Far better than when my predecessor-”

“Ostad Majid,” Jamal corrected him.

“Excuse me?” he frowned, then as if remembering “oh yes, of course, Majid.” He said with thinly veiled indifference. Ostad Majid was clearly not well-remembered by the school he had served for so long. Jamal sympathized with old Ostad Majid - a nice fellow, not too bright, always put the children first, but ultimately didn’t have the natural authority of a Principal. Despite himself, Jamal decided that he agreed with the new Principal, discipline must overrule.

When they reached the canteen opposite the basketball field, they stood in the shade. The Principal leaned against the metal rail, lifting his thobe a bit off the ground.

“Rafeeq, laow doo barid achaa?” he yelled. The Asian behind the kiosk brought two frosty cold fizzy drinks within seconds. “Shukraiya,” Jamal told him and sipped the icy drink. It cooled his insides, feeling the tingly fizz as the cold liquid slid into him.

Jamal listened vaguely as the Principal spelled out the school's recent achievements and its positive transformation at his hands. And when he asked, Jamal in return told him about his studies and time abroad. Jamal bravely maintained the colourless conversation for as long as possible, but eventually he couldn't hold back any longer. With as much nonchalance as possible he slipped the matter of the Red Hand casually into the conversation, burying his face behind his iced drink to mask any overt interest.

"The Red Hand!" the Principal said, muffling a laugh, wiping the corners of his mouth with index and thumb, "Oh yes, I remember the Red Hand. I've seen it myself once or twice, though from where I come from it wasn't such a big deal. I know that some scoundrel was behind it, probably his idea of a joke. It was silly."

"But is it silly, how can we know for sure?" Jamal blurted out, regretting it straight away.

"Well," he began, "What else could it have been?"

"I don't know. Perhaps there was more to it?"

"Trust me son, it was a hoax, a prank. I've seen many. This perhaps was the strangest, but all the same nonetheless. Besides, it's gone now, forgotten. As Allah is my witness, I've not heard those two words for many years now."

Jamal wanted to reel off the list of case studies he knew by heart, he wanted to ask the questions to which he knew there still were no answers, he wanted to describe in crisp detail the day he had first seen it all those years ago in this very school. But he swallowed all that passion. It wasn't the smart approach.

"It is interesting though – children's susceptibility to these myths and legends. I would like to be able to meet a few of the students and ask them about such things, as part of my piece, of course. Just to see what they think they know, if it's all the same to you," said Jamal, sounding quite the professional.

"Not at all, my dear friend," the Principal waved, gulping the last of the chilled soda.

Recess was ten minutes away. The Principal excused himself having other business to attend. Jamal was to give him a call if he needed anything.

As soon as the Principal was out of sight, Jamal made for the toilets. He had been at the school for almost an hour now and the call to return to the site of his first Red Hand contact had grown from a hum to a roar.

The toilet building had two doors. Under a shaded platform running along between the doors, fronting the building, was an aluminum water fountain with about ten taps. Jamal leaned over and pressed one open, the cold water flowed out and ran down through. He took a handful and splashed it over his face. He took a deep breath.

The creamy ceramic toilet floor was still the same, but drier than he remembered. New mirrors had been placed on the wall to the left. Someone had painted some sort of gothic diagram on one corner. One of the sinks was clogged. The cubicle doors were all intact and in working order. Jamal inspected each one of the cubicles slowly, expectantly. Nothing. There were no visible signs that the Red Hand ever existed within these walls; these same walls that once echoed the cries of young boys, these same walls where he had felt that first heady mix of fear and excitement, the taste of the supernatural. All that remained was this new, cold, artificial version of the place.

Jamal became bitter. This was supposed to be the beginning of his investigation, his first clue, but now it had stalled before it had even began. He went to leave, dejected, but then something gave him hope, and fear. A faint whimper coming from the far corner. He froze. It was familiar. He turned and edged towards the murmur, his suddenly thumping blood a torrent of adrenalin. He called but nobody answered. His eyes dropped, and a stab of anxiety

gripped his chest, his hands ran dry, as there before him he saw a trail of thick red liquid dribbling its way towards his feet. It was coming from the last cubicle.

PART THREE

A puddle of blood trickled out from under the cubicle door.

Jamal froze in anticipation. Not daring to open the door, he could already see the grotesque image in his head; a twisted and gutted little body, blood splattered across the walls of the cubicle. He willed his hand towards the knob, barely moving, his mind raced towards the gruesome possibilities that lay behind it.

Just before his fingertips touched the cold metal, the door swung open and Jamal leaped backwards.

A little boy stood in front of him. His clothes were designed with colorful blotches and splatters, a spray of blues, yellows and oranges. His trousers were splattered with red paint. The boy had clearly had an altercation with several colors of paint and his attempts at cleaning them off only made him look more like a masterpiece gone wrong.

“Oh,” Jamal said, startled, “Hello there.” The boy looked at him with wide surprised eyes and then ran out of the toilets. “Hey!” called Jamal, “Wait!”

By the time he got out, the boy had gone. A memory suddenly triggered of boys running, shouting, out of the same toilets years ago: “The Red Hand! The Red Hand!” they’d shout “Run. Run for it. The Red Hand will get you!” And they would run and cheer and clap and eventually laugh at each other.

The Red Hand seemed to have only touched one person at a time, always waiting for the weak, vulnerable prey. That was why most students traveled to the toilets in groups. Jamal remembers hearing conversations through the cubicle doors, boys making silly jokes and stupid remarks as they relived themselves, hoping to keep the hand away. He felt a cold shiver running down his spine as he imagined what might have happened within these tight cubicles, on the wet floor. What had happened? What was the Red Hand? What happened with those boys, whom he cannot even recall their faces, let alone their names? Save for Kareem Hassan of course. For some reason his was the only name that stuck with Jamal, but his face had long since faded.

Jamal walked through the corridors and pavements of this old school with a renewed verve; the scenes and the memories had prompted more enthusiastic questions about the Red Hand. Was it really just a hoax, a practical joke? Or is there something more sinister behind it? Something told Jamal the latter was the case, but was that just hope? Fear?

As he approached his old classroom on the ground floor of Building #3 the recess bell rang and students and teachers alike spilled out of every door like bees out of a hive. Most ran towards the canteen to be the first in the queue to get their shawarmas and falafuls. Jamal ventured into the classroom amidst a wave of memories that he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to handle. It was exactly like he remembered, except that the blackboard was now replaced with a white, shiny one. The desks and chairs were the same, small and uncomfortable. There were a few science and math projects hung on the back wall.

The paint-smeared sat alone at the back.

“Salaam,” Jamal said. The boy looked at him, his face expressionless, then returned to his notebook without saying a word. “Aren’t you going out there?” Jamal asked. The boy shook his head, still scribbling. Jamal moved closer, making his way through the wooden chairs and tables. He sat on one of the tables close to the boy.

“I’m a writer,” he told him, “A journalist.”

“Ok,”

“I used to sit on that very chair you are sitting on right now,” Jamal began, feeling nostalgic at the flurry of memory fragments swarming his mind. “My name is Shaheed, I was known as the El-Saket,”

The boy stopped his scribbling immediately, and then picked his notebook off the table, inspecting its surface. The carving was at the bottom left corner. It was still there. It said: “El-Saket won’t be forever ‘91”. It was carved with a key and colored green with a pen. Below it was more writing, something that Jamal had written year earlier. Admittedly he hadn’t known what it meant back then, or what inspired him to write it, but write it he had:

In the black realm of deception and lies,

All I see is a dot of light.

Like a lonesome baby star in the mid-night sky

It had taken Jamal some accurate carving to get it. He never imagined it would be still there after all this time.

“You wrote this?” asked the boy. Jamal nodded. “I’ve always liked it. Always wondered who had written it. What does it mean?”

Jamal had to ponder the question for a moment, feeling a strong, painful rush of emotions. He shook it off. “It means many things,” he whispered, “but I suppose it mostly means hope.”

The boy nodded. “That’s what I thought. It is nice,” he said. He stretched his hand to me. “My name is Khalil. Salaam.”

Jamal smiled and took his hand. The boy had a broken look about him. Jamal fought the urge to ask him what had happened, but it was obvious that he had been subjected to some bullying, some punks must have thrown paint balls at him. He noticed a shape that looked like a hand print on his trousers.

“Have you ever heard of the Red Hand?” Jamal couldn’t resist asking the boy.

“What? Are they a rock band. Because I’m not into that sort of thing.”

“Oh, no, well, at least not that I know of,” Jamal stumbled, regretting asking the question, “Never mind. It was nice meeting you Khalil. Good luck,”

“Shukran,” he said, putting his notebook back on the desk.

Jamal smiled again and waved, taking one last look around before he left. It was time to leave the school, he realised; time to move on. However, one last idea grabbed him.

“Ah, yes. I believe we do keep records here somewhere,” Principal Hamdani said, “If you know where to look, you’ll find the right information.”

And Jamal eventually did. The school kept dossiers of every student and staff member that came and went through it, along with contact details and addresses. So later that day – after a few hours of deep digging in the school records – and after the afternoon prayers, he headed to Tubli. Where Kareem Hassan now lived.

Jamal swung by his parent’s house for a bite to eat, but was too distracted by his latest lead to stay and chat. He took his father’s old, rusty Corolla and drove it through the bumpy, cracking streets of Tubli. The heat peak had passed and now the sun began its slow journey down to the West. The car’s A/C was struggling to refresh the air; Jamal could barely feel its mild coldness.

He found the house standing at a corner right next to a small mosque. Many thoughts were running through his head at the moment he finally pulled the courage to knock on the door, none of them were remotely close to what he was about to be faced with.

A short, round woman wrapped in her orange shawl opened the door.

“Salaam alaykum,”

“Wa alaykum e-salaam and Allah’s blessings and mercy,” she said, pulling the shawl across her face, hiding her mouth and nose. “Yes?”

“My name is Jamal,” he said, nerves squeezing his voice, “I am an old friend of Kareem. Is he here by any chance? Kareem Hassan?” for a second he thought what a stupid idea it was and that he probably got the wrong address anyway. But the woman’s eyes widened momentarily then died away. Kareem’s name pained her to hear. Jamal regretted his intrusion, several better strategies suddenly presenting themselves in the stark light of the woman’s distress.

“Forgive my intrusion,” he blurted apologetically, “It’s just that I have not seen him in many years, since we were kids in fact, and I would have liked to see how he is, nevermind-”

The woman’s eyes started to water.

“Have you not heard?” she breathed.

“Pardon me, but I have been away for a few years. I’ve lost contact with all my old school friends.”

“He has left us,” she told me.

“Oh, I see. Any idea where he’s gone to?”

“Heaven,” she said, tears running down her cheeks, “I hope.”

Jamal felt time contract. A squalid mixture of remorse, excitement, and intrigue washed over him. Many moments passed before either of them knew what to say, but as they both stood in the doorway, a busy Bahrain revolving around them while they stood in quiet reverie, Jamal sensed a presence nearby. It was that unnatural feeling of being watched. His own eyes slowly pulled away from the distant woman in front of him towards the eyes he was sure he could feel on him.

A figure in a white thawb stood next to the Mosque, he was staring at Jamal with eyes of burning coal. The man seemed as if he was suspended in air, levitating. In the fading light of dusk, the figure began to approach. Jamal’s eyes widened with sudden awe – was the figure floating?

PART FOUR

The dark figure hovered in front of him.

Jamal felt his blood run cold throughout his entire body. He couldn’t move, his feet refused to obey his fear. The figure had no eyes, but deep hollow pools of darkness instead.

His friend, Kareem, whose mother stood weeping at the door behind Jamal, was dead - there was no logical way he could be there in front of him. Jamal blinked and the figure disappeared. Had he hallucinated? He dared not ask the distraught woman if she had also seen the apparition. She had been through enough.

She had found her son one evening on the bathroom floor, his wrists slashed with broken glass, an empty can of rat poison next to him. He was supposed to be at the mosque for the Maghreb prayers, just like every evening. He did not leave a note. He seemed fine. Apparently not. He was just a week shy of sixteen.

His father, an electrician at the Electricity and Water Ministry on the verge of retirement, was resentful of the whole affair. Perhaps it was his way of dealing with it. He blamed drugs, accusing the junkies from the Flat Blocks of killing their son. But his wife had a different opinion.

“It’s that damned school,” his mother told Jamal, her voice filled with bitterness and anger, after her tears subsided. “Whatever happened to him there, that day, we never paid

much heed to it, it destroyed him. May Allah avenge him, may Allah avenge him,” she repeated.

“What do you mean?” Jamal asked. They were now sitting in the living room, she covered in the corner of her sofa “Something happened. In that school. Something must’ve happened to him. He would never say. He hid it, all these years. But I knew. He was my son. My own flesh and blood. My soul. I knew.” Guilt laced her voice.

Jamal’s heart felt heavy at the news. The woman’s spirit was broken, her family torn, her life castrated. Tears welled up but none fell. His sympathies were accepted, but his services not. He made a point of promising the woman he would do all he could for the memory of Kareem.

Jamal’s mission had darkened, his resolve hardened. Why did Kareem kill himself? What horrors did he have to endure all these years from the touch of the Red Hand? Or was Jamal reading things wrong here. Was he overreacting? Perhaps his mind was too clouded to reason clearly. Either way, he had to learn about the other boys touched by the Red Hand of Ottoman. He told himself it was for Kareem and his mother, but there was much in himself that wanted more, much more.

He allowed his obsession to deepen over the next week. He contacted all the old friends he knew; called half of the names in the phone book; visited old neighborhoods; demanded strangers cooperate; missed any social engagements. He was a hunter; the Red Hand his prey; the people of Bahrain it’s trail.

Jamal only managed to track down two leads. As he drove over Seef flyover towards one of them, after barely enough sleep, he was beginning to sense something very dark and sinister overpowering him. The image of the dark eyeless figure still roamed his mind, a dark companion. The further he drove into town, a new Bahrain emerging around him, he found himself hoping he wouldn’t ironically, eventually, end up being admitted into his next destination; the Sulmaniya Psychiatric Hospital.

He had found the first lead, Reza Hassan, in the Jao correctional facility. He was serving a long-term sentence for beating his wife and kids for several years. Jamal didn’t want to disturb the family and was refused entry to Jao.

Luckily the second lead, Majeed Ghuloom, a Persian kid who was a couple of years his senior, had visiting rights, albeit at Sulmaniya Psychiatric Hospital.

Jamal took a deep breath as he walked into the hospital, feeling his lungs wet with humidity from the sudden cold that chilled the insides of his bones. As he walked through the fluorescent-lit corridors, he noticed the complete silence. Hardly a soul moved, no footsteps or running nurses or screaming mad patients demanding the walls be stopped from closing in.

It didn’t take Jamal too long to get lost. All the corridors and doors looked similar.

“Excuse me!” came a shout from behind him. It belonged to a stout-looking nurse with plump over-rouged lips. “What are you doing out here! Go back to your room!” she ordered him. “Yalla!”

“Oh, no, madam, I’m not a patient here,” Jamal tried to explain, but the nurse was already ushering him somewhere, “I’m actually here to visit someone, a friend, an old friend..”

“Yeah, sure buddy, I’ve not heard that one before.”

As he was busy trying to convince the surprisingly strong nurse, clutching him by the arm, a doctor passed them.

“Jamal!” he yelled. “It is you! Jamal El-Salem!”

The nurse halted and turned to face the doctor.

“You know this man?”

“Yes, yes. Hanan, you can let go of him. He’s harmless.” He said with a sly grin.

Nurse Hanan eyed Jamal one last time up and down, and then finally, albeit reluctantly, released his arm.

“Thank you,” Jamal, almost guiltily, “You know me?”

“Ah, you forgot,” said the doctor. He was wearing slim-rimmed glasses and his receding hairline was revealing a rather shiny baldhead. “I’m Saeed. We took philosophy together in high school. I had long hair then!”

Saeed explained to his old school acquaintance how, after school, he traveled to the UK to study social physiology and upon his return had no idea what to do with his degree, so ended up at the Sulmaniya Psychiatric Hospital. “You haven’t changed a bit,” said Saeed. Then jokingly, “what brings you to my mad house?”

So Jamal explained, omitting his more outlandish theories on the Red Hand, and what brought him here, peppering the story with as many facts and logic as he could. Saeed seemed content that a journalist would be investigating a series of unfortunate events surrounding pupils from their old school.

“I see, that is quite anomalous!” the Doctor said, demonstrating his penchant to use big words at peculiar moments. “Yes, Majeed is here. Come, walk with me. He’s been improving lately. I’ve worked with him for several years now. It seems there is something disturbing from his past that we can’t quite comprehend. But I’m afraid you can’t see him. You’ve come on a bad day. We had a relapse, you see. We don’t know what aggravated it.”

They stopped in front of one white door that had a tiny rectangle window. “We had to isolate him,” said Dr Saeed, nodding towards the door. “He keeps talking about some kind of hand.”

“The Red Hand?” Jamal snapped, before he could stop himself.

“How did you know?”

Raised eyebrows are all he could muster in response, so he darted his eyes back to the isolation room.

He could see the man balled up in one corner, his head hidden between his knees. His hands were wrapped in what was once surely white cloth. Now it was soaked red.

“He cuts his palms with whatever sharp objects he can find,” explained the Doctor, as Jamal’s eyes scanned the room. His eyes were immediately caught. On the white walls, painted harshly and ruefully, were red hands. “And then leaves their imprints on the walls. It’s a peculiar compulsion, no?”

A feeling of panic and sickness swathed Jamal. Could it possibly be? That it was one of them all along? A crazed student, perhaps seeking attention?

Doctor Saeed jumped as his pager vibrated his hips. He excused himself and ran off, yelling to Jamal that they’d catch up more one day soon, but Jamal didn’t even care at that point. He needed answers. He had to speak to Majeed. He had to hear it from him.

Thinking fast, he snuck to the nurses’ counter down the hall and rummaged in the desk drawer until he found what he needed. Keys. He ran back, opened the lock and slipped through the door.

The hands on the walls were flaking, the blood drying up. He padded over to the feotal man, and knelt down, sparing a glance to the door.

“Majeed?” His head remained bowed. “Majeed, listen to me. I know about the Red Hand.”

As if electrocuted, Majeed’s body straightened. Blood-shot eyes bore into Jamal’s.

“You...know?”

“I do...but-” suddenly Majeed was on him. Pinned to the floor instantly, Majeed’s monstrous face was inches from Jamal’s. Years of pain, vengeance, and hate twisted the madman’s features like a broken mirror. There was no man left behind the drugs and fear.

Jamal had forgotten the keys in his hand, until he saw them in Majeed’s.

With one hand choking his neck, the madman lifted his other hand as high as he could, with the sharp end of the key jutting from his fist.

PART FIVE

The sharp edge glinted as it plunged towards him.

He was surprised by his reaction. He froze, prone, his back on the cold floor, his face a unsightly mix of fear and indifference.

His mind refused to believe the intention of his attacker. Surely, he wouldn’t want him killed, would he?

When the weapon – in the form of a large key – was only inches from him, something large and white smashed into the madman on top of him and flung him away. Two other figures rushed in and all Jamal could hear tussled grunts and curses.

“Those hands!” the madman shrieked, “Those hands! Let me kill him! I have to kill him!”

Only then did Jamal finally move. He got up to his feet and quickly – his knees still weak from the shock – stumbled out of the room, while the nurses, including Hanan, grappled with Majeed Ghuloom, still possessed with insane rage. The two men held him down and Hanan prepared a sedative.

Dr Saeed was running towards the room from the other end of the hall, calling on Jamal. But he didn’t wait, he ran – without looking back – until he was back in his car, and was gone in a spray of dust.

Jamal drove absent-mindedly, to anywhere, to nowhere. His heart pounded, and lungs heaved as he slowly calmed.

He drove through what was known as “Shari Al-hob” back when he was a teenager, in Adliya. Youths used to gather on weekend nights on the road, driving up and down the street, in the hope of meeting girls. They never did, but every weekend they kept returning. Eventually, they started parking their cars on the side of the road to show them off, and, out of boredom, would start polishing them up. Hours and days of their youth wasted on vain loitering.

The mobile phone in his pocket rang. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen. An unknown number, international. He clicked it open curiously.

A soft female voice spoke to him. “Come back, Jamal?” it said, “come back to me. Please.”

Jamal didn’t reply. He stared ahead, still heaving lungfuls of warm air.

“I had a dream,” the voice continued. “In that dream there was a man. That man hurt you.” There was a concerned, caring timbre to the voice. “Let it go. Leave it behind and come back. I’m waiting for you.”

“I can’t,” he finally said, “not now. Not yet.”

“I...”

“Don’t.”

“But I do.”

“I know.”

Silence.

“I should go. I’m sorry.” He finally said and didn’t wait for a reply.

His world accelerated. His senses heightened, the world around him quickened, his memories sharpened. As the cracked leather steering wheel rubbed his hard grip, Jamal pulled over to gather his thoughts again. Al Fateh Mosque loomed behind him, and the Muharraq skyline in the distance, beyond the bay. The tantalizing scent of salt water awakened something in him as his mind wandered.

Then it hit him. Those hands! Majeed said “hands” plural, not one hand! Why?! Everybody referred to the Red Hand as singular, and who was he exactly talking about when he said “I have to kill him.” He knew these were questions he could not get answers for, at least not from Majeed. Jamal would never go back to that place.

He had to return to the scene. He had to go to the Ottoman School for Boys again, where it all began. There was still one man he could speak to.

Principal Hamdani told Jamal that the janitor – Bu Basim, the only person who might know more - had had to retire as his health began to deteriorate rapidly. His diabetes was getting worse by the day. He had served the school well, he said, and was properly rewarded for his work. He’d spent fifteen years looking after the school and its students.

The house Jamal was referred to was in the slums of Kawara, not far off from Tubli. It was a small district, built over a forgotten graveyard. Jamal had to take a right turn off of Jed-Ali into a bumpy, rough dirt road. The whole area was like a ghost town, barely a soul in sight. Pity swelled in Jamal for poor Bu Basim, for having to live in such a lowly neighborhood.

His one-story house was the last, at the bottom of the road. It wasn’t even painted, its garish walls littered with graffiti. The dark, grey color of the cemented walls reminded Jamal of a crypt; cold and dark.

Bu Basim greeted him at the door on crutches. He had lost both his feet to diabetes. He lived alone. He had never married. What was this life? Jamal asked himself. Yet to his surprise this fragile man didn’t have difficulty remembering Jamal with a bit of probing.

“Ah, yes. I remember that day you hurt your leg. Yes,” he said, as he led Jamal to the living room through a filthy, empty, tight hall. The living room itself was a unspeakably disorganized, as if the house had been through several earthquakes and no maintenance.

“My ankle actually,” Jamal corrected him.

“Good gracious Allah!” Bu Basim suddenly exclaimed after they had chatted for almost an hour, “I have not entertained you yet. Pardon me old friend, I’ve not had a visitor for a long time I’ve forgotten my manners. I will bring tea,”

In the end, Jamal had to help the old man create the tea and carry the tray. They retreated further into the cave-like house. They sat – Jamal on a wooden chair eaten by time - and drank their teas. It was too light and sweet for Jamal’s taste, but he felt proud at providing the man some interaction, He clearly had no friends or family.

Finally, though, as the day began to fade and the orange sky darken, Jamal brought up the subject he came here for in the first place.

“Do you remember it?” he nodded. “Do you remember seeing anything strange back then? Do you have any idea what that Hand did to those young boys?”

Bu Basim pondered the question, shaking his head slightly. It shuddered as translucent skin slipped over weakened muscles. He took a deep breath, sighed and spoke with a tone Jamal had not heard before, bland and cold.

“I had been waiting for this day,” he whispered, then stood on his crutches, not without difficulty, and headed towards the back room. “Follow me. I’ll show you something.”

Jamal followed the old man through the back room, which led to a short hall way. It was dark and Jamal could barely see where he was going.

“Did you know that the Ottomans considered young, intelligent, handsome boys their finest treasures?” he said, as a matter of fact. His eyes were now drifting away, an unnerving calmness on his face.

“No,” Jamal replied, uncertainly, “I didn’t.”

“They rejoiced greatly when they discovered an exceptional, perfect young man. They celebrated as if they had laid their hands on the greatest of jewels. They would pick the youngest, most handsome, and strongest of the foreign-bred boys and take them into the Sarayas of the sultans. Specimens of significant good looks and marked intellectual abilities, with perfect, muscular bodies.”

He paused and his mind seemed to drift away longingly to better times. Jamal squinted in the darkness, confused by this new wistful version of his school Janitor. They reached a door at the end and the old man led him in.

“In here,” said the old man with a sombre tone, “In here, you’ll find your answer.”

There was a stench of things old and vile, the air was leaden with dust.

“What am I supposed to look at, I can’t see anything?”

“Wait.” Bu Basim took a few steps back, leading Jamal to think that he was going to get the lights. But instead, he heard a loud thud of the door being slammed behind him.

Jamal stumbled his way towards the door and called at the old man to open the door. A moment later, a very different voice emanated from the old man – it was dark, and laced with sin.

“You see, dear Jamal, these boys, they were the luckiest. They lived happy, satisfying lives. They were kept close with the ruling family, in the great palaces. They were dressed in fine silk, threaded brilliantly with gold and silver. They bathed with great men in the grand hamams. They... pleased... great men.” Jamal was sweating and shivering at the same time. The black room seemed to smother him.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

“Oh come on, Jamal. I thought you were one of the smart ones,” he said, a smirk still on his split, fat lips.

“Look old man, just open the door! You’re not making any sense!”

“I picked them one by one,” he said, between coughs. “I studied them well before I ever laid a hand on them, their looks, their physical capabilities, their mental skills. Some I spent months studying and just as much waiting for the right time to strike, waiting for the right moment, to find them alone.”

Jamal’s heart throbbed and he felt his chest tightening in his ribcage.

“It was good seeing you, my old friend.” And the voice was gone.

Jamal’s head was racing. What just happened?! What just happened?! He was confused, but guilty for trusting the old man, trying to make sense of what he had told him. Then he heard it.

There was a hissing noise coming from one of the corners of this darkened box he found himself captive in. He imagined a slithering beast eyeing its victim. The darkness cloaked whatever it was. But the strong scent hit him and he realized that it wasn’t a beast he was hearing, it was something far worse.

PART SIX

He knew that if he didn’t act soon, his life could end.

The stench was now enveloping him. He began coughing badly, choking. Crouched low, he reached for the mobile phone in his pocket. There was no signal, it was a dead zone. Using

the screen light he tried to illuminate his surroundings. He began crawling, until he found something against the wall. It was a small cabinet. The first drawer was filled with rusty tools, he picked up a wrench. In the second drawer, there were candles and matchboxes. He picked one. His breathing was becoming laboured, his lungs almost collapsing in on each other.

As Jamal turned again, he caught a glimpse of a rolled up carpet on the floor. Quickly dragging it, he headed towards the door and crouched into a ball with the carpet covering him. With his head was starting to spin, his concentration slipping away like a dying ember, he closed his mouth to stop the poisonous gas filling his lungs.

Praying his plan would work, he quickly took the matchbox, opened it and took one matchstick. With one move, he flicked it with his finger, as it burst into light, and tossed it into the space above the carpet and himself. The darkness fled as a ball of light and heat blossomed from the match.

Flames roared from the ceiling across the entire room as the fiery explosion engulfed everything within. It only took a short moment, but it felt like eternity for Jamal, who was completely surrounded by flames. When that subsided, he leapt to his feet, with the burning carpet still on his back, and ran to the door, which had also caught fire. He swung the heavy wrench with all his strength at the door and then threw himself through it, coughing and spluttering for oxygen.

Jamal stumbled down the hallway back to the living room. He was shocked to see that the old man was still there. Fortunately, the old man was equally surprised.

Jamal, with pain and anger in his eyes, started talking slow steps towards the his old janitor, who froze there, next to the wall, as the flames and smoke spread around the house.

“It was you,” said Jamal, his voice full of venom and spite, his eyes as fiery as those burning flames, “It was you all along.”

The old man looked down at Jamal’s hand and saw the wrench.

From the deepest depths of his darkest, neglected memories Jamal found things he had long dismissed and ignored, things that could’ve saved all these boys if he had only put them together and understood them; signs; clues; answers.

The times he saw little stains of red paint on Bu Basim’s uniform; the mysterious; locked storage room in the toilets compound; the fact that he was always the first on the scene whenever the Red Hand “appeared”. He had full access, he knew every door and every turn on the premises, he knew every student, he was close to all of them.

Jamal thought he was going to be sick as he came with that conclusion, but somehow he didn’t. I must be going mad, he told myself, this cannot be true.

“Why?” he finally managed to say, his voice low and dry.

“I had to do it,” the old man said, no longer the trusted, sweet Bu Basim that Jamal was once fond of, “It would’ve been a waste, if I didn’t.”

“Bastard!” Shouted Jamal, barging towards him. He stumbled back onto the wall as Jamal grabbed him by the collar of his thobe and pulled at him. He wanted to rip his heart out, to punch him hard in the face until his brains exploded. He wanted to kill him.

“Come on. Do me a favor. End my misery,” said Bu Basim. There was no remains of that warm, fatherly smile. Jamal could only see the glorified grin of a heartless monster. “Look at me! I’ve been waiting to die for so long. Release me. I’ll meet my maker with a straight face.”

Jamal released him from his grip. He felt filthy for touching him. He wiped his hands on his sweat-soaked shirt in disgust. He could feel the heat of the fire spreading further around them.

But to his biggest surprise, he pitied the old man. He looked pathetic. He was mad. But what he had done to all these boys... He was a monster. He ruined their lives. Jamal turned

his back on him, looking around, lost and confused, his mind wrecked, his heart aching, his soul darkening. He closed his eyes for a moment and all he could see was Kareem's face; his eyes seeking help, seeking a savior. Did he think of me as one?

He had promised his mother that he will find out what had happened to him and that he would avenge him.

I can kill him, he said to himself, he's frail and weak and ill. One blow would finish him. No one will ever find out, no one will care, and I will have taken revenge for all these lost boys who've lost their innocence, their futures, their hopeful lives.

Jamal looked around, raging with hate and pain. He remembered the wrench in his hand, looking down at it. He turned to face the old man again, who now was on the floor.

"You deserve this," yelled Jamal as his hands went up in the air with the wrench, ready to strike. The monster shrieked away, protecting his head. "Look at me!" Jamal shouted. "Look at me!" And he did; his eyes dull and lifeless. The two men stared at each other for a moment.

What am I doing?! He thought to himself! He was becoming like the mad man that tried to kill him at the hospital earlier, he was already becoming another victim of the Red Hand. Or was he a victim all along!? He had allowed it to consume him, the darkness grew inside of him and taken over. And here he was now, about to murder an old man!

He broke down in tears, sobbing like a child, dropping the wrench at his feet and falling to his knees, tears flowing like a river. He had not cried for so long.

"I had to..." Jamal heard a whisper, "Obey... orders... I had..."

When he looked up at Bu Basim again, he realized that the old man wasn't breathing anymore, his eyes still. Jamal got up. And suddenly the gravity of the situation hit him. He was in a burning house, with a dead man. His anger and pain was replaced with panic and fear.

He had to get out of there.

Jamal ran out of the burning house, straight to his car. He never looked back. He didn't call anyone. He didn't speak to anyone. He drove straight home, still shaken and distraught by the events and revelations he had to endure.

He played the events of the past few days over in his mind on the drive home. He could still see the smoke in the sky from the house reflected on his rearview mirror; learning about his school mate Hasan who had committed suicide at a young age, finding out more about the Red Hand, being attacked by a mad man, almost getting killed...

Everything seemed hazy and unsure, but final. Still there was a niggling feeling, as if this was still not entirely over.

He had many questions he wanted to ask Bu Basim. There was still so much he didn't understand. But at that moment, all he wished for was that he had never come back, that he never should've investigated the Red Hand. He didn't know which was worse, knowing or not knowing.

One thing that kept repeating on his mind was those last few words Bu Basim uttered at the end. Was he just rambling? Was he losing his sanity? Or was he talking about someone else? Could it be that someone, someone more powerful and dangerous, ordered him to do those things?

Jamal dismissed the possibility.

At home, his mother greeted him from the kitchen. But he said nothing and headed to the stairs.

"Jamal?" called his mother, "Are you alright my son? What happened to you?! Your clothes!!!"

He looked at her with broken eyes. He wanted to tell her what he had gone through but couldn't. Where to begin? How to explain it? Instead, he didn't say anything and went up to his room, leaving his mother perplexed and concerned.

In his room, he picked up his suitcase and began tossing things into it, a mixture of anger and desperation dousing his spirit. Amidst his frustration, he took the perfume in his hand and suddenly found it crumbling in his fist. The scent overwhelmed his senses and the burning sensation of the perfume on the wound was strong.

He shook his hand and went to the bathroom. At the basin, he ran water over his hand and saw the puddle of blood forming at the bottom.

Jamal stared down at his wounded hand, little deep cuts everywhere. He took it and pressed it against the mirror in front of him. Blood trickled down and around his hand.

He removed his hand from the cool surface to reveal a red imprint.

The image thrilled and terrified him.

There it was, right in front of him, a Red Hand, painted harshly and ruefully. And for a moment, as Jamal stood there alone, could have sworn that the hand twitched, reaching for him.
