Acts of Faith

A "Cry Freedom" Story

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Dancing Pig Media Limited

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For Bec & Emmie

1

It was only the thought that I had to say my goodbyes to the students at the Middle East University in London that got me out of bed that morning. Every single sinew in my body ached and my head was a mess of misfiring synaptic squibs. It hurt just to roll over and squint at the alarm clock. My stomach complained violently about the abuse of the previous night, the moment I struggled into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Starting the morning with a raging thirst but being unable to keep anything down is hardly a recipe conducive to fond farewells. The light in the bathroom spun stars across my eyes as I stood under the shower and let hot water cascade off my head and shoulders for a full twenty minutes.

One way or another I managed to dress. I even managed a mug of coffee and, keeping a nervous inner watch on the rumblings down below, I decided that I needed some fresh air. The morning was bright and blue, and there was already a haze building on the narrow city horizon at the end of the street. I needed to feel the muggy freshness of the city morning on my skin, before I could contemplate getting into another stuffy car for the trip to the university. It suddenly became vividly and urgently clear to me that absolutely nothing else would do. I needed a few minutes out of doors, even though the streets were already filling with the atmospheric fug of mechanised urban life and that almost feral nervousness that accompanies armed occupation.

I left the flat, while my erstwhile expatriate friend, Usman, finished his breakfast of hot buttered toast and thick, sweet coffee. My drunken companion of the night before had woken up with a slight fuzziness of the head but with no other visible signs of the harm that we had done to ourselves, at least none that he would admit to. I was too confused by the basic requirements of breathing and walking to notice that Usman was possibly being too damned bright and breezy. The compelling urge to taste fresh air meant that I walked down to the front door some fifteen minutes before our car was due to pick us up.

Beyond the heavy wooden portcullis that locked us up safely in the dead hours of the night there was a short series of portico steps

leading down to the open pavement. I took a fresh refill of hot coffee with me and under an all too rare burning London sky in July I sat down on the second step. I nursed my drink in both hands for some minutes, with my sunglasses pressed tightly against the bridge of my nose, and tried to focus on the coming day. From where I was sitting I could just make out one of the local police check-points towards the far end of the street, manned as usual by two armed officers. They were too far away to make out faces, but they looked relaxed as they both smoked, leaning against a wall of sandbags while they watched the rush hour traffic on the Warwick Road. My home for the best part of this last year had been in Earls Court.

Cars and motorbikes nosed their way towards the main arterial avenues of the capital just as they did every morning despite the random nature of the threat hanging in the air at every street corner. Shirt-sleeved men carrying bags and briefcases walked slowly along the street, sweat stains already appearing under their arms and in the smalls of their backs. I tried to compose an elegantly witty adieu for my students but the words would not take shape in my head. I supposed that I would have to busk it, that a suitable way of saying thank you to them would come to me nearer the time.

I remember feeling again the absolute fatigue that had overcome me on my trip back to my home in Beirut at the end of May. I decided to risk my first cigarette of the day, feeling tightness, a closing up of my airways on the first drag. I coughed solidly, drew down a second lungful of smoke, and started to feel better. Caffeine and nicotine. I made a mental note to buy a litre of something cold and fizzy in the university shop before I started my classes.

Sitting in the sunshine, warming my bones, feeling the prickly crawl of perspiration on the skin around my neck, I thought again about the missing Levantine souls. The latest victim was a banker. Reports said that he was in his mid-thirties, an executive type specialising in the financing of major capital projects in derelict countries like England, a man who might know my father. They say that wherever you are in the world you are never more than seven people away from someone you know. It seemed somehow

bizarre that I might be linked to any one of the sweating workers walking past these steps by some vagary of mass acquaintance.

The kidnapped banker was taken in broad daylight from the heart of London's financial district, right under the noses of the authorities, leaving pools of black and bloody stickiness surrounding his dead bodyguards. I knew now that the fantasy of my year as an aid worker was done with, and that the madly persuasive force of my self-deluding imagination was spent. My life in desolate, brooding little London was nothing but sheer and utter folly.

The selfish arrogance that once upon a time I mistook for some sort of life-purpose under the billboard on Monot Street all those months ago in Beirut now collided with a sudden rush of gut-churning fear. I was truly afraid for the first time in my life. In the rising heat of a July morning on a busy street in London filled with outwardly rational people, I admitted all this to myself for the first time and I felt emotionally sick. I put my coffee mug on the stone step beside me and checked my watch. Five minutes had passed. I wanted to go home right there and then.

There was only one answer to the conundrum of survival in this city and that answer involved poisons and nicotine. I lit another cigarette, breathed the smoke in deeply, and let the panic wash through me. I trembled a little despite the rising heat of the day and the half-digested coffee in my stomach started its slow reflux, but I continued to breathe, letting the nausea float away on repeated, deep exhalations. Usman would be down any second and I could not let him see me like this. We were friends at the edge of the world, descendants of Salah-ad Din's knights, and such a scene would be an act of betrayal, an act of gross boorishness.

A small flight of sparrows flickered across my peripheral vision, rising in a sudden burst from one of the Plane trees that lined the street. I have no recollection of anything suddenly being different in the world, but I do remember being vaguely aware of the birds' chatter as they took wing. I was wrapped up in thoughts of my own morbidity, a process that should be strange and alien to one so young. At that moment, my conscious self was oblivious to its surroundings. The transition between fundamentally opposed states

of being, of switching over between life and death, only takes the briefest of moments.

The car was a Mercedes. It was a dirty beige colour, one of the big boxy types from the seventies, the sort of car that leaves diesel smudges on the fabric of city streets. I remember staring at the driver's side front tyre, which was a white-wall, strangely out of place amid the summer dust and debris of this dilapidated city. Two men got out of the car, one from the front and one from the back. The driver remained seated in the front of the car, the diesel engine idling in the background with a low and insidiously menacing growl. I could make out the silhouette of a fourth man sitting on the traffic side of the back seat.

My first thought was about Usman. Where was he? The agency men were obviously here to pick us up, albeit a little mob-handed and a few minutes early, but I supposed that the agency were taking extra precautions. And then a switch flicked over in my head. I should have moved quickly. I should have jumped back to the door of our house. I should have had a key in my hand. I should have acted like the cool-headed warriors in the films, but I was pathetically and predictably human.

From the front passenger side of the Mercedes the larger, more thick-set of the two men climbed up on to the sill of the open car door and turned his head slowly from side to side, keeping watch. He was a squat but powerful lighthouse of a man illuminating any possible threat to his colleagues from the police at the end of the street or from the glass-eyed passers-by, all of whom seemed to be scurrying along the opposite pavement as fast as their terrified little legs could carry them. I glanced towards the police check-point, thinking to call out, but I saw no one to call to.

The second man now stood in front of me at the foot of the steps leading up to our front door. He was smiling. He looked perfectly at ease with the world, clean-shaven, dark-haired, and easy on the eye, wearing a frayed pair of jeans, clean, white trainers, and a sports jacket over a polo shirt. It was the smile that gave him away, a smile that turned the blood in my veins to Arctic mist. He held his left hand out towards me and spoke Arabic with a soft London drawl.

"Come with me."

For a second or two, during that last vestigial moment of sanity, I wanted to laugh. I wanted to share the joke. I almost convinced myself that I could tell this stranger to go away, but rationality is a flimsy construct, held together by thin and fragile threads. The scimitar-edged invitation offered no real options other than blank and silent compliance. The man flicked his jacket back with his right hand and I saw the matt black metal of a handgun pushed snugly into the top of his jeans. Too late. I couldn't move. Although the man covered the handle of the gun almost immediately the bulge of its muzzle beneath denim was imprinted on my brain like sunlight behind closed eyelids.

He spoke again, still in his accented Arabic, but this time more urgently. "Get in the car. Now!"

Still I sat there in the sun, dazzled by the brightness of the day and by the brilliance of my assailant's thin, cool smile. He turned once to look at the man on point duty. There was a hand gesture and then a nod. The minder with the bull neck stiffened momentarily, checking the street one last time. Then he walked around the front of the car to the pavement. His colleague trotted up the steps, put his left hand under my shoulder and hauled me upright. My coffee cup tipped over when I caught it with my knee as I squirmed sideways in a vain attempt to wriggle free. I remember the handle of the mug snapping off on the concrete of the lower step when it toppled over the edge.

2

I should explain a little about the how's and when's and why's, I suppose. In that moment of being hauled upright, so much of what had been – of my life story – flashed through my mind, and yet not a sentence of it could I have uttered, not one single vision could I have I described.

Somewhere in our histories, in the endless looking back that we all indulge in, there is often a tendency to believe that we can identify a point in time or a past action of such simple and singular significance that it allows us to say: that's it – that's the root of it all; that is what this is.

Fundamental truths appeal because they make simple the relationship between cause and effect, action and consequence. Searching for the source of our own headwaters, seeking out the trickling springs that feed the streams and rivers that flow through our lives, is a classical quest that holds at its end that estuarine grandeur of deliverance, that proverbial crock of gold: certainty, the surety of knowing that it is not, ultimately, our fault, that there are reasons and circumstances beyond our control that have made us flow as we have. Certainty is the key to the door of self-delusion.

In the same way that we try to find a firm coastal footing from which to view our historical hinterlands, we seek in the present the undeniable and indefatigable truth that makes sense of where we are and where we appear to be heading. Once delivered to the sea, with our sails set for the prevailing wind, we are relieved that finally we are on course, and although we are aware of the changeable nature of the wind, we believe that we are master of it.

The absolute truth of my being was an illusion. No matter how I defined my source or how well I plotted a course across the rolling oceans, I was fundamentally at fault. Belief in our inevitable fate is a drug that once tasted then draws a person into a lifetime chasing mirages.

Back then, before my kidnapping, at nineteen years of age, growing up in Beirut, and with a memory of events and times so little troubled by the realities of the wider world, I considered none of these things. The glittering lights of university life beckoned to

me beguilingly from beyond the barricades erected around the slow simplicity of my blissfully unaware childhood. Mine was a childhood full of brilliantly-coloured daydreams and half-conquered trees, and although now outwardly I was becoming a man, my inner self still revelled in a world of scabbed knees and grimy, lichen-stained hands.

That last summer at home, with my childish head still resolutely raised to the clouds, I breathed a rarefied atmosphere. Standing on the threshold of manhood I still looked at the world through the apparently immortal and innocent eyes of a stumbling pup. The freshly-budded leaf at the crown of the Turkey Oak in our garden in the Beirut suburb of Jnah represented an empire of possibilities. I had no more awareness of the brittle nature of each leaf's hold on reality than does a sparrow under the distant gaze of the hawk.

The adolescent part of me seemed to know that everything in the world was fresh and full of life, and yet refused to see the consequence of these changing seasons. I used to spend hours sitting on the deeply ridged boughs of my favourite tree, of my boyhood castle in the air, under a warm and mellow Mediterranean sun. Despite the gnawing sense of fear that came from the manhood growing and swelling within me, despite that urgent but terrifying want of life, I convinced myself that there really was nothing to fear. I would never change. The boy would go forth and dazzle the world from the crest of a wave. I was Al-Quam and Jason and Odysseus and Aeneas. My story was destined to be painted in martial colours, colours of triumph and glory second only to those of Salah-ad-Din. Although I had seen autumnal squalls strip the leaves from my fortress tree at the end of every summer for eighteen years, I could not conceive of any form or force of weather that might come and strip fortune from me. I was a naïve boy with a head full of half-formed dreams, and I firmly believed that nothing could ever turn the downy, glossy dark greens of my youth to the dry-brown husks that bleed away life as the sap slowed in my Father's veins.

I was then, as I am now, Marwan Tayeh, but we, the child and the man, have inevitably grown apart. I stood on the threshold of a brave new world. I was nineteen years of age, the son of a middle class banker living in a prosperous gateway city that lies between

the cosmopolitan modernity of the developed world and the awkward, childish brutishness of the old European north-west. My first gloriously immature steps out onto the shore by the ocean have long since been swept away by the winds of change.

3

That brief memory, that illusive moment of insight was ripped away from me as I felt the bones of my kidnapper's fingers biting into the soft flesh of my armpit. The man had a determined and powerful grip for one who looked so slight and unimposing. Everything happened too quickly to seem real. I felt as though I were looking at the world through a lens or through a cathode ray tube. The volume was set to zero. I did not utter a word.

They man-handled me into the back of the car, where I was pushed down into the rear foot well with my head buried between the feet of the third kidnapper, the one who had remained seated in the vehicle. He covered my prone body with an old tartan rug. I was facing the rear of the front seat and I felt the fabric bulge against my nose as the minder sat down heavily on old, rusting springs. I could smell human sweat and oil and that earthy mould redolent of wet winter boots on cloth. Doors slammed. The car pulled away from the curb.

Surely, I thought, the police will stop us, and just as quickly I realised what a catastrophe that would be. I felt hard metal on the back of my neck as a now familiar voice spat out fitful, stilted Arabic.

"You know who we are?"

I gagged on the smell of oil.

"You Persian?" continued my interrogator in broken Arabic.

My head began to clear a little. Maybe this is a chance, I thought, maybe there is a way out. They clearly had no idea who I was and I began to wonder whether they had any specific goal in mind other than the kidnapping of a foreigner, one of the sons of the great enemy. Their assumption was that I was Persian.

I pulled the rug away from my face and lifted my head a little, speaking in English rather than Arabic. I wanted to establish contact, to show them that I could make the effort, that I was not one those arrogant oil men so often vilified in London graffiti or the more extreme sectarian pamphlets.

"No," I said, trying to sound strong and calm. "I'm Lebanese, not Persian, Lebanese."

I tried to twist round to face the two men in the back of the car and I had to raise myself up to lift my torso over the transmission tunnel. A punch. I gasped as I took a fully weighted fist to the ribs.

"Stay down," he hissed into my half-turned face.

I slumped back down, winded, with my back arched over the transmission tunnel. I started to cry and tried to catch my breath to stem the childish tears. I felt as though I were six-years-old and yet again standing in front of my glowering father. I shook the vision off and slithered round a little more so that I could see the man who had just hit me. The car blanket slipped from my face and through the back window of the car I could see blue sky. Through the side window I could just see the tops of buildings skimming past. I could feel every bump in the road, my body shifting to left and right as the car twisted and turned through these unknown, topsy-turvy London streets.

The man who had remained seated in the car all the while, leaned forward and looked down at me. I could sense a moment of confusion amongst my captors. My answer, my claim to be Lebanese, seemed to have thrown an element of doubt into the perfect equation of my abduction. I smelled a heavily applied dose of cheap aftershave. A small bead of sweat dripped from my second interrogator's neck onto my chin as he looked down at me.

"Do you like the Saud?" he asked.

"No," I replied, trying to hold his gaze, trying to impress on him through the simplicity of my answer that I was not his target.

"Do you believe in the Caliphate?" he asked, unsmiling.

I had to think for a moment before answering. It was an impossible question to answer truthfully. The answer was implicit in my faith and in my history.

"No," I lied, adding again, "I'm Lebanese" as if this simple statement of nationality would explain everything. I felt sick inside, believing for a moment that my denial of such a simple truth would damn me forever, but the truth of my terror was a much simpler thing right then than my faith. Underneath the soiled car rug I urinated involuntarily.

For a couple of seconds, as this man and I looked into each other's eyes, I grabbed wildly at the possibility that the car would stop. I tried to believe in that moment with all of my heart. I willed

it to happen. They must set me free with some embarrassed explanation about mistaken identity. I could almost picture the faces of my family as I recounted the story again and again over dinner in the not too distant future.

My optimism was short lived. The man pulled the tartan car blanket back up over my face. I felt his foot move from under my back and then, as I lay there blinded by the blanket, he slammed his heel down on to my chest.

"Shut the fuck up. Don't move again," he shouted at me and barked an order to the driver.

We twisted and crawled through the rush hour traffic for what seemed like hours but was probably no more than fifteen or twenty minutes. I lost all sense of direction, but tried desperately to use basic reasoning to track our progress and as a way of keeping my sanity. The bridges into the south London camps were closed. We were hardly likely to be heading into the city with its network of check-points, cameras and armed policemen. Given the general political state of this benighted little island, cutting north would make the journey overly long and complex. We had to be heading west, back out by the airport, and then how far? I was a day away from travelling home, from flying away from the troubles, and here I was passing the very airport terminals where another of my flat mates, Ibrahim, had been working. I felt the first black hand of absolute despair grip my heart.

4

In the close confines of the foot-well, with my limbs pinned and my mind drifting towards numbness, I let the sway and sweep of the car lull me into a coma of memories. What else could I do? I could hardly begin to imagine a happy future, and I dare not let the meandering horrors of what might come get a grip.

When I said that I viewed the world with a child's innocent eyes in those days before my journey to London to work as a teaching assistant at the Middle East University, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that rather than being a true innocent I was actually just one among a broad generation of inexperienced and unworldly boys raised in a privileged and secure environment. I could afford the luxury of fantasy and fable because the dinner bell rang and my bed was made for me by a servant. I enjoyed the opulence of time in which to play the hero, and knowing nothing of want or despair, this world of mine was painted in primary colours.

My father, Najm el Din Tayeh, would, however, have told you then that it was neither innocence nor inexperience that clouded my world view, but rather a selfish, inward-looking indolence. As a youngest son, the only son of a second marriage, I was indulged with sufficient luxury and laxity that I grew up suited to the taking of things for granted. Although I matured physically, I failed to grasp the nettles that my father laid before me. My father was old-school, seeing opportunity as a stem with a sting, believing that in the grasping of that stem one would learn through the inevitable pain, but despite his many gifts to me I remained at heart a self-centred child. It was my seeming inability to see the wooden harshness of reality through the trees of youth's optimistic and fantastical woodlands that brought my father's frustrations out into the open.

I have never quite been able to find the single point of fact or that inevitable moment in time that might define me as a youth. As I looked back from that piss-sodden foot-well I saw instead in my mind's eye a tattered reporter's notepad listing my failings and, with the benefit of hindsight, I understand now that I was something of an alien being as far as my father was concerned. I was the cuckoo in his nest. It would be wrong to say that he was

fundamentally disappointed, although to my inexperienced ear it always sounded thus. I think that we simply missed each other and that we failed to connect because of age and generation. He was frustrated rather than disappointed. For the first time, buried under a grimy rug in the back of an old Mercedes, I began to taste that frustration in amongst the many flavours of my fear.

In my late teens I remember my father calling me Marwan only occasionally. I recall him using the phrase, "Damn that boy!" far more often than calling me by my name. I do not think that I ever really doubted his love, although like him I often found it difficult to express such emotions in public. I am the youngest of three sons, the elder two being born of my father's first wife, Bahira. I never knew her. She died of a cancer when her sons were still infant and long before I first opened my wide little eyes to the wonderful salty onshore afternoon breeze that blows across our beautiful city. My father did not marry again until he was nearly fifty years old and by then well established in his career, which means that both me and my mother, Yasamin, are of significantly different generations.

Najm el Din Tayeh was a successful man. Although our family has no pretension to ancient Lordships, coming from solid peasant stock rather than the bloodlines of Emirs and Sultans, this last century has seen the emergence of a sturdy and prosperous middle class in Lebanon. The ultimate decay of the Ottoman and the birth after the Great War of our modern nation state, together with the drive and determination of our people to prosper in this rapidly changing, oil driven world, saw the family rise from the soil to embrace education and the professions. Banking rather than farming became our family trade and my father rose to the challenge magnificently, becoming a Vice-President of the Laodicean Banking Corporation, which provided us with a well-appointed and comfortable life in one of the better suburbs of Beirut. In effect, my father was a modern day Atabeg, a middle-ranking functionary of the pan-Islamic industrial and financial empire that has risen, black and burning, from the hot soils and sands of our homelands.

Memory comes in so many shades of grey, but I tried desperately to see in colour that morning. I tried to focus on the vivid hues of my youthful world-view, but there was no single

image that I could create of my father, no unique cipher, through which I could recall him to my side in my hour of need.

5

In the thinking time, in the half-light of diffusing memory, I often ask myself how my story came to be written. What is the context? Why is it relevant? The answer that I constantly find my thoughts reduced to is never one based on fact, nor even is at an answer based in some quantifiable psychological profile determined by trauma. I answer such questions with another question. It is a time-honoured trick, a way of avoiding truth, but I console myself with the imagined cleverness that comes with a firm faith in the art of disbelief. I try not to know anyone's truth these days. I have discovered that there are no times, nor places, nor moments when truth actually exists. The question that I pose in response to logical enquiry is this; what if it was you? How would you behave if you faced similar circumstances?

And so we come to another question – what was the context? Why did I, Marwan Tayeh, come to be lying in a car foot-well at the far edge of a foreign land?

The most immediate focus of my attention then, and often now, was and is England. What made that tiny, fractious little island such a focus for violence? There is, of course, a wider question that we, the educated Muslim elite, should ask of our own history, and I have come to the conclusion that such separation is artificial. There is an enormous and complex whole in which hang threads and themes entwined like a cat's cradle. In dealing with England I must necessarily talk about the whole world. As with my own search for the headwaters of my life source, I have discovered that there is no single point in time from which any one person can view history. With every full stop that I type as I write down facts and my own shoddy interpretations, I find that new questions arise. It is a comfort. Origin and cause are forever swirling into the infinite past like the twirl of fractal images upon a computer screen, and it seems to me to be a perfect representation of the way of the world. Nevertheless, context needs to drawn and so I must make the first brush-stroke in this imperfect analysis of history. I beg the forgiveness of scholars, for this is how I see the world through the fibres of the impossibly dense weave of the cat's cradle.

What we call history is simply the result of an accident, or more precisely a series of accidents. Reading along the time-lines of event and outcome, we can detail a moment when a battle is fought and a direction is taken, but what I mean by accident is the unknown factor: that a general turns up on a battlefield with a streaming cold and is muddle-headed. That we in the East have come to a point of dominance in a global financial and industrial world is a symptom of accidental progress rather than, as some of my peers might state, an inevitable outcome. There was never anything inevitable about our rise to influence and power.

For my part I trace the weight of our accidental progress back to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century after Christ. It is there that I see the roots of failure in Western Europe. That our beloved Prophet gave himself and the word to Arabia some two hundred years later was, in cold, logical and historical terms, just another event on the time-line. The roots of my kidnapping lay in the vacuum that sucked the life out of the West following the fall of the Roman Caesars.

Between the fall of the Western Empire and the preaching of the First Crusade, a period of turmoil and shift in the West, our faith took root and then, with alarming vigour, spread across the Mediterranean. Let no man forget that long before the Ottoman, the descendants of our people's Prophet, peace be upon Him, laid siege to Constantinople as early as 675 in the Christian calendar. By the early eighth century Muslim armies and administrations held sway in southern Italy, in Andalus and Sicily. The last bulwarks against our expansion, Byzantium and briefly Christian soldiers such as Charles Martell in France, did little to halt the ripening of Islam.

Ours was a glorious age, made universal across the known world, into Africa, to the Far East, and there, lapping at the shores of the Papacy and Byzantium, we came to rest briefly. At the same time, in the emerging states of Europe, new powers rose up to meet the challenge. Ummayad faced Angevin and Capetian. Who amongst those warriors and thinkers and schemers knew how the world might turn out? The year 1071 turned the screw. At a place called Manzikert a Seljuk army destroyed the power of Byzantium for a generation, prompting the West to face not only its own internal struggles, but at last the threat from the East. A Crusade

was proclaimed. Jerusalem fell. The knights of Outremer were born and, sword in hand, they flourished in our homeland.

Even then there was no inevitability about the outcome. When you read the histories it strikes you how close some of those Christian lords came to becoming true Eastern leaders. They assimilated our culture with their own. Had the hot-headed generations to follow only heeded that knowledge and that experience, then we might have found peace. We did not. Salah-ad-Din re-took Jerusalem in 1187. There followed a series of increasingly ineffectual and divisive Crusades, until at last the energy of Christendom was spent. It took some four hundred years for Constantinople to fall to the Ottoman, but fall it did.

In the midst of this turmoil came the Mongol horde, wreaking devastation on all of us, Muslim, Jew and Christian. The world spun again on its axis and the energy and the vitality of the East was replenished. It could so easily have been destroyed then and there, but we assimilated the Mongols and grew again in strength. Our learning flourished. We found the inspiration to question this world and to push our development and our ideas ever further.

Some of our philosophers speculate on what might have happened had the Europeans found the peace and the time to take up the knowledge and the science and philosophy that the Crusaders brought back with them during that period. Might there have been a flourishing of European intellectual thought rather than the Muslim Renaissance that flowered with the sudden explosion of the Ottoman Empire? How might the world look now if the West had experimented and industrialised rather than the Arab and the Persian and the Turk?

The truth of it is that Europe reeled from defeat to defeat to defeat. The Ottoman armies marched north, taking the Balkans and Hungary. Suleiman the Magnificent stormed through the gates of Vienna and lay bare the plains of Germania. In the north Poland fell and while Rus-Kiev held they wasted their strength on the barricades for generations to come. In the south, we battled for Andalus and Italy and Malta, finally overcoming the Venetian fleets at Zonchio, and destroying the Aragonese-Basque alliance south of the Pyrenees in the last years of the sixteenth century after Christ.

To the north-west, where the Christian warlords fled, while the French and the Germans finally used their mountains and their distance from our heartlands to establish a rough border march, there came convulsion. Plagues ravaged the lands. The lost power of Rome was openly questioned and in 1517 a schism occurred. Protestantism and the Church Militant were born. The fledgling nation states of the early modern period fragmented and fought each other and so many died in the name of one cross or another. Those states with Atlantic coastal ports sent out vast armadas of their young and strong to find safe haven in the Americas. And this is how, by the beginning of the eighteenth century after the death of their prophet, the Christians descended into rancour and poverty and dispossession.

Nothing much has changed. While we in the East have unleashed a powerhouse of thought and effort, while we have invented and grown and finally thrown off the shackles of the Ottoman in The Great War, our European neighbours have played bit parts in world development, sinking ever further into poverty and state failure. Oil has been the key, oil and combustion and plastics and information. We flourish, while the English fight each other, splitting and fracturing across social and religious fault lines, with the Hanoverian monarchy ultimately failing to hold the nation together.

Why then would a young Lebanese man go to such a place to teach Arabic? Faced with a world of possibilities, a world of safe havens and cosy comforts, why did I choose such a place as London for my home? Bear with me and I will do my best to explain.

6

Once out of the inner labyrinth of London streets, the Mercedes picked up speed for a few miles. I could feel every rumble and thump of the car's tyres on the desiccated tarmac of London's neglected suburban trunk roads. From under the blanket I could not make out detail, but when we suddenly passed from the bright light of the morning into constant, dark shadow I knew that something had changed. The car drew to a halt. Doors opened. I felt the car rise slightly on its suspension as my captors got out. The blanket was whipped away from my head.

"Out. Out now!"

I had no strength in my arms and legs. I crawled out of the car, hauling the upper part of my torso out onto a concrete floor. Hands gripped my shoulders again and I was pulled upright. Guns. Not just hand guns but automatic weapons. M-16s and a couple of subs.

My weakness was, I realised, nothing to do with the cramped journey. It was a manifestation of my utter impotence, an inevitable conclusion to the sudden realisation of the random nature of death. I had to stand on my own two feet, literally. My parents could not help me now, no matter how much I might will it. This sudden recognition that there might actually be no purpose to life drained every ounce of my strength, and it was all that I could do to hold myself up against the side of the old Mercedes.

Amid the babble of voices in what was clearly some sort of disused warehouse I thought again of my mother, Yasamin, and I wanted to tell her that now, right at this moment, that I really did understand the meaning of her love. I felt sick again. The high walls of the warehouse trembled under the audio assault of a jet engine shock wave. I tried to focus on the voices, to hold onto the reality of the guns, but I could not keep up with the conversation.

Hands on my shoulders. A gun butt shoved into my side. My captors walked me around the Mercedes. They took me to the rear of another old car, an American import. My smiling companion, the man who gave me the unavoidable invitation, opened the boot, pointed at the bleak space between a box of rags and the stowed spare tyre, and said simply, "In."

Without strength, without any power of conviction or will, guttering like a failing candle at the end of a night's long-forgotten conversation, I managed to lift one leg into the boot of the car, but then my muscles gave way. I could feel the well of my tears emptying as I choked and slumped against the metal panels at the rear of the vehicle. I finally understood why men and women wail in the wake of tragedy. There is nothing else that you can do.

More hands pushed my head and upper body down into the car. Then they lifted my trailing leg in. I curled up into a foetal ball, breathing in the putrid aromas of oil and carbon monoxide. My world was a black soundtrack, a disjointed melange of raised voices, slamming car doors, and gunned engines, all of it playing out loud and long beneath a smiling English face that was framed between the lip of the open boot lid and my horizontal field of view above the panel work of the car. My captor put a finger up to his lips. "Be a good boy," he whispered, "and be very, very quiet."

The sky crashed down. Metal on rubber. Keys and locks. A faint trace of diesel fumes. Motion in the darkness.

7

Thoughts of a wider world and my place in history were far distant as I travelled the road of the damned. My thoughts were entirely personal and fragile and immediate. I thought again of my father. Even now, as I write this memoir from the safety of a quiet Beirut suburb, I find that I must flick through a thousand pictures of my father in my head, and although no single one of these images has the sharpness of focus that allows me to really see his face, I can by combining the images build a composite picture of the man I loved.

The key to having him close to me now is the remembrance of his moods and tones of voice. My father was a serious man. He was an exercise in patient frustration undone by the awkward circumstance and strange familiarity of those close to him. We were his second family, and as such never quite in tune with his image of what should have been. I do not mean that he regretted or would have changed things. Rather I think that he found it difficult to open up to us as perhaps he might once have done in his youth. I was "Damn that boy" precisely because he loved me. I know beyond any doubt that he adored my mother. As for my step-brothers, Da'ud and Salman, they too are serious men. They too work at the family trade.

The exasperation that I heard so often in my father's voice as I grew out of my child's body and waited for the man that would be Marwan Tayeh to emerge from my ill fitting teenage skin was the exasperation of a wilfully sober paternal love. His anger seemed so much more immediate and personal to me when I was young, but I have had time enough to reflect since then. I am as sure of his love for me throughout the ordinarily troubled days of our domestic relationship as I am sure of my love for him now that we are far apart. It was simply that in the days of my youth, and so typical of a confused teenager, I was convinced that no other boy in Jnah had to deal with such obvious embarrassments and such obdurate unfairness.

My schooling was a good one, paid for out of hard-earned salary, but not one that I particularly responded to. I sat at the back

of the class, not because I wanted to misbehave, but because it was the most interesting place in the room. Marwan Tayeh was always a dreamer, rooting those dreams in the voyeuristic thrill gleaned from the actions of other, more confident boys. Their words and deeds filled my head with imagined victories as I sat on the rampart boughs of my oaken castle in the soft and sultry summer evenings that will forever be my childhood image of home.

Once I finally got to grips with the fact that there was a minimum level of effort required, I found that I could work just hard enough to avoid the worst academic streams at my private school. This compromise effected between effort and dilettantism left a considerable amount of time in school for the pursuit of watchful amusement. I preferred to stand at the edge of the circle, safe in the crowd, as situations developed. I never actually joined in. I was a gawper and a goggler, living vicariously through others, dancing quietly in the flickering shadows as brighter and bolder boys flamed. I used to snigger quietly to myself as they ragged each other and, when the opportunity arose, like Rav Pappa's proverbial Syrian, I would laugh out loud within the bony confines of my head when they tried to singe the beards of our teachers. There were no great victories for the boys, no rapier thrusts to the heart, but there was always a quickening of the pulse as the skirmishes played themselves out. I envied those boys whose metaphorical blood lay spilled on the cool, tiled floors of our sombre and pedantic classrooms.

For the most part school terms skipped by without my paying any more attention than was absolutely necessary. My father's irritability with my progress was cyclical, like the seasons, and always came with the end of term report. Each ten-week period of learning and development seemed to crawl forward, blossoming at first like a tight red rosebud. The bloom then dragged its sleepy head through the petal-strewn dog days of summer before quickening to the rotting hip that turns black with late autumnal chills. The final act in the educational mystery play was always set in deepest, darkest winter. I remember some of the hackneyed phrases used by my teachers in their reports, lines from what now seems like a fantasy, a play, a poem learned by heart for a witching night: Marwan has potential but does not push himself; a

disappointing term; could do better; a bright boy let down by a lack of application.

The end of term report would arrive in the post a few days into the holiday and there would then be a day of muttering between my father and mother followed by a polite but serious request for me to remain at table after dinner. My father would ask me questions about responsibility. How could he continue to pay these fees if I failed to make any effort? I usually mumbled half-formed promises to try harder. When the holidays finished he always reminded me of my obligation, but the repetitive seasons in miniature that marked out my academic life always turned, no matter how bright the spring-time, to cold, grey rain.

I muddled through, though, passing enough exams for my family to hold out some hope that I might one day be a useful member of Lebanese society, and eventually, at nineteen, after a summer cramming for re-sits, I scraped grades just good enough to attend Beirut University. Needless to say, my father made it quite clear that his damnable youngest son should have worked harder the first time around instead of causing the family even more expense. He took what seemed to me to be a grim satisfaction in my punishment. I spent a summer sitting in a cramped and airless room with a private tutor while my family and friends went strolling along the glittering and intellectually vibrant thoroughfare that is Hamra Street. They spent their evenings at the theatre or at the one of the many sweet-smelling coffee shops, while I toiled over my books. I missed the lazy days spent at the rocky beach clubs in Manara, where Muslim, Jew, Christian and Druze mix at ease because of their wealth and cosmopolitan sense of community. Apart from Saturday nights, when a short furlough was permitted me, I even had to forgo the serious business of dressing-up in the finest linens and silks for our traditional promenade evenings spent in the restaurants and clubs of the thriving Christian enclave that is beautiful Ashrafieh in eastern Beirut.

8

Of the many manifestations of paternal love that I tried to summon up like a Jinn as that cramped vehicle wound its way to the west, it was my father's critically analytical look that I remembered most clearly. I have already said that time has a way of blurring faces, but one or two of the many images in my head stand out more clearly and brightly than the others. My facility with selectively vivid memory has something to do with my experiences in England, something to do with the deprivations of a sudden and enforced solitude. Through that experience I have an ability to view fundamental pictures of key people in my life, a latent skill, no doubt, brought into full development by the trauma of my particular separation.

On report day I remember so clearly the weight of disappointment folded into every crease and wrinkle on my father's face. The devilish document sat on the table at my father's left hand throughout dinner, which I always recollect as a dimly lit and brooding affair. My father's moustache would twitch furiously as he ate. Other than the obligatory politeness associated with shared dishes, the meal would be conducted in awkward silence. On such evenings his eyes always appeared to be rigidly set and full of a stern determination. This time he intended to slay the serpent of lethargy that wound itself ever tighter around his son's torso. As soon as my mother cleared away the dishes he turned in his chair and looked directly at me, trying to control a faint quiver in his bottom lip. Father rarely raised his voice when he was truly disappointed in others, and it was this calm and hushed menace that truly made my blood run cold.

I sat at my designated place at the end of the dinner table unable to look my father in the eye. My ears burned as he quietly but most definitely repeated that oh so familiar peroration and exhortation. The one thing that gave me relief during these oft-repeated family dramas was the slight twitch, the slight, rhythmic throbbing of blood in one of the veins on the back of his right hand. As I watched the blueness crawl under his skin and counted the pulses, synchronising them with the rise and fall of his voice, I knew that so long as I agreed with everything that my father said the torment

would eventually end. The process of paternal chastisement and teenage abasement was almost hypnotic, becoming a ritual part of my adolescent life.

Lying across the transmission tunnel of that old Mercedes, being driven to Hell, I pictured my father's right hand smashing through the windscreen to pluck me to safety, but the splintering of glass and bone never happened. With the miles unwinding beneath my prone body, I turned to my mother and, like so many boys in extremis, I silently begged her to billow out her skirts so that I could hide away from these awful playground bullies.

Neither my mother nor her skirts could reach this far. Instead, I remembered how, throughout my years of day-dreaming she always did her best to soothe the tempers of the men in her life. She was twenty years younger than my father and although she eventually learned to put up a good fight, she was, back then, still somewhat in awe of him. It was only in his later years, when he retired, spending his days in the garden of our villa in Jnah or on the golf course at Ouzai that she came into her own, assuming in her own maturity the position of mother, then loving nurse, and eventually emerging from the chrysalis of marriage to take gossamer wing as our adored and beloved matriarch.

Mother's name is Yasamin, and she perfected the art of combining deep patience and absolute loving firmness in dealing with the invalid during my father's last year, when he finally succumbed to a lifetime spent smoking cheroots. He never quite seemed to master the art of smoking, blowing huge blue-grey fogs across his study when he retired after dinner to spend an hour quietly reading bank papers. In their early years together my mother nagged at him to stop, and when he wouldn't do this small thing for her she nagged at him to smoke outside on the veranda. Over time my father's quiet stubbornness wore away her objections, so much so that in later years she used to join him in the study. They both sat and read for an hour in contented silence while he idly filled the room with great clouds of tangy, clinging smoke. All these years later, well into her sixth decade, my mother still sits in my father's study after dinner, refusing to have it decorated, or anything other than superficially cleaned, because the smoke that

has suffused the paint, the drapery and every page of every book in the room brings him back to her.

9

Motion in the darkness. Motion sickness, but not the familiar feeling of childhood nausea from the back seat, not a juvenile disorientation caused by blurred scenery and an overdose of sugar. My awareness of time and place was confused, on a slow burn, the air around me fogged by the stifling heat in the trunk of the car. My heart was racing and my breathing shallow. I fought back the tears as I struggled to make any sense out of being alive, of being a vital, breathing member of the human race. Everything around me told me that my circumstances were terminal.

I tried to focus on fact, on the reality underlying my current situation, but every time that the car lurched left or right the wider implications of my new status as a hostage crowded in and tore up my poorly drawn blueprints for a good life. I lost all sense of time and purpose. My world closed down and I lost sight of broader horizons. I found that I could only, by slow degrees, focus on the most immediate things. I took small steps towards understanding. Locked in the trunk of that car I started to count small blessings.

The trunk of this old American leviathan was bigger than I had imagined. I focussed on the space around me, feeling for shapes and textures in the darkness. Slowly but surely I started to get a grip on my wilder terrors, and that constricting edge of fear that made every sensation a moment of celluloid horror, began to fade a little. I willed myself to stretch out, to push my legs against the carpet lined walls of this coffin space, and by sliding first one foot and then the second along the panels towards the rear seat, I managed to wriggle onto my side, embracing the rags and what felt like a four spoke wheel brace in an intimate game of spoons.

This simple change of position, breaking out of the closed confines of my vulnerable and foetal state, meant that I could breathe a little easier. I tried to control my heart rate by breathing slowly and deeply. Engine oil and diesel fumes suffused their sickly aroma into my clothes and skin. A viscous film covering every surface in the trunk started to creep inside my mouth. I could feel my nose clogging as the aromas of mechanisation, as the industrially pungent black power, wormed its insidious, carcinogenic way into my body. I tried to pick my nose clean, but

the sticky residue of carbon combustion was already fused to the skin on my fingers.

Carbon monoxide. Heat under my left shoulder. The car lurched to the left and my body shifted, my knees flexing with the motion. I felt along the carpet under my shoulder. The weave was threadbare, almost crisp under my touch. I could feel hot metal beneath the material. I scratched at the scabby floor covering and felt metal flakes slide under my fingernails, scratching me to the quick. I winced involuntarily, hitting my head on the box section of the trunk lid.

By twisting round half onto my front, I found a hole in the compartment floor. I sensed rather than saw a change in the light. A dry, metallic heat throbbed through the hole. Pinpricks of gas, of scorched exhaust, steamed into the trunk as the eddying airflow beneath the car twisted and spun. I gagged. The heat beneath my shoulder intensified. Convection. I vaguely remembered something about children and ovens, and my Mother's favourite Scandinavian fairy stories flooded into my head; gingerbread cottages and hags and huge black iron ranges with massively ornate doors.

I reached out in the darkness and fumbled through rags and assorted tools, selecting what seemed to be a thick piece of wadding. I stuffed it into the hole in the floor of the trunk. I had to find fresher air. Breathing became difficult. My throat was dry and I could feel the tendrils of an uncontrollable convulsion spreading out from my stomach. The thought of my vomit mixing in with the heady spice of burnt oil, urine soaked trousers and corroding steel made me shudder.

I twisted onto my back and rolled towards the rear seat. My elbow crashed onto something sharp, and I remember the jangling ache of trapped nerves curling into every joint in my body. I tried to swing my knees up, catching them on the raw, sharp edge of the boot lid just as I had hit my head a few moments earlier. I cursed, and in the speaking I found release. Fear is a shackle, but I was cornered like a she-wolf with cubs. The anger and the pain shattered the bonds of terror, at least for a moment.

I pushed again and again, making a series of small but definite manoeuvres through which I eventually turned myself over so that I lay on my side with my head now facing the rear of the old

American car. The light was different. The shades of darkness were real and definite. The subtle shift in colour tones made me feel better, as though I was taking control of my life for a moment. I felt as though I was breaking free of the deeper dungeons in this strange new land of dread beauty.

Just below the boot lid I found the source of light. There was another hole. The edges of my new window on the world were ragged and punched-in. I felt another sting of sharp metal and then the tin stickiness of blood running down between my fingers, but this time I didn't care. This was a small moment of authentic salvation. I shuffled forward so that I could put one eye up to the hole through which I watched an alien world drift out and away from me, a ribbon of reality, a narrow field of tarmac, of other cars, of flashing street furniture and broken down building façades. Then it dawned on me. The hole that I was using to make this threadlike connection with the simple observation of things familiar, no matter how remote, was one centimetre in diameter. It was a bullet hole.

Once again the evidence of death crowded into my head, obliterating the fragile recovery of these last few squirming moments. A bullet hole. Guns and bullets and flechettes. I cried again. I shut my eyes to the world outside, realising that this was all true, that there was to be no awakening in a soft, sweat-drenched bed. The horrors of a life taken and displaced, isolated and broken down, flooded into my veins. It became difficult to breathe as each and every scent of metal and oil and exhaust fumes and dust became a finger around my throat, squeezing ever more tightly. I screamed long and loud, drowning myself in the noise of the car as I gave way to another bout of absolute terror.

I had to breathe. It came to me then that I had to breathe. I had to see sunlight one last time. I had to look my killer in the eye before I died. I raised my head back to the bullet hole and began the basic, primeval work of survival once more. After a few minutes I began to calm my racing heart. I let the adrenalin rush of fear subside and then I decided that I should try to do something practical, if only to keep from going mad. I watched the world unfold through the bullet hole and tried to get some bearings.

I alternated between sucking in volumes of hot July air through my tiny, jagged window and then twisting my head slightly so that I could watch the world unravel and then disappear in the rising heat haze beyond the car's wake. Breathe and look. Keep sanity close by. Suffocation takes more than one form.

A subtle undertow of human sweat now mixed with the perfume of oil and diesel exhaust. My shirt and trousers were soaked through. My eyes stung as rivulets of sweat flowed across my shadowed face. Again I tried to piece together the events of the morning but nothing made any sense. All routes, all signs, all logic pointed towards a single destination; the black heart of a vengeful Heaven.

A simple, repetitive set of questions shape-shifted on my tongue. Despite all of my efforts to induce serenity, to centre myself in this madly spinning universe, my heart raced yet again and the day-hidden stars gyrated in a lunatic dance above my head. The hard steel floor pan of this rogue automobile bruised and burnt my skin by turns as we ground our way through London's suburban wreckage. Why was I still alive? Why hadn't they killed me? What did they want?

10

My self-absorption as a teenager, followed by the urgency of student life and then by the solitude of my time overseas, meant that I missed much of my mother's late transformation from the beautiful but slightly shy younger woman of her early married years into the more resilient but contented and considerate woman that I discovered on my return to Beirut. I will always be grateful that she found within herself the capacity to make this change in such a comfortable way. Without my mother's guiding and gentle hand I doubt that I would be capable of telling my story to you now.

The relationship between my parents was difficult at times, made so by the pressure on my father's time caused by his position at the bank and his rank in Lebanese society. The salary that he earned was handsome and so were the expectations of him from his superiors, in both his commercial and social guises. My father's role as a cipher of progress and unification in the commercial development of the old Ottoman vilayets and provinces as our country grew to maturity was often placed at odds with his patriarchal responsibilities in our still stratified and divided ethnic melange. That he survived these conflicts and prospered, leaving so many of the daily wrangles and bloody-minded frustrations outside of our family home was a mark of the humanity in the man. Now that I have extremes of behaviour to guide me, to provide a benchmark against which I can measure my father's life, I can begin to appreciate both his life and that of our beloved Lebanon. The inevitable conflict between the global drive towards prosperity and that seemingly endless, rural poverty of the North still goes with the territory. My step-brothers lead similarly fractured lives.

In marrying a woman twenty years his junior, a woman who had previously been his secretary, my father fulfilled many a mid-life, crisis-driven dream, but he was fortunate in that his first wife was long dead and that his eldest sons were already men. Unlike so many new husbands of a similar age, position and disposition, who come to rue living the dream, my father was doubly fortunate. Yasamin loved him for who he was and not for his rank or for his money. On reflection I think that part of my father's frustration

with me was that I was oblivious to their understated passion, and to the benefits that came my way because they made each other so much stronger. I felt as though I were hanging somewhere in the semi-darkness just outside their mutual orbit, like a rogue moon.

These relationships, this family world that I inhabited as a young boy and as a young man, was like the sap that coursed through the capillaries of the great gnarled trunk of the Turkey Oak in our garden, the boughs of which bore my weight and let me climb up towards the bright blue Mediterranean sky. This is just a little of my history, of the history of Marwan Tayeh. It is a history that has no singular point of significance, no absolute moment of clarity, no constant certainty, but it is incontrovertibly my own.

Bright-eyed but bemused by the world around me I was nineteen and a week away from attending Beirut University. It is a matter of absolute regret that I never asked my father more questions, but at the time I thought that he was just an old man, who knew little and who bored me with fractions of irrelevant personal knowledge. I was about to attend a place of real learning and at such a place, amongst such people, I would surely enter the real world. At nineteen years of age my family was the last place that I could conceive of as being the true source, the fountain-head of Marwan Tayeh.

From the outset my choice of course at university was another cause of familial misunderstanding. Unlike my step-brothers I did not choose mathematics or economics, good solid subject areas well suited to the rigours of international finance. I chose obscurity in the form of a medieval history course, chosen from the simple point of view that I had been good at the subject at school and would, therefore, not have to work quite so hard at college. I have always enjoyed a general, non-specific and certainly non-academic interest in the past. I found that the wider aspects of world history, in as much as they touched on our daily lives, could hold my interest a little more securely than many other subjects.

In choosing my subsidiary module, however, I believe that I confirmed my father's worst suspicions. I chose to study the English, their language and history, a subject in which he saw little value. Why would a bright Lebanese boy with the whole world

opening up before him attempt to learn about an obscure, unstructured and lazy people? The subject held no merit in my father's global financial world. For my father, English was the language of the dispossessed, the mother tongue of the Great Satan, the language shared by the last of the Crusader states and their latter-day, fanatical heirs across the Atlantic Ocean. For my father, English was the language of fundamentalism and terror, the favoured medium of expression used by the discredited followers of the misunderstood Nazarene prophet, peace be upon him. For me it was just an option, one that looked vaguely interesting, a subject and a skill that might prove useful at parties.

It sounds as though I was a godless boy, but I was not. The simple tenets of our faith are never lost, no matter how we might dress up our lives in cosmopolitan liberality. Living in the cradle of the developed world, where humankind evolved from the nomadic loneliness of the primitive hunter-gatherer to embrace the complex interrelations of modern Lebanese urbanity, it is easy for us to forget our roots. Beirut is a melting pot of races and religions, a society founded on a bedrock of tolerance and balance after the wreckage of the Great War.

As a family, as Lebanese people, we are devoutly of the one true faith, but quietly so these days. The fervour of a religious life has been subsumed by the economic and political wealth that we enjoy. I prayed dutifully when I remembered, attended the mosque with my father on the requisite occasions, and loved the Prophet, peace be upon Him, but neither I nor my family ever proselytised. As a family, like so many others where comfort has replaced struggle, we felt no need to express our views so fundamentally. The society in which we live has global connections and enjoys a substantial share of the wealth of the world. We have a truly international outlook infused into our bones. We are relaxed about the elemental constructs of faith because we can quite literally afford such respite.

In my opinion Lebanon is as vitally rooted in the deep loam of global finance as it once was in the long tilled and pastured soils of the Biqa Valley. Our history is turbulent, but it is one of shared Abrahamic faith, which was one of the points that I wished to make to my father. How better to dispute the fundamental global

inequalities that my country and my family were so redolent of than by choosing to study the history and the language of a basket-case philosophy, of a once great power gone to the dogs, namely the English? But, these people fascinated me, living in barbaric squalor and poverty in their corrupt, broken and fractious little island. The common understanding in our society was, and still is, that the infidel island at the end of the continent is the last bastion of barbarism in a civilised, Muslim world.

It was the joy of the argument rather than any specific topic that finally drew me out of my boyish shell. That first year of university life was a revelation to me in so many ways. The amusement afforded me at the back of my old classroom at school was replaced by the eager anticipation of dispute at tutorials and afterwards over coffee with my peers. To be surrounded by people of my own age with whom I could construct impossible theories, and with whom I could get intellectually and physically drunk in the down-town bars frequented by the polyglot expatriate banking communities resident in Beirut, was utterly fantastic.

To be around women who weren't my mother, my mother's friends or strange amorphous aunts was a small but totally compelling glimpse of Heaven's ultimate bounty. That we could relax together, that both sexes could share the benefits of a liberated and almost equal society, still rooted in our faith but merged with the wider diaspora of humanity, allowed us the luxury of speculation.

Combining all of these things, the argument, the setting and the company of attractive girls, together with a few cold beers on a warm, close, evening in the early spring of my first year at university seemed like perfection, like a gift from on high, a gift that only I, Marwan Tayeh, could squander.

There is no more truth in this singularity than in any other that I've mentioned so far. There were plenty of other boys and girls who got carried away with their first taste of freedom, who drank from whatever chalice filled their souls with delight, and who lost their way for a while. Sometimes we even remembered that there were still many boys and girls in our world, those living at the edge of reason as we lucky few described it, who lived with the burqa and the work of Jihad, but we students were confident masters of

destiny. The greater Muslim community and the currency of oil combined to give us the world, and so, oblivious to anything but our romanticised impressions of the hardships endured by our brothers and sisters all around the globe, we professed our utter commitment to them over cold beers, coffees and sweet pastries.

11

Cold beers and coffees. The joys of mixed company and broad debate. At that time in my life I had no idea that there were parts of the world where such things were not even luxuries afforded by a privileged few. We in the affluent, cosmopolitan world of the Levant are often accused of cultural imperialism in that we assume that the rest of the world is like us, and if not then it should be. This is the crux of our problem. Our culture is pervasive; it is something that we expect all 'others' to recognise and to emulate. We forget our own sectarian histories and believe that now is how it always has been and always will be. We either forget or simply refuse to acknowledge that there are parts of the greater Muslim world where those old insecurities and those old fanaticisms still exist.

Lebanon's recent history mirrors much of the industrialised east since the overthrow of the Ottoman after the Great War nearly a century ago. With the coming of freedom, with the emergence of our nation states, such as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, we have blossomed in the ever-shining sun of capital markets, of increasing social mobility and in the softening teachings of our faith. This is not, however, a global view of how to be civilised and we forget that at our peril.

Traditionally described, our world-view stems from a relatively simple extension of our teaching: that we attempt to satisfy the needs of our people without creating chaos and destruction. The underlying principle that has driven our exploitation of oil and industrialisation throughout this last century is that freedom comes from trying to live with the best possible system rather than one that harms others.

This is where we fall foul of cultural assumptions. Not everyone is like us. In the West, in the Americas in particular, the doctrine of Capitalism is rooted in scarcity, or as some prefer to call it, the market. Our view has always been that there should be sufficient resources for everyone, that no one should be forced to do without the basic means of sustenance and shelter that otherwise comes from unbridled devotion to money for its own sake.

From this starting point we have developed ideas of commonality, of provision for the weak. My Lebanon boasts a

National Health Service second to none in the developed world. Our education is free. We are secure. The fundamental tenet is that everyone can lead a happier life and so our society is fulfilled and stable and offers opportunity.

None of this, of course, creates equality. We are driven to create global success out of our economic power. Those with talent are encouraged to do well and in so doing to differentiate themselves in status and possessions. Thankfully amid this culture of finance and power we are also absolutely required to recognise that although some are more talented than others and that wealth will accrue, as with my own family, that each of us has a responsibility to our society to ensure that all are fed, educated, housed and cared for.

So ends the philosophy. This is the reality of the world-view that I carried with me to England. We have money and we have power and we have the means to project our cultural values beyond our geographical borders. We have no history of Demos here in the East, preferring the strong man approach. We are still fundamentally as we were under the Ottoman. We have simply replaced one leader with another and put a mask upon his face. Many things have changed for the better, but the roots of our power remain deep in the cultural soil ploughed by a long line of ancestors who held simple and fundamental views.

For the English, for those at the edge of the world as we have made it, where there are such very great disparities in wealth and resource and opportunity, we are representative of threat, and our world is something to be envied, to be jealous of, to be craved. Where they have poverty and dirt and want, we have riches and excess, and although we arrive on their shores offering alms and support, there has to be a catch, there has to be a price to pay. There always has been and as far as the poor and downtrodden peoples of barbaric little Europe are concerned there always will be.

I, of course, never gave such things a second thought. I saw an opportunity and I took it. I revelled in the social freedoms that come with wealth and a society that feels really rather smug about its place in the world. Had we not, during these last hundred years, thrown off so many of the old ways? Women worked and studied as equals. We tried to eradicate want and suffering. We exported justice and security, admittedly often based on our own perception

of what would be best for the world, but at least we tried to pay some dues for the greater human good.

Such is the naivety of a youth from a comfortable and safely middle-class family living at the heart of the developed world. I and my fellow students believed in justice and the light at the end of the tunnel, and so long as one or other of us had enough cash to buy another cold beer it would always and forever be so.

12

A fog of fear and memories and choking exhaust fumes obscured the sharp edges of the my once cosy but now shattered little world. In this close, coffin-like confinement alien concepts of death continually stormed the ramparts of my sanity and turned me towards madness. I retreated from the bullet hole, closed my eyes and drifted again to thoughts about home.

A definition. Marwan Tayeh: a shooting star, a firework, bright, gaudy and noisy, that then declines and fades, inelegant.

Towards the end of my first year at university I think that I did finally become aware of a certain symmetry with my earlier years, a repeating pattern; initial enthusiasm followed by a slackening of resolve and application, and finally submission to that dreaded state of indolence. But I am, perhaps, being too harsh on myself. The truth is that I worked very hard at some things in those early months, particularly socialising. So much so, in fact, that my father's wallet was once more called upon to settle my debts, educational and otherwise.

In that way that we have of embroidering the truth by omission, I used to say to my fellow travellers that I failed no exams that first year at college. Initially I enjoyed the intellectual stimulus of the professors, lecturers and students, and I joined in vigorously with student debate, relishing the challenge of the 'what if' questions, but in the end I simply could not sustain the effort. We debated endlessly amongst ourselves, more often than not propped up in the corner of a fellow student's kitchen with cups of thick, sweet coffee steaming before us. We spent hours discussing the possible outcomes of alternative histories; what if the Crusader states of Outremer had survived into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; what if the Ottomans had been stopped at the gates of Vienna; what if Ferdinand and Isabella had defeated the Almohads in Spain; what if the Mongols had crushed the Mamelukes and stormed through Egypt; what if Rome had stood firm as a beacon of Christian power in the Mediterranean; and always that final question - how should we deal with the bombs and the hijacking perpetrated against the civilised Muslim East by these Christian fundamentalists?

But late nights and a lack of application take their toll. I let things slide. My arguments lost their intellectual rigour and started to descend into polemic. I took offence too easily. The thick crop of invitations to join my fellow students withered in the heat of my anger. I was bored by the wilful inability of my friends to see my broad pictures. The rolling fields of wheat that should have ripened under our combined intellectual sun instead turned to barren and waterless dust under my singular, searing gaze.

One May morning, a week before my first year examinations were due to commence, I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I saw there a child in a man's skin. I felt a sudden urge, an absolute need, to stop the childish merry-go-round that I had been riding all these years. I made a decision. I joined that anachronism of the modern world, the Communist Party, and promptly abandoned the bourgeois state that my family exemplified. I failed no exams that first year at university because I took none.

There is a certain type of industrious lethargy that both obscures an individual from and yet reveals that same person to the wider world. The contradiction is paramount. I was lethargic and obscure in my revolution. Where my ancestors had been diligent, I lacked any commitment to the detail of a thing. Where application provides the basis for sound and lasting success, I preferred the path of the comet, flaring briefly across a dark sky before disappearing over the horizon for a thousand years.

I was not lazy in the sense that I applied myself assiduously to debate and to the company of others like me, but I missed deadlines, overslept, failed to attend lectures and, despite being given a number of opportunities to reform myself, I elected to follow the path of the black sheep, of the dumb martyr, of the spoilt brat. I closed the door on my education and, with my father's despairing disapproval ringing loudly in my ears, I packed a bag and headed for a friend's flat in Ramlet el Baida, where I acquainted myself for the very first time with the harsh realities of cash poverty. Summarily cut off from my allowances, existing on the charity of friends and on small amounts of money that my mother sent to me every couple of weeks, I decided, in solidarity with the masses, that I should forget all privilege and get a simple, manual job.

Looking back, unrolling the canvas upon which I sought to draw impossibly defined images of my world in simple black inks, I am still embarrassed by my inability to tell my parents how grateful I was for their time and their love. They deserved more than I could give them. I always intended to do the right thing but somehow found that I could not cross the threshold of the temple that housed such simple and solid responsibility. It was the same with essays and jobs. I always intended to finish an essay but found the sights and sounds of the bars in Hamra more compelling than the dry and dusty detail of the fall of Constantinople. I constructed an outward persona full of fire and sharp edges in order that I could conceal the confusion within.

Concealment, however, was not a skill that came naturally to me. My dedication to the argument, to the noisy, blustering affirmation of my rights in the face of other people's slights, forced the hand of many an employer. I cleaned dishes in a restaurant on Monot Street for two days short of a week before clashing with the head chef, a capitalist running dog if ever there was one. The kitchen was a cauldron of ego and testosterone, a nightly fire-fight, and the new boy could not help but answer back on behalf of the dispossessed. From there I became a pot-boy in Gemmayze, working the late shifts for a succession of bar owners. I even spent a week or two working the door at the Golden Horde nightclub on the basis that a little bit of street enforcement might come in useful at the inevitable revolutionary barricade.

None of these career moves proved a success, and with the welcome at my friend Jamal's flat wearing decidedly thin, I had to make another choice, a real choice: sink or swim. Like most middle-class revolutionaries I bit the bullet that I had marked out for the assassination of social convention and called my mother.

In the Christian testaments there is a story of a prodigal son, a simple, apocryphal story but nonetheless beautifully portrayed in the Orthodox by the Kontakion hymn:

I have recklessly forgotten Your glory, O Father;

And among sinners I have scattered the riches which You gave to me.

And now I cry to You as the Prodigal:

I have sinned before You, O merciful Father;

Receive me as a penitent and make me as one of Your hired servants.

Yasamin and I met outside one of the cafés on Monot Street where I had briefly worked. We sat talking in stilted voices, eagerly circling the still twitching carcass of my university life like ravenous hyenas held at bay by slack-necked vultures, while around us the road slowly choked with predatory cars. The sound of horns blaring and people shouting formed the backdrop to our meeting.

Mother looked tired but she was warm and beautiful, as she always will be to me, with her hair hennaed and neatly coiffured. She was dressed in a simple but elegant floral pattern summer dress. I cringed when I looked into her eyes, and turned my face away from hers, making a play of scanning the traffic. I did not doubt that some of the crows scratching in the dirt around her eyes were birds set there by my own hand. As with my father on the day that my school report arrived, I looked down at the tablecloth when we spoke.

"Look, Mama," I started to say quietly, and felt her hand come to rest on mine. Still I did not look up from the tablecloth. "It's…hard, you know. All that expectation. I know I've…"

She spoke softly as she cut across my first attempt at self-abasement. "I know, Marwan, my darling. I'm a mother. Your mother. I can't help loving you… and neither can your father. We are disappointed. Of course we are, but mostly we're just worried. What are you looking for Marwan? Where do you think you're going?"

I gave up on my prepared statement. "I don't know, Mama. That's just it. I don't know. I wish I was like Da'ud. Solid. Dependable. But I can't find a path."

I sighed. Yasamin squeezed my hand and nodded.

"I can't come home," I said, finally looking her in the eye. "I can't… not yet. I need to sort myself out… away from him and all that stuff. I have to find my own way…"

Mother started to cry the soft and gentle tears of parental loss. She knew that her little boy, no matter how fragile he might seem right now, was finally starting to break free.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “It’s about time. It grieves me, but it’s about time.”

I think that all of us, even my absent father, knew that I would not return home. Marwan Tayeh must find his own way for a while before returning to the slowly-roasting fatted calf and the inevitable business suit. We spoke in a warm but desultory fashion for a while longer, but there is only so much that you can say about plans as vague as a sea mist. Mother restricted herself to the inevitable maternal commentary: you look awful; are you eating enough; where are you staying? That she did not approve of my life was clear, but neither did she condemn.

“What are you going to do?” she asked. “I don’t mean in life, not in a serious way, Marwan. What are you going to do now, tomorrow, you know?”

This was the part of the conversation that I always dreaded. The commitment. My aim in meeting mother was to do the penitent thing, maybe make a start at a longer conversation, and definitely to get some cash. The question of what I was actually going to do was beyond me and I started to flounder. Raising my eyes from the tablecloth I looked briefly at my mother and then at a poster on a billboard that rose out of the exhaust fumes above her left shoulder. The noise and bustle of the street acted like a lens, focusing my attention on the Red Crescent rising above a green Cedar of Lebanon, the local symbol of the ArabAid network.

“I’m...” My voice faltered for a moment. I picked up a lump of sugar from the bowl in front of me and chewed it as I swallowed the last of my hot, bitter tea. “I’m going to volunteer for ArabAid, Mama. I’m going to do something worthwhile.”

It was an escape route, a way out of an awkward conversation, a way of postponing the moment when I would have to recognise my shortcomings. As I said these words both mother and I knew that I had no real intention of fulfilling this vow any more than I had ever fulfilled any of my promises to buckle down and do better in the future. Mother sighed once, paid for the drinks and told me to follow her.

We zigzagged our way through the flashing chrome and glinting glass river of traffic, crossing to a branch of my father’s bank

where my mother withdrew the maximum allowed at the automatic teller machine. She thrust the crisp, clean notes into my hand and then she kissed me on each cheek She held my head in her hands and looked into my eyes before finally, and for a moment longer than she needed to, she kissed me once on my forehead. She smiled through the still waters in her eyes.

"Good luck, Marwan. Call me when you know where you are going. Call me anyway, my love. Come home one day. Your father misses you, you know. Very much."

With that she left me on the pavement outside my father's bank. She left me enough money for a week or maybe two, provided I could find a cheap place to stay. That last look, that last maternal embrace, left me with a lump in my throat and an almost overwhelming urge to run after her. The man, Marwan Tayeh, wanted to hide in the folds of her dress and beg her to keep away the creatures of the night. Somehow, amid the noise and the heat, I found that I could not allow myself the luxury of movement, and so I stood under a burning sun watching my mother fade into the bustling crowds of Monot Street.

I needed time to think. I crossed the road again, sliding between the fenders of polished limousines and dusty wrecks, and sat again at the table outside the café. When the waiter, impeccable in black with a tied, white apron fixed firmly around his waist, asked me what I might want to drink, I ordered an Almaza. As condensation dribbled down the outside of the bottle and over my hand, as the petrol and diesel fumes wafted over me, imperceptibly turning the table cloth by shades to grey, I stared up at the poster on the billboard. ArabAid. Why not?

That was the moment when I received revelation, when I truly knew that there was a point to it all, to the failed study, to the incomplete picture in my head. I would volunteer to work in dirty, confused little England, an island that was tearing itself apart at the very edge of civilisation. I held a smattering of the country's history in my head, could speak the language in a basic form and I read the foreign sections of the broadsheet papers regularly. What could go wrong? If I could spend a year or so on the voluntary circuit, if I could do something to be proud of, for my parents to be proud of once they got over the shock of my actually doing

anything constructive at all, well, I reasoned, I might even find a cure for indolent old Marwan.

"Insha' Allah," I whispered to myself, as I finished my beer and made a note on my napkin of the telephone number under the symbol on the poster.

So this is really it, I thought, as I walked along the shimmering pavements of my home town. The boy is dead. Long live Marwan Tayeh!

The world seemed to open up before me, throwing up a bright and broad horizon, as though the city streets had suddenly peeled back to reveal a towering sky rising above the vastness of an empty ocean, an ocean upon which I would finally set sail like a latter-day Sinbad. At last, in my darkest hour, I discovered that fundamental certainty that underpinned the true self. I felt as though I finally knew myself. I knew what I had to do. I knew that although you cannot hide from fate, you can at least run free for a while, free of the inevitability of an overdrawn current account, free of the contracted marriage ceremony and the small deaths of domesticity that I imagined were the staple of my parents' lives. I would do something good and in the process I would slough off the juvenile skin of my life, would become a man and find a way to express my definite views on how a world should be organised. I would find a way to paint the world in solid shades by being a volunteer, by righting some of the wrongs done to a shabby island people who lived in the twin shadows of poverty and disillusionment. Marwan Tayeh would walk among them and bring light.

Two weeks short of my twenty-first birthday I walked into the ArabAid office in down-town Beirut, filled in a small forest of forms, handed over my passport, and gave the Infidel West a year of my life. Having done this, having given of myself to the world, I took our Lady Fortune by the hand and returned to my parents' house, confident that I could weather any storm.

There followed a typhoon of argument and earnest discussion, followed by a hurricane of shopping and packing, but not once did I doubt the purpose of what I had chosen to do. I stood firm in the face of the tempests.

I waited for a telephone call. It took nearly a month of meetings, six weeks on a series of training and familiarisation courses, and I

was ready to go, ready to teach Arabic to the unfortunates at the far edge of the developed world, ready to assume an assistant teaching post at the Middle East University in London.

After a lifetime of climbing and grazing my hands, elbows and knees on the rough old bark of the Turkey Oak in our garden in Jnah, it seemed to me as though I was finally standing on the highest branch, looking out across the world, ready to fly the nest. I was no more aware of the attentive gaze of the hawk as was my old friend the sparrow.

13

Time drifts away from you in the darkness. The physical restrictions of captivity combine with the dull weight of fantastic duress. I felt battered and bruised, beaten to a pulp by the blunt cudgel of absolute, heart-rending stress and a shattering sense of loss that came with all these thoughts of home. I was exhausted, burning up with fear and a feverish infirmity of thought. I lost all sense of how long the journey took. The aches in my joints progressed from a dull niggle through spasmodic and painful cramps, before finally settling into what I firmly believed to be a numb precursor to necrosis. I closed my eyes and tried to let the rumble of tyres on asphalt hypnotise me. I tried to will myself to sleep but such a release was impossible. Instead I subsided slowly into a state of bland resignation, a strange, unearthly becalming before the next storm-front

After a while, as I became more attuned to the creaks and groans and growls of my automotive prison cell, I became aware of the men in the car speaking over the mechanical fury of the beast within whose gullet I was slowly dissolving. We bumped across a kerb, the violence of the manoeuvre crashing my head against the trunk lid yet again. I took it as a warning. I could feel the worn tyres underneath me fighting for grip in the summer dust. We were crossing open ground, unmade ground, and the soft, flabby suspension of the old American jalopy wallowed and yawed drunkenly. The trunk space filled with a fine storm of dry particles kicked-up by the rear wheels and I started to choke again. Putting my mouth to the bullet hole was no use. Dust streamed into my living space from every crack and fissure. My eyes watered with irritation and the tears mingled with the sweat running down my face. I pulled the rag away from the burning patch of floor above the exhaust pipe and held it over my nose and mouth. It tasted sickly, chemically sweet.

With a sudden sense of decompression the car lurched to a halt and the sound of the engine died away. I could hear voices, sporadic and urgent, and as the exhaust ticked towards coolness beneath me. I thought I could even hear birdsong, the chatter of squabbling sparrows, just like the ones I had heard in the street

earlier that morning. This brief moment, this small miracle of innocent, natural life existing alongside the gun barrel, reminded me that even in the direst of circumstances the world keeps turning. The freedom of the moment took me briefly home to the Turkey Oak in our back garden in Jnah. If birdsong was the last thing that I should ever hear I believed that I could at least die with the song playing in my heart as some small consolation.

I braced myself against the sides of the trunk and waited for the blinding, full frontal flood of daylight, waited for the dull crack of an automatic weapon in that final instant, but there was no light, no crack, no jolt. Car doors slammed. I heard footsteps, uneven, broken footsteps on rough ground, and then nothing but the birds. Although the heat and fumes from the exhaust were draining away now that we had stopped, I could feel another sort of oppression rising. The heat now was arid and breathless, the climax of a full summer day under a clear sky where a terrified and stupefied man lay in a roasting tin box in the middle of an outlandish killing field.

I must have drifted away from consciousness again for a moment or two. I should have heard footsteps and voices. I should have been aware of a key in a lock, but I wasn't. The suffocating shroud of warmth in which I was cocooned burst open in a blinding flash of brilliant sunlight. The trunk lid was wide open. I was so stiff that I could barely move, managing only to thrust my arm across my face to shield my eyes from the slashing blades of light that spun and whirled across my dulled retinas. From under my forearm I blinked briefly and could just make out coronas of light around shifting, human shadow-ghosts.

I felt hands on my body, hauling me up and out of the car. My shirt caught on the locking mechanism and ripped. They swung my legs out and lifted up my limp torso. Once out of the trunk my legs buckled underneath me and I fell down on all fours, panting, gasping for breath, able to squint now at the boots of my captors. The smiling man, the good cop who first manhandled me on the steps to my flat, knelt down beside me and offered me a bottle of mineral water.

"Please, drink, clear your head," he said quietly in English.

From this time onwards neither he nor any of his compatriots made any further attempt to speak to me in Arabic.

I felt the bottle being placed to my lips. The water was warm, but right there in the dirt I wouldn't have changed it for the finest Lebanese wine. I managed to sit back against the rear of the car and hold the bottle upright, drinking down huge gulps of water. As I sucked on its contents the cracking of the plastic bottle seemed oddly reassuring, a sound from the good old days of throw-away freedom and consumer certainties.

I took in more of my surroundings now that my eyes were becoming accustomed to the full breadth of the day. I was surrounded by a forest of legs, four men, two of them facing me, two of them facing away from the car, clearly on point duty. Jeans and fatigue pants. Boots and belts. Webbing. Combats and torn tee-shirts. Shaven heads. On one of the men's shoulder I could just make out a tattooed image of a burning cross. Maybe fifty metres from the car, to the right I could see an old warehouse or factory building. There were other buildings too, scattered across the landscape, and all of them seemed hollow and unkempt. The land was littered with broken glass and shattered clay pipes.

I felt more hands pressing rudely into my flesh. My captors hauled me upright and they taped my hands behind my back. Then they taped my legs. I watched, disembodied, feeling only the basic stings of physical existence. It was simply a relief to stand upright and to stretch my cramped and aching muscles. My mind was blank, as if I were deaf and dumb and watching a film, watching a gratuitous gangster flick in a mental vacuum. This random band of hoodlums busied themselves with the method and process of kidnap. After my hands and feet had been securely bound one of them placed a hessian sack over my head and shoulders.

Returned to shadow once more I regained my senses, as though the world in daylight was too much to comprehend. I heard voices again but I couldn't associate the sounds with words. It was probably the onset of shock. One of the men said something quite unintelligible to me and I felt hands on me once more. I was lifted up onto somebody's shoulder and carried like a sack of softly groaning potatoes across the broken ground.

The light dimmed and the air on my exposed arms felt a degree or two colder. I heard the sound of boot soles on concrete and the closing of a heavy wooden door. A bolt slid forward along a

groove. I heard scuffing and then another door opening. I heard the sound of complaining, poorly lubricated metal. I felt my carrier drop down to his knees and I was turned so that I was propped up in a sitting position. I could feel cold air on my ankles. Hands grabbed my feet. Another pair of hands pushed in under my armpits and shoved me along the floor. My knees bent downwards over a hole and I was man-handled down a ladder, a commodity being stored away for a rainy day, like meat being humped from the slaughter house to the cold store. At the bottom of the ladder the first man down grunted and strained as he took my full weight. My head bounced off the rungs of the ladder adding to my already bruised sense of confusion and impotence. One of the guards bent down in front of me and removed my shoes. I felt another rough hand on my shoulder, felt downward pressure, and from some deep and hidden well of despair I found the strength to resist. I tried to show my captor that I was not ready for the dirt in what I now assumed was my grave.

He screamed at me, "Down. Now. On your knees!"

Full force. Weight. Blunt metal on my neck.

The dream was over. I snapped back into real time. I was in a hole, lost, underground, descending into the underworld. My once imagined Odyssean journey was playing out in terrible reality. Shade and light drifted in and out of focus through the hessian weave, and I felt as though I should place coins upon my eyes for the boatman.

That final blackout never came. After another moment or two I realised that the fluctuations in light were caused by a low watt light bulb shining through the weave of the sack covering my head. In the absence of obvious visual clues I started to draw for myself a mental picture of my surroundings. There was a distinct odour of damp earth, the smell that bursts out with the fungal spores when an old log is overturned. I couldn't see the man with the gun, but I could feel his presence next to me. The tip of the gun barrel that he pressed against my neck shook slightly. My captor was breathing hard. He sounded scared.

Orders were shouted down through the opening, and although my English was fairly fluent by now, the speed of delivery, the

urgency and the echo, turned the otherwise familiar words into an alien language, guttural and brutal.

"Head…knees…blind…there…no, there…knife…"

One of my captors shinned down the ladder and thumped down on to the floor beside me. Yet again I felt the hard bones of foreign hands under my armpits, digging into my soft flesh, leaving their mark on my skin. They hauled me upright. I heard the word knife again, and this time I was convinced that they meant to do it. I could feel the blood pounding through my temples. I didn't want to die in a hole. I didn't want to leave my family to spend eternity in this stinking pit, lost and forgotten, alone.

Through the loose knit of the sacking I saw a human shape bend down in front of me. This was it. Should I try to kick out? My legs were still bound. Could I fight back somehow? Impossible scenarios rushed in and out of my mind; the tragic hero laid low, the vain assault of the taped-up man. I fantasised about a boy who could wield a knife with devastating effect despite his physical bonds. I felt a sharp hardness slide between my legs. I heard my captors laugh. They were going to slice me open from the bottom upwards. Fantasy and reality. So much for dying bravely. I urinated involuntarily for the second time that morning.

"Jesus Christ!"

The man with the knife pulled back as my jeans turned blue-black and began to drip. Beside me the man with the gun gave a low, throaty chuckle. I could smell my own sweat, mingled now with the distinct aroma of fresh urine, and all of it fusing with the damp, earthy musk of the pit.

Voices in the hole bounced off the walls. The echo started to build within my head a vague sense of directions, but I still could not get a grip on the visualisation. Monsters in the twilight.

"Dirty little shit."

"Shut up, Dave, how'd you like it?"

"Fuck off. They're all the same. Bloody Arabs."

"I said shut it. The poor sod's piss-scared. Literally. Let's get him done and dusted, alright?"

The knife slid in between my ankles quickly once again and I felt it slice through the tape. My captors spun me round and did the same with the binding on my wrists. Still with the sacking over my

head, they dragged me across roughly laid concrete. My left knee stubbed against a door jamb and I yelped with pain. It was the first real sound that I had made since I had dropped through the rabbit hole into this looking-glass world.

Hands in the small of my back. A shove. I sprawled head first onto the floor beyond the doorway, grazing the palms of my hands as I slid across more of the same rough concrete. I lay prone and abandoned on the floor as I received my first instructions. Barked orders. That same guttural brutishness.

"Simple rules, mate. Keep your head down and you'll be alright. Break them and you'll get what you deserve. One: you put that sack over your head whenever a guard opens this door. No looking. Two: you piss and shit in a bucket over there in the corner."

I could not see anything with the sacking over my head, so I had to trust that this was the case.

"Three: you get ten minutes every morning to slop out and shower. Four: you get breakfast every morning and an evening meal. One bottle of water a day. Don't ask for anything else. Five: you do what the boys say. Always. Do you understand?"

I breathed in deeply and twisted round so that I could see filaments of weak electric light through the open doorway. The silhouette in the doorway formed the shape of a thin man, a man who sounded familiar, the man from the street outside my flat in London.

"Yes," I said, trying to sound firm, "I understand."

"Right, behind you, to your left there's a mattress. Sit with your back against the wall and get those jeans off."

I sat back and peeled my soaking jeans and my boxer shorts off my sore legs. I shivered in the cool, damp air. The thin man's number two stepped into the room and squatted down in front of me. He gingerly picked his way through my jeans pockets, taking my wallet and some loose change. Then he grabbed my left wrist. I pulled back instinctively, shouting out a simple denial.

"No!"

I received a sharp blow to my forehead. The handle of a knife. My head cracked against the wall. The last straw. The camel's back snapped in two. The overwhelming effects of stress and violence took their inevitable toll of my senses.

14

After my acceptance by ArabAid, the final few weeks at home passed quickly and easily. I think that the simple fact of my choosing something definite, despite everyone's initial disappointment at my dropping out of college, helped my father to overcome his by now habitual displays of displeasure and frustration. We shared together the fragile luxury of a little time to think things through, and for my father, being almost seventy years of age and having finally retired on a good pension just a few months previously, such serious considerations could be afforded a lifetime of experience and care. Without the pressures of work, and wrapped as he was in my mother's softening embrace, he was mellowing, and it was only in the dog days of my late emergence into the world as an adult, when this decision about my immediate future started to focus my own mind on the possibilities inherent in life, that we both began to see beyond the superficial friction of our relationship.

I think the routine of training helped. By keeping regular hours for the six weeks of my familiarisation course, by coming home of an evening and joining in with the family debates around the dinner table, by showing a rare and sustained enthusiasm for this uncertain future, my father recognised in me many familiar, kindred traits. Instead of talking at me he began to talk with me. It was something of a revelation for me to find that parts of our previously separate worlds actually existed together underneath the same heaven-sent sky. Growing up is a strange and dangerous affair, usually made all the worse by the fact that you recognise the criticisms and comments of others but find that recognition too painful to accept. There is nearly always a period of denial, a period of shouting back, of treating the prickly friend as an enemy, before one day you look in the mirror and see your own reflection humble in admission.

During this period of waiting and learning, beyond the books, the lectures and my wild rhetoric, I started to look into the depths of reflected perspective that lay behind that steamy mirror. My father saw this happening too and, perhaps remembering something of his own youth, he broke away from the inevitable narrowing of

horizons that accompanies ageing and walked with me through my discoveries. It is a time that I cherish and honour.

We discussed the state of the world and how, even though names and faces change, the essential elements of life remain the same. We reviewed aspects of my training. We debated the disjointed nature of the European experience, and I discovered things about Najm el Din Tayeh that I had never suspected: that he had travelled in the late fifties before settling to the family trade; that he had visited Baghdad, Mecca and Cairo; that he spent a month in Rome; that he been a member of the Lebanese Communist Party for a year at university and been arrested for protesting against the rising threat of nuclear annihilation. My father was suddenly so much cooler than I. That annoying fraction of knowledge suddenly seemed so much greater than anything I could offer to the world.

This time of interviews and training, in total ten weeks of a balmy autumn and mild early winter spent in the discovery of myself and my family, was a time of gentle relaxation for all of us after the vexations caused by my recent vicissitudes and attitudes. Yasamin, my mother, the discouraged woman at the cash point, watched her two boys finally break through the wire-bound perimeters of their generational ghettos and become true friends. As the tensions drifted away from our house on the afternoon sea-breezes, she smiled and shopped and packed my bags with woollen jumpers, thick socks and heavy cotton trousers, all of them designed to protect me from the harsh realities of the English weather. Despite the inherent dangers of my working abroad, she was delighted in the change, absorbed by the need to succour her loved ones, and never, I think, happier.

On the last weekend before I was due to leave for London I spent a happy day visiting my friend Jamal in Gemmayze, where I apologised for my past boorishness. I visited my step-brothers and their families, and finding warmth in their company that I had never before experienced, I said an almost fond adieu to Jnah and to the innocent haunts of my childhood. On the last yaum al-ahad of Dhul-Qi'dah, the first Sunday of December in the Gregorian Calendar, which would shortly come to be the measure of so much of my time, I sat for a chilly hour on the lowest bough of the

Turkey Oak, wrapped up in one of my new jumpers. I watched the lights of the city merge into the late afternoon gloom. My little moment of closure, of quiet expectation, was broken by the sound of my mother's voice. From the backyard veranda of my parent's villa she called to me.

"Marwan, come in now, dear, our guest is here."

My father had expressly invited Rafik Arris for this my last dinner on Lebanese soil for at least six months. Rafik Arris had been Lebanese Ambassador to the Court of Saint James for two years in the late nineties, and was a long time friend of my father's, both of them having attended the same course at university. The purpose of the meal was to say goodbye, and, for good measure, to give me a frank and bare-metal view of what I was letting myself in for. The late nineties had seen the last bloodthirsty acts of civil war in England before the coming of an uneasy peace. Rafik witnessed at first hand the last of that peculiar Christian ferocity that pits sect against sect in the pursuit of power through the medium of religious divide. He had been right in the middle of the chaos, had been there when the street bombs shattered panes of glass and smashed brittle lives with random finality. Rafik shuddered even now as he recounted these dark tales and remembered the high velocity crack when snipers picked-off the brave and the foolhardy across the green demarcation lines of the city. This meal and this man's company was my father's way of telling me that he loved me and that he wished me safe on my adventure.

After our meal, as we drank dark, sweet coffee and sipped at our fragrant glasses of warming Greek brandy, as my father and Rafik made their first inroads into a box of Cuban cigars, a gift from Rafik for the evening meal, the conversation turned away from politics. Rafik reminisced about the pale light of the Cotswolds. He talked about taking a car and twisting and barrelling along the lanes that scar the deep green velvet of Devon's hills. Finally he crashed the conversation into the neon brightness and brashness of London's crowded markets. Rafik was fascinated by the basic warmth of a people who had learned to hide themselves behind a mask, and who warped every hope that they held in their hearts into a dark despair under the shadow of the gun barrel.

"You have to understand this, Marwan," said Rafik. "There are things of beauty, people of real worth and humanity in the country, but there is a black heart of misery as well. We're lucky. We have material things: we have freedoms, so many ways to say what we want. Since the war, since the collapse of the Hanoverian unity, the country has ground to a halt. Many of the people are poor, especially the rural population, and that makes them malleable. Individually they are basically good people, they love their children, love their God, but they can't express these things easily. There's not much in the way of education out in the countryside, and what there is tends to be manipulated by the militias and religious groups. They are open to suggestion, a suggestion driven by their poverty, by their lack of education."

I nodded. My father nodded. Yasamin used my old tactic of staring at the tablecloth to hide her maternal concerns. Some of this I had heard before at college from well-meaning middle class intellectuals. Some of Rafik's advice grated on my still unpolished edges, but I was changing and unlike those argumentative episodes in my immediate past, this time I remained silent. Now was not the time to trot out my old arguments about personal responsibilities. This was not the time to disturb my father's last, heart-warming investment in his youngest son's future.

Rafik emptied his brandy glass and as my father poured another liberal shot he went on. "The politics of the place is fractured beyond belief. I know we have our problems, I know that Arab fights Arab fights Persian fights Turk, but we have strong leaders, strong men who know how to wield power. Somewhere along the line they have lost this. There are many names for it in our newspapers, on our televisions and in our cafés: the culture of the war-lord, terrorism, bestiality even, but the truth is simpler. What ails these people is a curable disease. It's despair.

And then we have the Americans, reverse colonisers, influencers and bank-rollers, stealers, petty and vindictive thieves. They export their evangelical messages, their strict scriptural views of our world, and into the bargain they throw M-16 rifles and rocket launchers. However it's packaged, under whichever banner they proclaim the faith of their struggle, the truth is that the English are being used because they have lost hope. Never forget this, Marwan,

no matter how safe or committed you might feel: a people without hope end up seeking salvation in extremes."

15

The flight over Europe was a mixed bag of fascination and boredom. It was the first long flight that I had ever taken. Youth and inexperience has a way of making the mundane exciting, especially when the end result of five and a half hours at thirty-five thousand feet is entry into your very own brave new world.

I flicked through the Lebanese Airways magazine, marking an article on my country of destination for future reference by folding down the page corner. The plastic tray of tabouleh was overly spiced with ground black pepper but otherwise passable and, having secured an aisle seat, I was able to stretch out a little and ease the cramps in my calves. My neighbour slept through most of the flight, but when awake he introduced himself as Anwar, an Egyptian oil worker.

We shared a brief conversation about the financial possibilities of the recent north sea gas and oil discoveries that were suddenly causing the petroleum corporations of the developed East to take notice of poor little England. In my new-found sympathy for the oppressed, committed now as I was to helping rather than exploiting these people, I quickly started to resent Anwar's laissez-faire attitude to benefits that might accrue to the great multitude of unwashed, non-believers, and in so doing gave myself little opportunity to mine Anwar's experience for English gold. Our conversation tailed off rather rapidly after the in-flight meal.

To my surprise Heathrow did not compare too unfavourably with Beirut International Airport, but there were clear signs of difference: a grubbier feel to the corridors and a significant number of armed, nervous looking, pale-skinned men wearing dark green uniforms, lining those same dirty passageways. Nonetheless the inevitable expanse of concrete and glass, the global familiarity of conveyor belts, polished steel and baggage trucks, brought to my mind all those clichés about a small world.

Once through the hard glare of the customs booths, and with my single large suitcase in tow, I walked through a pair of heavy double doors and into the arrivals lounge. Here, under bare strip-lights, where a distinctly cool breeze met and mingled with the heat

of bodies from the baggage claim, I was met by another crowd of whey-faced men and women holding up signs with names printed in marker pen on cardboard. To find my driver amongst the crowds at the barriers I turned the dial away from my usual, fluent Arabic and tuned into my stilted and still ungrammatical English.

We exchanged a quick greeting during which I found my basic grasp of the language exposed as slow and dim-witted. He told me that his name was David and taking my suitcase he asked me politely to follow him. I had experienced the chill of a Mediterranean winter's afternoon, but it was nothing compared to my first taste of the dull, overcast, purple and grey of London on a low and cramped December evening.

As we walked across crowded lanes of cars, taxis and buses I was aware of people and headlights, of strange voices and pinched faces. The walkways teemed with people and I remembered that London was a city of some ten million souls while Beirut, for all the glory of location and climate, could muster perhaps two million inhabitants. I felt the first sense of being an alien, of claustrophobia, as though the proximity of so many people might close in and swamp me like a punctured inflatable dinghy on a high sea. This was a world of turned-up collars, long coats and garish yellow neon.

Our car was an old Rover, showing a leopard-skin pattern of rust spots through finned rear wings. The rear bench seat was shabby, the leather cracked and sagging through years of use. The engine growled under acceleration and David grinned at me as he explained slowly that the engine, "the lump," as he called it, produced three and a half litres of American horse-power capable of taking the machine to over one hundred and forty miles per hour. I very much doubted that we would wheeze beyond sixty, but I tried to look impressed.

I asked in my stilted and awkward English, "Is this the best the agency can do?"

David looked sternly at my reflection in his rear view mirror before smiling softly and replying.

"It's best not to draw attention to yourself, Sir. We prefer to use local cars. New ones, foreign cars, they advertise, if you know what I mean."

I explained to David that I did know what he meant, which made him laugh. It was a colloquial expression of emphasis rather than a question.

Our destination was Earls Court. From Heathrow the streets changed by turns from a mixed estate of reasonably new looking industrial units around the airport perimeter through various stages of dilapidation until we hit the old steam and coal driven slums of the inner west London suburbs. I could see my driver frowning as he pointed out landmarks in the tumbledown outskirts of Chiswick as seen from the Great West Road the bombed-out shell of the Gillette factory, houses pock-marked with bullet scars, and everywhere I looked I saw the unmistakably gaunt shabbiness of a world grown tired and inward-looking. The city, this heart of a nation, this seat of government, of Plantagenet and Hanoverian kings, this cradle of a long drawn-out but ultimately failed experiment in democracy, could no longer shake off the dust-caked fatigues of civil war.

As we hit the inner circle of the western approach to the city, passing signs to Fulham, West Kensington and Notting Hill, as we crossed one of the city's arterial railway lines and joined the Warwick Road, the city changed again. The street lights worked. Shop fronts glowed brightly rather than being shuttered against some unseen enemy, and people flowed along the pavements in tight little knots that swirled and merged like schools of bright silver fish.

"Welcome to your new home", my driver said as we turned into Eardley Crescent. This was more like the London I had imagined. We drove slowly down the street, passing between ranks of immaculate three storey Victorian villas, substantial and solid behind their red and white brick façades and Doric porticos. I was to reside in flat number three, on the third floor of 56 Eardley Crescent, a home to be shared with two other members of the ArabAid agency staff – a place of safety that was to prove a convivial but largely illusory introduction to my life in a foreign land.

Fatigue and friendly faces. My new flat mates were called Ibrahim and Usman, one a descendent of the Mughal, the other a Palestinian from Tyre. They introduced themselves and we drank

coffee. Ibrahim was tall and thin with a wry smile and a soft, Peshawar-accented voice. Speaking rarely, letting Ibrahim play the role of host, Usman watched the new boy through dark eyes that would, had I the wit to understand, have told me all that I needed to know about living the wrong sort of expatriate life in England for any length of time. Ibrahim showed me to my room. The flat was warm. The sound of a boiler firing regularly in the kitchen took a little getting used to. Odd to think that one of the first things I noticed about the differences between my Lebanese home and my newly adopted country was central heating.

My head filled with names and faces and greetings. I felt awkward and unsure of myself amongst strangers in a strange land, especially so as the images from the streets collided with the realities of the day-to-day existence that I could see in the flat. Suddenly I felt very tired. I washed quickly, made my excuses and shut the door to my bedroom, a small box room at the front of the flat with a clear view of the street. I could not be bothered to unpack, and lacking any books by my bedside, I took the in-flight magazine from my shoulder bag and opened it up at the marked article. "…is a complex mixture of the bucolic and the belligerent, and just like these twin but opposing poles, the English peoples are also an intricate blend of races. The island has experienced waves of migration throughout its history, especially in the aftermath of the collapse of Mediterranean Christianity at the end of the Crusading period. At times this little country has punched well above its weight, especially during the period of its great seafaring expeditions to the Americas some three hundred years ago, but in recent years this same complex mix of racial and religious diversity has lead to fractures in the body politic of the country. In particular England's former American colonies have developed a strong influence on sections of the population since the emergence of some of the more radical and militant American Christian philosophies…"

I had studied the histories and read the newspapers. I believed that I knew what I was letting myself in for in coming to England. As I lay in the warmth of my bed and closed my eyes, tucked up safely in the bosom of an ArabAid safe house, the contents of the

magazine article and the warning given to me by Rafik Arris seemed remote now.

16

Over the next few weeks I stumbled into the routines of expatriate life. During the week I rose at seven with the sound of church and chapel bells ringing through the streets, calling the faithful to prayer. At eight o'clock one of the agency drivers would ring the buzzer at the front door and Ibrahim, Usman and I would trot down to the car like schoolboys to be driven in turn to our places of work. Ibrahim was leading a reconstruction project out at the airport and was always the last to be dropped off.

Usman and I were both assigned to the Middle Eastern University, whose campus was based in the grounds of what had once been an old country house, the home for centuries of the Dukes of Northumberland. Syon Park still boasted a formidably beautiful main house, from which the university authorities now carried out their duties. The main faculty buildings were housed in a series of single storey modern red-brick pavilions that spiralled out from a central courtyard in which the famous statue of Flora still stands upon her tall, thin column. It never failed to amuse me that the name of the place where our campus was situated was a Christian derivation from Mount Zion, a hill just outside our own holy city of Jerusalem. My amusement did not, however, extend to the physical humour of the location. Armed guards watched over each of the entrances to the college and rolls of razor wire topped fences and stone walls, but not, as I first thought, to keep us in, but to keep others out.

As an Arabic language teaching assistant my job was to help more experienced teachers in their practical work with the students. The reality was that once I acquired a basic level of local fluency, and after I had witnessed the teaching method in all of its glory, I was given my own group to lead towards the wonders of global conversation. There were simply never enough of us on site to cope with the workload. With the arrival of oil revenues, and the accompanying explosion of Middle Eastern economic aid and trade with the country, the English government was pumping money into education. Class numbers were rising to such an extent that even my modest skills were of use. I taught conversational Arabic to

twenty-five young English men and women, and I loved every minute of it.

My students were bright and, given so much negative reporting back home in Lebanon, surprisingly articulate. Once we overcame some of our mutual reserve we found that we shared a lot of common ground. It was, I suppose, understandable given our respective ages. I was, in effect, a student too. The warnings about religion and debate, about politics and taking sides, could be set aside with relative impunity in the rarefied atmosphere of the Student Union. Teaching at Syon was like being back at college in Beirut. In the classroom and over tea and coffee in the refectory, my students and I found that we could cut through so many of the factions and fictions that are trotted out in the popular media. I learned a few simple, home truths.

The English are, by nature, no more barbaric or backward than anyone else. The country was, in simple terms, basically sound and these young people were not demons, were not the crazed gunmen of our newsreels. They told me that they wanted no part in the militias. They wanted to mend their country. They all knew someone who had either been a victim of sectarian violence or had taken part in it. I tried to make a point of the fact that we are all victims, but a number of them, mostly young men, argued against me most vehemently. I began to realise through my conversations with these bright young men and women just how narrow a world view I really held. My experience as a young man was entirely inadequate in debate with these eager citizens of a war-racked land.

"The Americans," they said, "are arming the militias again, only this time the targets will be Persians, Turks and Gulf Arabs. Now that we have oil, the stakes are higher."

When you see yourself reflected in the passionate eyes of the young and the eager from another world it can take a while to regain your composure. After a few moments I plunged on with my naïve questioning and asked them about the militias, about why the country had, on and off, suffered civil war for thirty years or more. My students were quite blunt about it. "Oil. Oil and the Americans. And you."

Steve, one of my younger students explained. "After the Great War, when you Arabs [their term for the wider industrialised

Islamic world] took control of things, our fathers thought we'd benefit as well: that we'd be re-united with the Americas, that we'd be strong, like you. But none of it happened. All this globalisation, all this wealth, passed us by. The Americans went off on their isolationist shit for a generation and then, when we got oil and gas in the north sea, suddenly they're back. Until the oil came, we had no real industry to speak of, nothing properly developed, not after the Great War and the bombing, and our governments were just as bad, selling us out to whoever offered them the biggest kick-backs. When people have got nothing and then someone turns up with money, guns and a message, when the oil came and the Americans came, that's when it went wrong. And now you lot have arrived with your aid money and your engineers and your talk about stable government and human rights."

Some of the debates got quite prickly, but slowly I began to see some of the problems – problems that never seemed to get an airing in the press at home. Despite these moments, we gradually started to rub along well together, with me teaching some rudimentary Arabic to the English, while they taught me about the bare bones of life. We found that we could generally relax on campus, but as the bells rang at the end of the day, as the students and local teachers approached the razor wire and fell in step with the armed guards, you could see everyone tensing-up, becoming nervous, betraying their fear by the hunching of shoulders and the quickening of their footsteps on the cold January paving stones.

Freezing, stamping our feet on the cobbles as we smoked and breathed-out great white clouds of smoke, Usman and I would wait under the grand portico of the old house for Ibrahim and our driver to arrive. Then, as the lights of the city changed raindrops into sodium yellow viral spores on the breeze, we slunk back to Earls Court.

Usman invariably started the same conversation in the back of that wheezing car. "So, how did it go today?" he would ask nonchalantly. "Any joy?" He always looked at me with a knowing smile when he asked this now familiar question.

There was one day that I remember when my usual sarcastic grimace gave way to a broad smile. "Actually, there might be something", I whispered conspiratorially.

"Go on, do tell me more."

"At coffee this morning, one of the girls, Deb, brushed my hand. I'm sure she was making cow eyes at me in the lecture."

"Sounds promising." Usman was whispering too. "So, you going to ask her out? Get her along to one of our parties or something? Or is it the quiet dinner for two and a rosebud between your teeth?"

The grimace returned. I made a face at Usman and sat in silence for the rest of the journey, while he poked fun at me. I felt just like a naïve little boy hanging around with the playground bullies.

Away from work, away from our closed campus, away from the slightly suffocating presence of our minders, Usman and I developed a good relationship. Perhaps it was the shared experience of the Middle East University that brought us closer together, while Ibrahim, who was older than the both of us, who had worked on many overseas projects, proved to be something of a loner. He worked, he read and he prayed. For Usman and I, however, the open doors of the expatriate community around Earls Court were far too much of a temptation. We invented a legion of reasons for our dissipations, but the truth behind our peripatetic round of debauchery was that it relieved the feeling of claustrophobia exerted by the close confines of our working routines. By opening the door of our flat to life on the streets of Earls Court we tempted the fates and, in our own eyes, made ourselves bigger than we really were. Looking back I also think that Usman took a strange pleasure from that fact that he could take me out with him. He enjoyed giving me, the new kid on the block, the benefit of his brief but seemingly vast experience.

There were regulars in the bars and restaurants that we visited: members of the overseas pan-Muslim community who refused to let the simmering tensions of London prevent them from enjoying their vicarious lives. Our new-found comrades included fellow aid workers, a plethora of bright-eyed news-hounds, the inevitably stoical cameramen, and a general assortment of freebooters and long-term expatriate residents. Some of the bars and shops were owned by members of our own communities, a number of whom had simply never got round to leaving, while others had nowhere

else to go. We drank and we ate. We talked incessantly. We watched satellite news channels with cold drinks in our hands and, in the increasingly liberated presence of women, both local and from our homelands, we flirted and danced and drank again. For all that I tried I could not get to like the dark, flat, hoppy local beer, but there were plenty of imports available. Whisky, on the other hand, was another revelation in the life of Marwan Tayeh.

The simple daily round of work, drink, eat, drink some more and then the fall into numbed sleep eventually desensitises you to the passing of time. You don't notice that your skin is maturing and weathering in the harsh cold of a north European winter. Similarly, the daily contact with an alien people, the recognition of shared hopes and fears, the exposure to ideas and altered circumstance, seeps into you. It is an osmotic process by which you absorb a locale and a sense of your place in the world. By regular but imperceptible degrees I accelerated the process of change, becoming so much more than the boy who had so recently flown the nest. I never did ask my student, Deb, out for that drink.

I remember my first sight of the real London, the London beyond the agency car, the compound and the expatriate bar-room crawl. One Saturday in early February, Usman and I hired a car and a driver from a security firm used by our agency. We asked our driver to show us the sights of the city. We visited the old mock medieval parliament buildings, drove around the government sector and stared at the shell holes that still pock-marked the former War Ministry building. We saw countless graffiti-covered statues and marvelled at the cracked dome of Saint Paul's Cathedral. We visited the old Norman Tower down by the river Thames and in our improving use of the English language, kept up a constant babble of question-and-answer with our driver, Mike.

We took lunch in a café on the Embankment where the locals stared at us, but not in anger. Theirs was a shy and quiet but persistent curiosity. We smiled back at them and, when asked, explained who we were and what we were doing. For our benefit Mike tried to look relaxed, but he was noticeably tense throughout the meal. On more than one occasion his hand moved inside his jacket when one of the locals got too close for comfort.

After lunch we took a stroll along the Embankment and looked out across the grey waters of the Thames at the distant southern bank. A bleak, monochrome, concrete ribbon ran along the length of the waterfront. Although the river was wide and the light poor we could see well enough, and the far city looked desolate and dirty. We could make out broken roof-lines and the shells of burnt-out cars on the mud flats on the far side of the river. Dirty, dark grey clouds smothered the tops of chimneys in the far distance.

I turned to Mike and asked, "What's that place? Can we go there?"

Mike stared at the southern wall of slums for a moment before replying.

"No, Mister Tayeh, we can't go there. It's Southwark Camp. Shanty town, full of refugees, it's a very dangerous place."

He pointed to his right, up and beyond a moored and mouldering black hulk, at Westminster Bridge.

"See the check-points? Military. If things kick-off again, it'll start over there."

So, this is the real thing, I thought to myself, this is where it all happens.

With the wide, grey river flowing lethargically between us, Southwark Camp seemed a million miles away. For the first time since my arrival, away from the cosseted émigré world that we inhabited, I started to understand just a little of the reality of London. From across a short stretch of dirty water I could be shot at by a sniper. I could watch a rocket burn its way into the heart of the northern boroughs of the city. We heard no gunfire on that Saturday, but we could see all too clearly that there was a scarred and wounded animal brooding on the far bank of the river Thames under a haze of low cloud and dirty coal smoke.

I tried to call home once every week, usually on a Sunday evening, and managed to send a reasonably consistent stream of short emails to friends and family. I invariably spoke to my mother when I called. I have never been particularly good on the phone, finding the process of speaking through the static, mechanistic machine, disconcerting. At that time mother was probably the one person who could elicit from me more than my typical

monosyllabic response to a question. She also had – and perhaps this is a fundamental part of the feminine, nurturing gene – an ability to ask the right questions. She had an ineffable way of capturing detail and from my garbled answers she could infer from our conversations something of her son's state of mind. Had I spoken directly with my father, we would have shared a few brief platitudes, the odd cursory constituent element of a story, and the rest of the family would have been none the wiser. As it was, my mother collected a weekly snapshot of my life and happily broadcast the story of Marwan Tayeh's adventure in England to a broad and encouraging audience.

Before my father became too ill to venture onto the golf course, he took my mother's version of my serialised narrative and proudly translated it into father-speak for his banking cronies on the nineteenth hole.

17

The English winter slipped through the turgid waters of February, which in turn drifted through overcast skies and rain soaked streets into the slow brightening of March. We had a few frosts at the beginning of the month and the sound of crisp grass crunching under my shoes on campus was a new experience for me, but one that I quickly grew to love despite the accompanying cold.

Another new experience, one that rapidly became the axis around which my calls home revolved, was the sound of gunfire. The lightening of the days after the lock-down of drab winter brought forth birdsong and leaf buds, and in the midst of this awakening brought forth unrest in the south London refugee camps. Rumours spread about factional fighting between Anabaptist groups and Davidians.

I answered my mother's constant and sometimes tearful requests that I be careful with a carefree nonchalance that I did not, in truth, feel. The feuds and fire-fights in the camps were sporadic and lazy. The reports on the television showed the by now typical shots of men firing automatic rifles around corners without actually looking for their supposed enemy. We were not touched in any direct way by the violence, even though it spread slowly, like a weak flu virus, into the villages and towns of the Thames Valley. Sectarian fighting broke out first in Slough and then in varying degrees through places that I had no knowledge of: Maidenhead, Reading, Theale and Abingdon.

We got on with our jobs. Our embassy issued bulletins and advised people to take precautions, but nothing more than that. The start of April marked the opening of my fifth month in England, meaning that I had just eight weeks to go until I could return to Lebanon for a week of rest and recreation. I started to make plans for the trip home, to collect the little mementos and keepsakes that would momentarily delight my family. Usman and I left Ibrahim to his increasingly solitary reflections and, despite the growing unease on London's dark and dirty streets, we kept to our hectic social schedule.

Even when the agency security advisers called round to instruct us on how best to avoid trouble, on how we should always travel in groups, how we should stay within the confines of our protected expatriate zones, we nodded agreement, made encouraging comments, and as soon as they had moved on to the next flat Usman and I left for a night out at a seedy Greek restaurant on Warwick Road.

Our particular west London suburb was deemed to be a safe haven. English people mixed with the expatriate community, the weight carried on their shoulders visibly lightened by the cosmopolitan atmosphere in the streets around Earls Court. Even when the army started setting up sandbags and machine gun emplacements on key junctions and interchanges on the A4 trunk road, we still felt safe. They were, after all, here to protect us.

On Saturdays I took to walking alone up to the Notting Hill markets to buy trinkets and souvenirs. I bought London buses for my nephews, dolls in pearly queen costumes for my nieces, and a shawl made of Nottingham lace for my mother. For some obscure reason I remember being particularly fascinated by an old and weathered bandolier. The leather was dry and cracked, with scuff marks all over it, and the buckle was red-black and seized with rust. The stall holder showed me three spent bullet casings lodged in their respective compartments, 3.03s from an ancient Lee-Enfield, a relic of the Great War rather than the more recent civil conflicts.

To me this seemed to sum up so much of what I saw here in England: relics from the past, particularly the ancient and endless cycle of blood-letting and grieving. I took the bandolier home and showed Usman. I delighted in telling him that it was a gift for my father from one youthful revolutionary to another. Usman smiled and feigned interest for a moment and then went back to watching the television.

"You'd better check this out," he said and added a weak impersonation of our driver's favourite phrase: "Serious shit."

We both watched transfixed as live news feeds showed government troops on the streets of the south London camps in Southwark, Greenwich and Croydon. This was a crackdown, the enforcement of law and order on the sundry factions and militias, a firm hand on a rifle butt, a small surgical strike to put a prompt end

to those nonconformists that sought to disrupt daily life. Reports came in of new checkpoints, of tanks on street corners and lorry loads of troops and government-backed paramilitaries being bussed across the bridges over the river Thames. Similar scenes were shown to be taking place across the south-east of the country, in towns and cities throughout this densely packed island. Conflict makes headlines. That evening my mother called.

"Marwan, my God, have you seen the news?"

The question struck me as slightly odd. I was in the place where the news was being made. "I'm fine, Mama, fine. Don't worry. There's a little bit of local difficulty, that's all, a few unhappy people. The government is dealing with it."

Mother was clearly nervous. Her voice rose an octave. "Dealing with it? Marwan, there are tanks on the streets!"

"It's okay, Mama – it's sort of normal here. Anyway, we're nowhere near the trouble. There's a bit of fighting in the camps, south of the river, nowhere near here. We're all quite safe. Usman is here with me. We're all okay."

Our conversation went on like this for nearly half an hour and by the end of it, as mother and I exchanged our small but nonetheless affectionate tokens and greetings for friends and family, Usman stood by the front door making hurry-up signs. We we're running late. One of the Jazeerah television cameramen was celebrating another birthday on the front-line and Usman and I had personal invitations.

Over the next three weeks the situation around London deteriorated significantly, in an almost direct but contrary relationship with my attitude to safety. Familiarity tends to breed a degree of contempt, but my attitude to danger in these first heady weeks and months of my foreign sojourn was based on more than just that. I wanted to escape the straight-jacket of agency minders. To be driven between safe zones, to exist behind razor wire, to mingle only with the privileged few on the international aid circuit, was, particularly given my age and naïvety, just too constricting. I wanted to find out more about this place that I had for nearly six months called home. It was a compelling want, a confused need, an irritation that I needed to scratch.

With hindsight, cutting through the psycho-babble, through the layers of mystery that I now understand to be layers of my own creation, I should have known how to behave. My home in Lebanon has a mixed history of occupation and rebellion, of warlords and holy men, of sectarianism and dubious tolerance, all of which should have informed me about the possibilities for trouble.

As with most people, especially the young, who believe that they are experiencing reality for the first and most vital time, who believe that now is all encompassing, I ignored the signs and portents. My own education contained enough of the key to the cipher that would make the message intelligible, but who among us wants to read symbols in the dust? The nature of the problem, the imperative at the heart of the universe, was Marwan Tayeh. The world still revolved around what I wanted and what I truly believed I deserved. As an old saying goes; you should be careful what you wish for.

The camps to the south of the Thames were not transient. These were not the tented townships that inevitably follow earthquake or typhoon. The south London camps were tenements, long lines of dishevelled and bombed-out back-to-back cottages and blocks of monumentally decrepit concrete. Over the previous three decades, as wave after wave of civil conflict waxed and waned across England, as the Hanoverians gradually lost control of the country amid a welter of ever more draconian restriction and retribution, the already run-down streets of the southern suburbs swelled with displaced people. In the final stages of the last full outbreak of civil war, which had officially ended some seven years prior to my visit, but the embers of which still smouldered in the slum-shadows of the city, the government posted tanks on street corners. These tanks were still there and now, as fighting flared again, those government forces undertook surgical, battle-group strikes against insurgents in the south and west of the country and along the borders between the mainland ethnic divides.

Television newsreels showed grainy clips of successful advances, while the trickle of refugees from the fighting grew by the day into a torrent. But no matter how dead the hand on the tiller of government, no matter how thorough the searchlight, it is always the rebels, the so-called terrorists and militants, who become ever

more brazen in their success, dancing on their many faceted pinheads before the city walls.

At the end of the last civil war, change had been inevitable. The government was toppled and a new coalition came to power, backed by American money and guns. The Hanoverians still clung to the levers of power but now they had partners with different agendas. The new powers changed the school curriculum, where history begins with a new book written by the incumbent authority.

This cycle had been repeating on and off for some thirty years. Each upsurge of violence created ever-shifting coalitions, conservative adherents of the status-quo, the religious hard-liners and the fundamentally collectivist adherents of the common weal, and one by one they all broke through the barriers, stormed the citadels of power and promptly established themselves in the same seats as their hated predecessors.

Change begins and ends with a name. For the multitude, for the displaced and the despairing, for the dispossessed, for the rag-tag inhabitants of the camp zones, the coalition leaders became valedictory oppressors and they, the foot soldiers of the revolution, burned slowly through the years before once again igniting the fuse of their hopeless fury. The year in which I chose to save the world was another point of ignition.

This latest, feeble English government put tanks on the streets and death squads into the night dark terrors of sleep. We saw official news bulletins in which the army carried out targeted operations while members of groups as diverse as the Virgin Martyrs or the Freedom Front brought bestial acts of terror to London's streets. We read pamphlets in which the glorious freedom fighters of the apocalypse struggled to free the common man from the oppression of tyrants and dictators.

The names of these groups, rooted in the psychology of the country and its latter day saints, roll off my tongue easily today; Grace, United People's Party, Cruce Signati, Trinity Coalition, Dies Irae and England Forever. The languages of conflict still echo in my head, languages that use the same words to mean different things to a majority of people who simply want to love their children, who simply want to live.

In the language of this conflict, in the code that determined my future, Monday April the twenty-seventh should have been a day to remember. It should have been the day that I saw the light, that I took notice of the subtle nature of the world around me, but as ever I wasn't paying attention. On this day the rebels defied the messages broadcast in strictly controlled television bulletins and newspaper editorials by bringing the war onto the streets of Earls Court. A car bomb exploded between the main gates of the Persian embassy compound, its driver immolating himself and twenty-three other people, a mix of civilian, military and diplomatic collateral, in the name of freedom, acting under the spell of the promised land of milk, honey and angelic virtue.

On this day, in what we believed was a safe area, near to the bare bones of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, the first kidnapping took place. Menachem Dov, a reporter doubling-up for The Times of Syria and one of the satellite broadcasters, a Jew from Nazareth, was bundled into the back of a black van in broad daylight. Footage from an earlier Jazeerah report on that night's six o'clock news showed pictures of a smiling man in a sports jacket and jeans, and the speculation started.

The agency sent round another memo about the heightened need for security. My mother called and she sounded like she had been crying enough to fill a small lagoon. I assured her that I would take care, that I had seen the coverage, had actually met the kidnap victim at a party a few weeks previously, and that he would be released shortly. I think I called the kidnap a propaganda stunt. After the call ended, Usman and I decided that we needed a drink.

18

When I eventually awoke and realised that I was in a cell, that my nightmare was real, that the memories of my months in England would never make a happy-go-lucky party tale, my head felt like it was full of butterfly wings. My tongue felt as though someone had glued it to the roof of my mouth. I sat in stupefied silence for some time, unable to focus on time or place, until a niggling sense of hurt began to worm its way through the earth covering my corpse. My captors had stripped me. The bastards had taken my wallet and my watch. My shoes were gone. I lay in darkness in what I now understood to be an underground cell. How dare they!

The stimulus that brought me back into the fully-waking world was the sound of voices – thin, muffled, fluttering voices – voices heard from behind metal, voices beyond a door. It was impossible to tell what was being said and by whom. The gossamer filaments in my head turned to stone the moment that I tried to move and I could feel a distinct and tender swelling on my forehead. Darkness came upon me once more, but this time it simply hovered above me before clearing slowly, leaving me nauseous but wide awake.

The voices receded and drifted up and away, back to the land of mortals. I stared into the pitch-black velvet of absolute external silence. The only sounds that I could hear were those that I myself made: the slide of my bare arse cheeks on the mattress; the rubbing of my shirt on the wall; the scratch of my skin flaking to dust. I sat in a blind funk for some time.

Usman came unbidden into my mind then, laughing and joking and ribbing me about my lack of success with the girls, especially my lack of success with the English student at the university. At that prompt, and with his usual sarcastic smile plastered all over my mind's eye, I tried to capture the warmth in Deb's eyes as she stared at me during lectures.

"Such a fool," I told myself over and over again. "Such a bloody fool."

I could not help but wander through the labyrinth of possibilities that I had spurned. Human comfort and warmth. Laughter at shared

jokes, jokes that only we two would understand. I imagined situations and moments, and it dawned on me then that I was sitting in the blind dark, alone, quite possibly waiting to die.

"Shit, you dumb-ass… you're going to die a virgin…"

With that the never more than hazy recollection of my might-have-been lover began to fade. The last thing I saw was that look in her eyes as she had brushed my hand in the cafeteria. A tear rolled down my cheek.

Without light, shut away beneath the rough ground of this foreign land, it was impossible to stop my thoughts from fidgeting. I tried in vain not to think, but unwanted images of pain and torture and death came anyway, drifting in and out of focus with fading recollections of my friends and family. I fought to control my breathing once more. This was the edge of panic, and I was being buried alive. It was all that I could do to stop myself from beating the suffocating sense of despair that I felt out of my head on the walls, but from somewhere deep within I summoned the sheer bloody-minded strength to keep my skull intact. I would not let them win that way. I would not. My rational self drifted through the hours, weaving complex webs of insanity and persecution as I twisted myself into mental knots.

The darkness and the silence unnerved me to such an extent that I could not speak out loud. I was afraid of making myself real in this fantasy nightmare. It was as though the void swallowed sound and thought like a black hole swallows light. To regain some semblance of control I tried to focus on a word, on one single idea to the exclusion of all else. The word took a long time to take shape and form and meaning. Every time that I tried to think about the first vowel I was hit by a cascade of unwelcome images, of twisted bodies, of coffins filled with scratching corpses, desperate to dig their way through the earth and out of the ground that held them so warmly. I felt impossibly small and immature, as though I were reading aloud in class and had stumbled across the first syllable of a new and intimidating collection of complex letters and phonetics. Mental dyslexia. I began to make pathetic little mewling noises in the darkness to accompany my wild gyrations of thought.

I stretched my arms out in front of my face in an attempt to push these horrors away from the blackboard in my head. Letters drew themselves up in random orders, dissolving and reforming themselves every time that I started to derive any form or meaning. My eyes were screwed tightly shut. I forced myself to concentrate and finally, as trickles of cold sweat ran down my sides, I could hear the dry scratching of soft white chalk. The word was 'hostage'. I cried myself into a stupor. It was the only way that I could hide from the one word that seemed to make any sense, and with that word came the story of Marwan Tayeh, remembered again in all its sad and shabby glory. Memories of the days before my abrupt capture seemed to me to be the only antidote to the inevitability of future isolation and lunacy.

19

Waking in a foreign city to the sound of gunfire in the small hours of the night becomes routine. The novelty of watching tracers illuminate the soft edges of this schizophrenic city with their beautiful but deadly pink, white and yellow lines of gently arcing lead eventually paled. The dull crump of a distant explosion, the crunching of glass underfoot in the mornings, the lines and dark rings under the eyes of our minders and students, all of these things flared and then faded into the background of our daily lives. People tried to live. Between the end of April and my leave at the end of May, in just four weeks, the lines of war shifted across the city. From the southern camps the rebel militias gained a foothold in Docklands, on the western approaches of the Thames Valley and in the Medway. As I packed my bags, carefully stowing away the souvenirs and gifts that I had bought for my family, as I tried to assemble my thoughts and feelings in a way that would give the folks back home a coherent glimpse of my new life, I watched the stories of kidnapping unfold.

Two members of the Persian television community were taken from their hotel in early May. A week later a Turkish lecturer was spirited away as he walked back from an ill-advised off-campus lunch with some of his students. He was followed by a Christian Armenian engineer, then by another lecturer, this time a Gulf Arab, and finally by a long time London resident, a Syrian shop keeper, who lived only two streets away from the apartment that Usman, Ibrahim and I lived in.

I could understand, in as much as I could grasp any of the kidnappers' motives, that the Persian and the Turkish kidnap victims might be taken. Their captors had no concept of the personal motives of these hitherto anonymous people for living and working in London. They were seen as blind tokens through which their respective nations could be taken to task. They were a key that might unlock the code to the dynamic of the expansion and dominance of the East. Given their homelands' respective roles in the emergence of world Islam, these hostages were obvious targets. The kidnap of the second Gulf-Arab lecturer was widely held by media-savvy opinion to be opportunistic.

The act that brought home to me the random proximity of this danger, however, was the Armenian. Apart from the geographical intimacy that we shared in our homelands, and even allowing that a mistake might have been made based on the oriental colour of his skin, the fact that as a fellow Christian believer he was not immediately released, shocked us all. We were told by state media that a number of groups were behind these apparently copycat kidnappings. The usual suspects. The word on the street was Cruce Signati, which was, as we were increasingly coming to recognise, the armed voice of a small but virulent fundamentalist American sect.

Not that any of this mattered. Usman and I worked and partied, sure in the knowledge that whatever might happen out there, it would never happen to us. It could not happen to us. We were special. We were immune. And so the days became nights and the weeks passed. I flew home on leave at the end of May and I felt like a conquering hero returning from the wars

Touching down at Heathrow for the second time brought to the fore a mix of emotions. The anticipated jolt and shudder of heavy metal on solid concrete has its own dynamic of fear and thrill, a dynamic that mirrored the conflicting sense of time and place within my own thoughts. Here I was again, finishing the slow rumble of our final taxi towards the arrivals gate, entering into the final few months of my exciting, exhilarating life on the front line. At the same time, as metres of concrete trundled out into the bright and shimmering wall of summer heat haze behind the tail of the plane, I could feel the emotional ties of home clutching at my coat tails.

A week of leave is never long enough. I had not realised how fatigued I had become in London over the winter, and the warmth of late Lebanese spring combined with the tenderness within the safe haven of my parents' home provided me with an utterly compelling reason to sleep. The week passed in a blur of drowsy waking, family meals and a couple of trips to Ashrafieh in the sweetly perfumed evenings.

Although my own people's history revolves through centuries of conflict between the bloody and the righteous, Ashrafieh, so unlike

the broken streets of my new home in London, has become a gem in Beirut's gilded crown. The quarter is one of Beirut's oldest, located on a hill in the eastern part of the city alongside the Mediterranean shore. The place is a melting pot, a locale that combines the closeness of narrow winding streets with the bright and gregarious ostentation of large apartments and office buildings.

The thing that struck me during my week at home, something that I had never before been aware of, was the complex mix of people in the quarter. Ashrafieh was dominated until relatively recent times by a group of prominent Greek Orthodox families, and Ashrafieh still bears their monumental signature in the Saint Nicholas and Tabaris neighbourhoods. We strolled, my mother, my father and I, through these close bound, noise filled lanes, surrounded by the amiably brash descendents of factions and sects, and the simple act of basic tolerance written through everyone's lives made my home seem like a foreign country.

As the plane crawled to a halt at the terminal, as I felt the dull thud of the ramp locking against the fuselage, the strings that bound me to my father tightened. At dinner one night during my week at home, I met again Rafik Arris and this time, as I was clapped on the back and welcomed as a man, we shared more of my father's best Greek brandy. Ever since that first meal with Rafik just before I first left Beirut for London, I had been nursing a sense of unease about my father. During my time abroad it was easy enough to placate these feelings with regular self-deluding admonitions against my feeble-minded worrying. At this second dinner I wanted to turn the world off and stay at home, not because I was scared or suddenly homesick, but because there were so many things still unspoken between my father and I.

He was tired, almost drained of colour, like a dog whose coat has lost its shine long before the illness strikes in any obviously physical way. Mother looked older too, although at the time I put this down to too many sleepless nights sat in front of satellite television coverage of the disintegrating peace in England's green and increasingly unpleasant land.

As I prepared to disembark the plane, this amorphous concern, this shapeless, nagging disquiet called me back to Lebanon, but the swell and surge of the crowd in the airport halls, the need to

recover my bags and the compulsion to rejoin Usman for one last blast put the thought out of my mind. I had six months left in London and then I would have the time and the luxury of choice. I walked through customs, found my driver, burrowed down into the back of an old and tatty Ford and watched the streets of west London drift by once again.

For all that I believed in free will, especially in the heightened atmosphere and expectations of a London summer, I was in reality as bound by the cycle of basic routine as I had been at school, at college or within my father's house. Life is a succession of times, places, and necessary actions. Usman and I watched clocks. Drivers turned up at appointed hours, we delivered lessons, we ate meals, and the round of evening jaunts, meals with friends and the endless discussions about our host nation, continued as if in the middle of so much tumult nothing would ever change.

Change, of course, is inevitable. In a converse relationship that I hardly noticed at the time the temperatures reflected back from London's cracked pavements rose by degrees through June and July, just as the circle of friends that Usman and I enjoyed diminished. The breadth of our lives reduced. With every bomb, with each crack of the sniper's rifle, with running battles taking place in Kennington and Wandsworth between the increasingly brutal government forces and the equally ruthless militias, another aid worker packed his or her bags and headed out to a spot in the world less scorched.

There were rumours of Death Squads in dark alleys, of reprisals against those known to be employed by the government, of throats cut in the countryside, and with these rumours, despite the compulsive need of news crews to dig ever deeper, the agencies, newspapers and broadcasters started to withdraw their people. Our flatmate, Ibrahim, packed his bags in the second week of July, abandoning his project out at the airport after RPG rounds had been fired at the foreign workers' compound from the back of a Toyota four-by four driving along the perimeter fence.

In the midst of the whirlpool, with my movements restricted by big, burly men in uniform, men stationed on the streets for my

protection, I received a call on the telephone in the flat from Sayed Suleiman Chalabi, the head of ArabAid security in London.

"Hello. Is that Marwan Tayeh?" The voice was a dislocated analogue of thickly Syrian Arabic.

"Yeah," I replied. "You've found your man."

"Good. Good. Look, we're pulling you out, okay? It's all getting a bit sticky. Non-essentials are being sent home, you know, teachers, technical advisors, that sort of thing."

We were all expecting the call, but the physical evidence of danger was part of the thrill, part of the addiction of living through the early days of civil war. I cannot say that I was a brave man. Despite the fact that I tried to give an outward appearance of impudent cheek, convincing both myself and those members of the remaining expatriate community who we called friends that bullets would bounce off my thick skull, the truth was that I was scared as hell. Even my ever-present companion, the laughing cavalier who called himself Usman, he was scared too. Nevertheless, when the call came it was a shock.

All that I could think of to say was a quiet, mumbled "…When?"

I could hear the rustle of papers on Chelabi's desk.

"Thursday. Be ready for pick up at ten in the morning."

I had to think for a moment before the logic of the calendar became clear. I had two days. "What about the kids at college?" I asked. "Do I get chance to say goodbye?"

"Yes. Look, Marwan, you're not in any immediate personal danger, okay? Everyone like you is going. Your flatmate, Usman, he's out of here on Saturday. Anyway, go to school tomorrow as usual. It's your last day. Pack on Wednesday night. Be ready to fly Thursday."

Usman opened the front door to the flat. He was carrying a plastic bag full of basic supplies, bread, milk, coffee, and the usual evening starter pack of bottled lager. He must have seen the look on my face as I signed off on the call and put the phone down.

"So, what's the deal, my friend?" he asked, putting the shopping bag down on the sofa and kicking off his sandals.

"The call…" I said.

I sat down next to the shopping bag and grabbed a beer, still chilled from the shop's cooler. Condensation ran down my fingers and across my wrist as I flipped the cap against the corner of the coffee table.

"You're out Saturday, me Thursday."

"Fuck…" Usman grabbed a bottle. "I mean, fuck, that soon?"

We both sat in silence, staring at each other numbly, until Usman's face cracked.

"Party time," he roared.

20

July in London that year was a suffocation of humid, sticky heat, the sort of heat that frays tempers. The dog summer turned the rising violence of the spring into an indiscriminate and desultory war characterized by extremes of cruelty on all sides of the confrontational equation. The night-time streets in Earls Court were largely deserted by the locals. Military Jeeps scattered loose gravel into the gutters during their regular patrols. The sound of gunfire to the south and west punctuated long hours of curfew.

We expatriates must have looked like rabbits caught in headlights as we hurried from those bars that still opened, most of them in the hotels around Warwick Road, to various and sundry flats and apartments, living the war vicariously through the television networks and through our own, cultivated sources of gossip. We learned more about the squads who called on you in the small hours of the night and helped you to disappear. We heard rumours about torture cells in the basement of Paddington Green police station. We saw photographs of bodies hanging from lamp posts in the south London camps, a fairly even mix of twisted and bloated corpses from government units and rebel militia bands.

Towards the middle of the month an armed group of seven men tried to hijack a Gulf flight from Paris to Jeddah. On television we watched the story of terror and reprisal unfold like dumb kids, stupidly holding onto our beers until the chill made our fingers numb. The final scenes in the drama, the Special Forces moment, those strangely grainy filmic scenes, were shown on every channel.

Two of the terrorists were killed outright. Of the two-hundred and six passengers and crew aboard the plane there were three further fatalities and a number of injuries. Five pale-skinned men in worn fatigues, grubby looking men with wild shocks of hair, were shown laying face down on the tarmac at Tunis airport, surrounded by black-clad soldiers in masks holding automatic weapons. We watched with unblinking eyes as an officer with the local security force kicked one of the captured men in the head. The whole episode played out on a video screen, a new level in a deadly shooting game in which we were the canned crowd expected to applaud on cue.

The response of the group claiming responsibility for the hijack was predictable: they kidnapped a Lebanese banker on his way home from work in Westminster, leaving his driver and bodyguard dead in the street. All of a sudden these poor downtrodden, hopeless English boys became foreign, infidel bastards, and this bitter, interminable brutality was getting too close for comfort.

On the night that I heard about my imminent return home, smothered as we were by the twin strands of stagnant summer air full of flies and barking dogs, and a claustrophobia born of the ever present sound of war, Usman and I drunk our fill of the late night haunts in our ever-diminishing personal fiefdom. Our world was now limited to a rough square of London bounded by Warwick Road to the west, Earls Court Road to the east, West Cromwell Road to the north and Old Brompton Road to the south. It was a world of revving engines, snarled orders and the staccato dedications of light arms fire in the distance.

I forget exactly who we met, with whom we shared our brief but intense reminiscences, and to whom we said our goodbyes. The night was long and we were young and this was an occasion for a special bottle or two, for the saved and revered whisky, a drink that I had slowly grown accustomed to during my residence, and one that always left me feeling as though I had spent the night with my head next to a camel's rump.

21

I lay on the mattress in my underground cell and let the drifting memories of London and Usman fade to black. My ever-present tears had dried on my cheeks by the time that I woke fully from my reverie, leaving my face covered with brittle tracks of tight skin. Now, instead of being overwhelmed by confusion, I felt strangely refreshed with this waking. An inner voice seemed to say to me that all those memories were history. They were nothing more than a fable. What mattered from here on in was just the present, moment upon moment, where life exists or simply ceases to be.

Despite the absolute blackness, something so unlike the usual night-dark that we become used to at home, I tried to visualise the space around me. I squatted on a thin mattress on the floor of a small, underground room. The brief glimpses of my new home in this subterranean world that I had stored away as I watched and listened through the sacking started to coalesce and form a broader landscape. Under the bare, low-wattage bulb hanging from the ceiling in the outer corridor, I had glimpsed a narrow passage running away from me as I knelt at the foot of the ladder. There were doors set into one wall. I had been pushed through one of them, stubbing my knee on a bare wooden frame. The mattress was against the left hand wall as you entered the cell. I remembered one of the guards saying that there was a bucket.

"So," I whispered to myself, afraid that any definite sound might summon the nineteen guardians of Hell, the angels of the light of our Master, "there are rules and frontiers. You need to get a grip, Marwan. You need to find out where the boundaries begin... and end. From now on, boy, it's about staying alive. That's it. Staying alive as long as you can."

The very thought of survival made my heart-rate swell and boom. It was difficult to imagine walls in this darkness. I imagined the space around me to be infinite, falling away from the edges of reality like the seas that tumble over the edge of a flat earth. Knowing that I was sitting in a hole in the ground seemed to me to be an alien construct, something half remembered from another world, another time, another me. The mystery of infinite walls made my head spin. This was a dream state, a nightmare scenario,

where I was falling through space, watching the ground draw closer, and yet I knew that I would never actually splinter on the dead earth. The dream slipstream rushed across my face, sucking the air out of my lungs. I gasped, fighting the constriction in my throat, feeling the pain of tightening metal hoops across my chest. I felt rough fibres catching at the corners of my mouth as though I were being force fed a winding sheet, and then, as stars started to explode across my eyelids, I realised with a flood of relief that my head and shoulders were still covered by the sacking.

I felt stupid and pathetic. I pulled the material up and over my head and threw the sacking to the foot of the mattress. I sucked in deep draughts of air. As the panic subsided I smelt the sulphurous odour of a slow fuse being lit.

Orientation. Removing the hessian sack was like shucking-off a mental straight-jacket Along with a sense of humiliation I could also feel a sense of anger rising in my blood. I started to explore my cell. I moved about on all fours with my right hand extended out in front of me. I swore in whispers as I moved, damning to hell the bastards who had brought me to this state and place. I traced the wall starting at the door. The cell was slightly deeper than the mattress, perhaps by as much as a metre, and the space was double the width of the mattress. I estimated the measurements at approximately three metres in depth by two metres wide. The walls were breeze-block, roughly pointed, and the floor of the cell was the same rough concrete as the corridor. By the far wall of the cell I found a dry plastic bucket with a broken handle. As I became more confident in my new surroundings I stood up and tested the cell for height. The ceiling was low but not too low. Standing to attention there was perhaps fifteen centimetres of clearance above my head. In the middle of the wall opposite the mattress I traced at head height the outline of a caged light fitting.

For a time I asked myself inane and stupid questions. Nothing made sense, as if I was waking from the equivalent of a long and comatose illness and had no idea what year, what decade this might be. I realised slowly that my eyes were open but that I could not see. I was blind. I could visualise the blocks in the walls and the ventilation grill in the door based only on memories of things from another time, from another world. I was surprised at how quickly I

became aware of alternative ways of interpreting my strange new home. I started to sniff at the objects around me. The bucket, for instance, felt clean and dry, but bathed in the aromas of moulded plastic and disinfectant I could sense a mixture of bleach and the faint tang of stale urine. The mattress smelled of dust and damp earth and human sweat. My still damp jeans and shorts lay at the foot of the bed and I put them in the bucket in a vain attempt to confine their ill-humours.

The mattress stained the air under my head with the faint aroma of damp soil when I turned over. It felt slightly greasy, as though other heads had lain upon it. Strangely this thought of foreign heads was comforting. I was not alone in writing the history of this place. I wondered whether the face and the hair that had once lain here might now be rotting in the earth, but somehow I did not care. The simple fact of habitation, of human contact, even at one remove, gave me hope. I was surprised by this. This shared mingling of human substance gave me strength and, like a small bellows, fanned the flame of glowing anger that accompanied my slow investigation of the crime scene.

I could lie on the floor next to the mattress with my head against the grill at the base of the door and feel a faint stirring of cool air in the outside corridor. I wondered whether the trap door into the building above these cells had been left open. I tried to pick at the frame of the grill so that I could steal a stray beam of light from the bulb in the corridor, but all that I did was aggravate the pin prick wound in my finger from the bullet hole in the trunk of the car that had brought me here. My already heightened sense of smell recoiled from the metallic odour of fresh blood.

I listened to the background sounds of the world more intently than I had ever done before. My own sounds were shocking. In the real world, in the free space from which I had been stolen away, there were always so many distractions that I had never listened to my own body. I wheezed slightly when I breathed. My skin was rough and caustic. My bruised left knee clicked when I squatted down. The sound of my knuckles when I bent my fingers back was painfully deep and hollow.

I heard other sounds too, underground sounds: walls flexing slightly as the day's heat dissipated; scratchings and scurryings; the

sound of insect wings flapping against the bare bulb in the corridor. Through the open trap door I thought I could make out the occasional raised voice. Guards. My keepers. The only people who stood between me and oblivion. I made myself hate them with a purpose. This hate, this vengeful sullenness would, I was sure, keep me alive. I would not give in to despair.

I lay with my face to the grill for some time, until the chill of the cold concrete seeped into my joints and made even the slightest movement a symphony of dull ache and discomfort. I rolled away from the door and back onto the stink of the mattress. I lay my head down on the dirty material and breathed in the perfume of another man's body. The stress of the day washed through me. I wanted to sleep again under the comforting blankets of a stranger's body odour.

Although I felt desperately tired, I could not get comfortable. I tried to rest my head on my arm, but it was all in vain. When I shut my eyes my head filled with colour, bloods and blacks and burnt shades of orange. The fuse burned slowly across my retina, and with the colours came more ghouls and demons. I tossed and turned. When sleep eventually came I found no rest. The falling dream played and played. I heard demonic laughter on imagined winds, the laughter of rotten angels, once born of light but now servants of the black pit. In the dream, glass window-panes shattered and razor-sharp shards spun through the darkness to split open my eyelids.

When again I awoke from the dream-time I developed a raging thirst and the soft flesh of my mouth thickened. Imagination is a sore bed-fellow, especially when the demons have you by the tail. In frustration I invented the first of the games, the first of the displacement activities that would become a keystone in my monument to survival in this terrible place. I counted the breeze-blocks along the foot of the wall by the mattress and extrapolated a total for the circumference of the room. Then, by counting up the blocks that rose along the door frame next to my mattress I calculated the total number of blocks. I made an educated guess for the number of blocks missing because of the door itself and so arrived at a number.

Now for the skill in the game. Starting from alternative points in the room I counted the blocks individually by tracing them with my hands to see if my original number was correct. The truth is, no matter how many times I tried to make the numbers match during the period of my incarceration in this room, I never arrived at the same total. Looking back now I do not believe that I ever really wanted the numbers to match. This quantum aspect to the humble breeze block became a part of the game. If ever I looked like reaching a point of corroboration I would stop, recalibrate, and start again.

I invented other games to pass the time. I tried to will the guards to come down to my cell by imagining different numbers as keys. Count to forty-seven and the door will open. Multiply forty-seven by the total number of blocks in all four walls and they will give you a cigarette. Count to one hundred and eighty-eight and there would be cool, clean water to drink.

This is how my life as a mole-rat began: musing and counting in the darkness, burrowing into myself and losing my sight, living a half-life, reverting to my basic mammalian familiar. Even then, buried alive on that first day, I began to realise that the slow fuse of anger, the dumb resilience of the caged animal, was all that I had to prove that I was alive, to affirm that I was actually a worthwhile human being. I cupped the flame of my anger and resentment in my hands to protect it from any cruel winds that might blow in from the world upstairs, all the while counting and manipulating the prime numbers of my tiny little universe. In the playing of such games I finally drifted into a pattern of fitful waking and dozing, often repeating this simple phrase over and over again as a mantra that would bring sleep: "I am Marwan Tayeh. Fuck the world. I am Marwan Tayeh!"

And then one day the endless repetitions of sleep, of dream, of game and of memory fused into one long drift of existence. Where once I had thought of the present as a logical reality, as a means of survival, I now believed that there had never really been any history. The past was a myth and the future a mirage. For Marwan Tayeh there was forever just the dark and seething now.

"I am Marwan Tayeh. Fuck the world. I am Marwan Tayeh!"

22

Not that I ever really slept again in the looking glass world. In all of my time in captivity I don't think I ever managed to sleep, not truly and deeply. Unless unwell, I never again felt the vagueness of a morning where you remember nothing at all after your head hits the pillow. Locked down with the shock, bound in chains of fear, I tried to break my bonds by lashing out at phantoms amid irrational bouts of bravado. At this unfathomable depth of day and night, where darkness and light merged into one long, monotonous passage of time, my blood thinned and cooled. A fever struck, the delirium of constant doubt. What signs did I miss on London's streets? When was I marked out? Why was I here? And always that last question, one that persists even now that I am safe and at home here in Beirut. When will I get the bullet in the back of my head?

The ebb and flow of mood and image was compulsive and addictive, an endlessly fascinating battle between the contradictory and the fantastical, and there I was trying to catch snatches of sleep during brief lulls in the fighting, couched in a fox hole between the warring front lines of my own imagination. I felt as though I were some sort of divine, an apologetic mystic, caught between the simple terrors of normality and the apocalypse of revelation. Even then, when hallucination was all that I had to hang on to, I knew that it all boiled down devising a strategy for survival.

I had little real idea of how to plan my defence, of how to marshal the meagre forces at my disposal. Thinking about a future was like trying to belly dance on a three-legged stool. I was in shell shock. I could barely react to my own bodily urges. Formulating a method for prolonging my life, for fighting back, was like contemplating self-mutilation without an anaesthetic. Could I actually wield the knife? My hands trembled in the darkness. When I woke from a moment of sleep, startled by another black dream, the tears flowed freely across my grimy cheeks.

I drifted in and out of the dream-state, and with each step along the way through the whimsy during those first nights in confinement I confronted images of my death. Whenever the muscular twitch in my groin, the inevitable and basic urge to pee,

eventually broke through the layers of hallucination, it was a relief to have to think of something so utterly and basically animalistic.

For days I felt too light-headed to stand. It occurred to me that even if I could summon the strength to stand then the act of urinating in complete darkness would probably be a mistake. Every time the need arose I concentrated on the geography of my new home for a moment or two and then struggled up onto my knees. By edging my way along the mattress I could position myself opposite where I thought the bucket should be and then I shuffled forward onto the rough concrete floor. Ridges of crumbling stone and cement bit into the thin skin covering my knees and I waited, letting the reality of this simple and basic reaction to the physical world wash through me. The sharpness of the sensation reminded me that I was alive. Another shuffle forward and I felt the rim of the bucket against my thigh. As I relieved myself the sound of liquid hitting the sides of the bucket burst the bubble of silence in my cell.

During my first few nights in captivity the hollow trickle of urine on thin polyurethane together with the pain in my knees acted like a magic serum. For a while things became clear. I was still alive and so I had a chance. I used to hum the melody of a popular radio track of the time, ad-libbing the words "I am Marwan Tayeh, baby" when the chorus played in my head.

I remember that when I finally awoke on what I assumed was my first morning as a hostage, time had already lost its steady state. I had no real idea whether it was day or night and I didn't care. Darkness had already become my natural environment, but now that the embargo on sound was broken by bodily function I started to talk myself through the situation.

"Okay," I whispered. "Let's take a look at all this shit." I talked to myself in a low and hushed whisper, anxious not to attract the attention of the guards. "They've got you. What does that mean? Question one: who are they? Question two: where am I? Question three: why am I here?"

I scored a big fat zero in the game of life. I changed tack.

"Okay. Think about it, Marwan. You know you're in a cell. They've used this place before. They've made arrangements for you. Remember, they said you'd have meals and a shower. You're

not here by accident. So, ask yourself this: would they have made this place just for you? Are you alone?"

The evidence to date suggested that I was. I had heard no other sounds, nothing that might reveal other bodies behind the doors that I had caught a glimpse of along the corridor when I arrived. "Even if I am alone," I argued, "the evidence suggests that others either have been here or will be here. So, try to remember, Marwan, try to remember how many doors there were? Can you name the other hostages? Think, man."

Although factual input from television and newspaper is with us all the time, and we live in a world saturated with information, I found it very difficult to remember anything specific about the other hostages. Sitting there in the darkness, unable to see my own hands, it seemed to me that the images in my head were all out of focus. Newspaper pages floated in front of me but the words were jumbled-up and ridiculous. It felt like reading some ancient stone tablet without the aid of the Rosetta Stone. The mental television screen on which I could see so many familiar outlines flickered violently through a swarming wall of static. I had to keep count on my blind fingers as I tried to make a list of my fellow hostages.

"There's Menachem Dov – yes, I remember him. He was the first. There was a cameraman from Persian Broadcasting. Was there a sound man as well? Shit, I can't remember. Was there? Not sure. I do remember a lecturer – Turkish, I think so that's three, four if you include the phantom sound man. We'll call it four. The Armenian, of course."

I tucked my left hand under my armpit to keep my five fellow hostages safe from harm.

"Another lecturer, I think, and the banker, the one who got his driver shot-up."

I settled on seven souls, forgetting for the time-being the Syrian shopkeeper. Of these seven men I had one name but no facial skeleton upon which to hang the man's flesh. Nevertheless, I overcame the deficiencies of memory by imagining seven fellow human beings with sacks over their heads, an image of seven brothers sitting in the darkness on damp, unhealthy mattresses. I made a mental list of largely anonymous men whom I could

cherish and in turn, if I could show them that I too existed in this Hell. Then they might cherish me.

Seven is a magical number. Seven is the number of ayat in surat al-Fatiha. Seven is the number of heavens and the number of levels of Earth. Seven is the number of fires in Hell. Most appropriately, it is the number of Sleepers who travelled in time by sleeping in a cave for three hundred solar years and nine lunar years. Sleepers. How ironic.

I prayed that the uncertainty in the Qur'an, which states that the true number of sleepers will be known only to God, might not remain such a tightly guarded secret. It even occurred to me that the Seven Sleepers, my unseen companions in the dream-time, were accompanied by the dog, Qitmir, the eighth member of the group. Mine was the eighth name on the list of English hostages. It amused me to think of myself lying at the feet of the seven Sleepers, wagging my young tail, waiting for them to throw me a bone of hope.

"Basics, Marwan, basics," I continued. "You're not alone, not in spirit. Why, though? Think. It's a mistake. They think you're from the Gulf. They mentioned the Saud. Think about it. You're a foreigner, and we all look the same to the English. Right now they assume you must be one of the enemy. All you have to do is tell them you're Lebanese, that you're a teacher, of sorts, that you're from a small place that's got no history in all this conflict, and they're bound to let you go. Once they realise you're worthless politically, they've got to let you go."

Poor little Marwan. Stolen from the world in error. It was just another cock-up, and that meant hope. I decided that I could accept my solitude because it was a temporary thing. They had the wrong man. They would understand. They would let me go. It seemed so obvious, so logical. I could survive until then. It was shit but it was manageable. There was a light at the end of it all. Marwan Tayeh's kidnapping was a mistake.

I told myself the simple things over and over again. "Keep calm, keep your wits about you, and talk to them. Ask them for help. They'll understand. It's a mistake. It has to be. You're not going to die."

Even as I said these things to myself I could feel the moment of calm dissipating. I had an imaginary handle on the situation, a means of expressing reasonable doubt, but the civilised voice of Marwan the philosopher was a weak and feeble thing. My hitherto fitful and subdued anger was too raw and too close to the surface to allow reason to win. I tried to shut my eyes, tried to breathe softly, but the venom in my heart was growing hot.

It worked for a while. I tried to still the anger by repeating my new little mantra of survivalist logic, but after a couple of hours of delusional yogic calm I suddenly lashed out at the far wall with my right foot and yelled at the top of my voice, "Screw you, you fucked-up bastards. Screw the fucking lot of you!"

Mood swings. Depression and fear. Just like in the dream-time, my waking hours were full of contradictions and wild changes of opinion. I bounced off the walls like a rubber ball, a perpetual emotion machine. I broke the protocol, broke the code of behaviour that marked out the boundaries between captive and captor. The merry-go-round started to grind forward on its rusty gears with Marwan Tayeh clinging desperately to the headless neck of a pock-marked and cracked waltzing horse.

23

I counted the days not by marking the passing of the usual solar landmarks, but by reckoning the drift between waking anger and dreams that always twisted in chimerical fear. Whenever I awoke, and despite my eternal confusion about time and place, my inner currents of anger and resentment always felt fresh and alive. Given the nature of my captivity and the simple fact of guns and knives and men with tattooed arms, I also realised that my anger had to be controlled. I had to survive. There was no other way. Here among the ghosts, on the edge of the world, I would not let the bastards see the hurt and pain that burned in my empty stomach. This continual darkness that made day and night obsolete was clearly losing its first, naïve terror, or so I thought at the time. This is how the routine began. This is how I made a new instance of something called sanity, how I reshaped my right mind to meet the needs of a madman.

Time in the hole was also measured by hunger. I first realised this after I had spent what I guessed must have been my first twenty-four hours alone in the cell. My throat was bone dry and my furred tongue was starting to swell. I felt hollow and my hands were beginning to tremble. Despite the freshness of my anger I felt physically weak, lacking the sugars, proteins and carbohydrates that give a body balance. The glands in my throat were starting to swell, a sure sign that my body was stressed.

At first, when the long hours of silence were rudely interrupted by activity out in the corridor, I did not believe in the sounds that came from the world outside of my cell: boots on ladder rungs, a scuff of rubber soles across rough concrete, and finally the sound of a key in a lock.

The sacking. I had to wear the sacking over my head. In my confused state I had no idea where the hessian sacking was. Where in the name of all that is holy was the sacking? Always wear the sacking in the presence of the guards. I scrabbled frantically around the mattress feeling for the rough weave of hessian, expecting the light on the wall to flare into life and singe to black my eyeballs.

The guard drew back the bolt and opened the door just wide enough to slide a metal tray into the cell. As the door opened I had

the presence of mind to curl myself into a foetal ball and I lay facing the wall, covering my head with my arms. There was a pause after the sound of thin metal scratching across hard concrete. The dim light from the bare bulb in the corridor stayed on. I glanced down the bed and saw the sacking lying in a crumpled heap at the foot of the mattress.

A voice. "Hey, boy! Breakfast."

The guard spoke with a slight burr, as though he had been chain-smoking all night. The sudden remembrance of nicotine ripped through my body. The starved chemical receptors in my brain joined with my empty stomach in making severe the protest running through my veins. My body was wracked by the misfiring of endorphin responses, of endomorphic confusion, and I could not think quickly enough or with sufficient clarity to risk answering the man.

"I'm talking to you, boy. Where's your manners?"

I summoned a little of the anger in my blood, using the adrenalin as an antidote to the pain, and held out a shaking hand. I pointed to the foot of the bed and spoke with a weak and pleading voice. "Need the sack."

The words hung on the air like old musk, thick and heavy and bilious. A pause. I heard another metal object being placed on the floor beside the tray. The anonymous voice from the corridor spoke again.

"It's okay. I'll step back. You get the sack and sit up. Then we'll see what's what with the day."

Think quickly, I told myself. It's a chance to see something. I waited for a couple of seconds before opening my eyes fully. I pulled myself up and crawled to the end of the mattress, all the while taking in the scale and detail of the thin and decrepit little room that I was being held in. Breeze block walls. The bucket with my soiled jeans hanging over the edge. A blue and white striped mattress. Horribly stained. Rough concrete for a floor. The light fitting, but no bulb. A metal door. The grill at the bottom was covered by a sheet of thin metal to prevent me looking through it. Three screws.

Outside, through the narrow opening I could see the same walls and floor. There were no doors on the opposite wall. Beside the bed

the guard had delivered a tray of bread and jam and an apple. The enamel mug next to the tray steamed pale and hot with the anaemic milky tea so loved by the English. There was a litre bottle of water on the tray next to the plate of jam and bread. I sat on the mattress with my back against the wall and pulled the sack over my head.

I called out to the guard, trying to remember a line from a film about prisoners working on chain gangs. "Ready, Boss."

That was good, I thought. Firm and clear. Keeping my voice level and speaking with confidence in their native language was a small victory, a brief but successful skirmish against the night terrors. I drew the sacking closely across my face so that I could see a little more of my new home and my new best friend. The smell of hessian was a welcome relief from the soiled background odours in the cell.

Then I remembered my state of undress. I was completely naked from the waist down. The anger in my blood rose another notch on the temperature gauge. It was so undignified. I was being treated abominably. I pulled my knees together and cupped my genitals in both hands.

The guard stepped back into the doorway and pushed open the heavy metal door. I tried not to move my head. I tried not to give him the impression that I was looking at him. Through the gauze I could see a blurred image of green military fatigues and heavy boots. My guard stood framed in the doorway for a moment and then squatted down. It occurred to me then that this was a game and he had played it before. He knew the rules. I did not. Did he want me to see him while not seeing him? A green tee-shirt. Muscled arms. Short, dark hair and fidgeting eyes. Unshaven. High cheek-bones. He held a snub, black pistol in his right hand.

"Sleep well?" he asked and laughed softly.

As a student of language I couldn't help noticing that he accented the syllables, making them round and long. I tried to place the man geographically, guessing at a west-country origin. I felt that such things might become important. I was suddenly aware of every little sound, of every little movement. The sight and sound of my captivity made real by this man made the adrenalin rush even more toxic. I felt hot and naked and awkward. I tried to nod but the gesture was feint and unconvincing and masked by the sack.

"On your feet, boy. Time for your daily."

The man stood up and stepped back.

"The daily?" I asked. "What about the food?"

"When you get your tray you slop out and shower. If you're quick the tea'll still be hot. C'mon, boy, shake a bloody leg. Shit and shower."

I struggled to stand, keeping my maleness covered with both hands in a pathetic attempt to maintain what was left of my fraying dignity. Hunger and fatigue made me feeble and my head filled with black stars. I had to lean against the door-frame for a second to stop myself falling backwards into the cell. I felt a hand under my right armpit and the increasingly familiar small bore weight of cold metal in my back.

My voice almost floated away from me when I remembered the bucket. The guard pushed me back into the cell. The soft drawl hardened. "Go get the dirty fucking thing".

I did as I was told and then stepped gingerly over my breakfast tray, not wanting to spoil the dubious pleasures that awaited me on my return from my ablutions. Tea with last night's ordure. One hell of a combination. I held the bucket in front of my exposed manhood. I felt the gun barrel being pressed into the small of my back again.

"Walk."

There was tension in the man's voice. When the door to my cell opened and he squatted down in front of me I had assumed that he was as nonchalant about all of this as he looked. Now that I was outside of the cell he seemed palpably nervous, as though my movement across the threshold somehow threatened his safety. It was absurd. I could barely walk. I was butt-naked. He was armed and fit. And yet it was true, I realised, as I was half marched, half dragged to the bottom end of the corridor. He was as scared of me as I was of him.

I had by now wrestled with the night terrors and survived. Round one was evenly fought. Now, walking down to the shower room, I realised that we were equally scared of each other. My guard had the advantage, of course, but I decided that round two, the dawn of day in this brave new world, should be awarded to Marwan Tayeh by a majority verdict.

The corridor was no more than fifteen metres long. Looking down at the floor from under my sackcloth hood I managed to make out four metal filled doorways. My cell was immediately opposite the base of the ladder and I guessed that I was in the first cell. Beyond the last metal door my guard pushed me through another open doorway into a hollow space. He barked at me from the corridor.

"Shower and shit, boy. Ten minutes only."

I heard what sounded like the dragging of curtain rings. Slowly I took off the hood, expecting to hear the brief retort of exploding gunpowder at any second, but there was no other sound than the echo of my own heavy breathing. This final room was a palatial space, tiled in white from floor to ceiling. The floor sloped slightly into a drain hole in the middle of the concrete slab. A small square of wooden decking stood damp and mouldy under the shower-head. On the far wall there was a tap and shower fixing. Against the right hand side wall there was a cassette toilet, a little place of golden luxury after the night stain. There was the same grilled light-fitting on the left hand wall, this time with a working forty-watt bulb installed. There were no mirrors but there was a chrome wire shelf with a bottle of shampoo by the shower fitting. The door into the bathroom was covered by a plastic shower curtain. I could make out the dark shape of a thick-set man on the far side of the curtain.

I tried to defecate, but nothing happened. Zilch. My bowels refused to play ball. I willed myself into a state of pseudo-dysentery, but the stress of the previous twenty-four hours was taking its constipational toll. Five minutes wasted. As I stripped off my shirt I wondered how I could measure time accurately, how I could make the most of these small moments of freedom.

I turned on the shower and leapt back against the wall, yelping. Freezing cold water. Laughter from beyond the shower curtain. My initial shock gave way to a steely determination to get clean. I deposited the contents of the bucket in the toilet and then sluiced out the bucket from my cell and dumped my soiled jeans onto the wooden decking. As I shampooed and washed I trod the jeans against the wet wood. It was the best that I could do, basic survival, like brushing my teeth with my fingers.

When I turned off the shower a towel was thrust through the doorway. I dried myself and dressed in my shirt, wrapping the towel around my waist to cover my nether regions. With my rung out jeans and shorts in the bottom of the bucket I put the sack back over my head and returned to my cell where the guard left the door open while I ate the bread and jam and drank the now lukewarm tea. I put the bottle of water on the mattress. He watched me eat in silence and as soon as I drained the last dregs of tea the guard cleared away the tray. Then, as I sat back on the mattress I heard the unmistakeable grind of metal on flint. He was lighting a cigarette. The bastard. The absolute fucking bastard.

And then a miracle. I heard him move towards me. I imagined him blowing smoke into my covered face. I recoiled as images of a burning cigarette end being stubbed out on my bare legs played out in my head. I bit my lip to stifle the scream when I felt warm human fingers touch my arm. Instead of torture I felt the cigarette being placed into my fingers. I sat there, numb and stupefied as my guard bolted the door. That was it. A small kindness offered within the largesse of terror. I whipped off the sacking and burned the cigarette down to the butt in two or three long, lung busting drags. What the fuck does this mean, I thought? And so began another day in darkness. I was allowed to keep the towel.

From that morning on, I tried to think constructively about the nature of my captivity. The all too brief moments of human contact in the tepid light of these artificial mornings meant that I had to try and establish some rules, to establish a structure to things. Finding solidity amid the wax and wane of irrationality is impossible when you have no real points of reference, and all that I could do was drift through arguments while floating in the suffocating darkness.

My situation was absurd. I was Lebanese. I was nothing to these men. I had nothing to do with these men and their struggle against the great Devil in the East, but here I was being kept like a wild animal. Worse than a wild animal. My treatment at their hands was by degrees intolerable and pathetic.

I discovered the true depth of my anger that first morning. In the ten minutes that passed after my guard shut the door I peeled back those few thin layers of social conditioning that ostensibly separate

us – the civilised and enlightened, from the barbarity of the infidel. I allowed myself to indulge in the one real luxury left to me. I started to shout in the darkness. I stood at the door and screamed at the empty corridor.

"What in the name of all things holy do you want with me, you sons of whores?"

I yelled, cracking my voice on the higher notes as I grew ever hoarser. "I am Lebanese. I'm not your enemy. What the fuck do you want? This is a mistake. Let me out now. Let me out!"

This sharp squall twisted and turned across the blunt cliff face of my captors' indifference. I worked myself into an almost exquisite state of rage.

"You're all ignorant peasant bastards," I screamed.

I heard a dull thud. The trapdoor leading down to my subterranean prison was slammed shut. I thought I heard faint peals of laughter from the floor above. I wracked my brain to translate good Lebanese insults into English.

"Infidels! You're all bloody maggots!"

As the heat in my soul rose to a combustible level I forgot the rudiments of the English language, reverting to a lingua franca that combined the best of the gutter from East and West.

"Ayir brains!"

I slammed the flat palms of my hands on the metal of the cell door, feeling the reverberations of the blow flow up my arms. The door-frame shook under the force and weight of my blows on the heavy metal sheet.

"Boos teezi… fuckwits!"

I felt good. I felt alive. I could feel the blood pumping through my arteries and the sweat beading on my forehead. Screaming and shouting at the world was exhilarating, was a release from the introspective lethargy of the suffocating night terrors.

"Why don't you English bastards all kul khara we moot?"

I started to enjoy myself. I threw everything that I had at the door, behaving like a two year old having an absolutely heartfelt but ultimately pointless tantrum. It felt wonderful.

"Nik nefsik!"

Carried away with the moment I kicked the door twice in quick succession, feeling the sudden sharpness of bone-deep pain scream

through my leg even as I drew my foot back for the second assault. I tried to pull out of the second attack but the fury was on me and I was already committed to the kick. The last strains of insult dribbled into the darkness as I crumpled by the door, sliding down to the floor in a flood of tears and personal recriminations.

My mad outburst was over. Yet again Marwan Tayeh, this briefly arcing flare, fell back to earth, spent and blackened. My anger dissolved, reducing, becoming a sullen undertow rather than a raging torrent. I cried as I hugged the ball of my right foot, cursing my own stupidity and bloody-minded folly. Self pity. In extremis I was bludgeoning my way with the utmost prejudice through the natural states of grieving. I lay on the floor by the door for fully thirty minutes before I dragged myself over to the mattress. I sat up and wiped the salty trail of dried tears from my eyes and cheeks. I drank water from the bottle left at breakfast. I retreated back to the safest place I knew: the silent world of Marwan Tayeh the hostage.

My foot ached. The bones in my leg felt jarred and loose. My toes began to swell.

"Fuck them," I told myself. "Fuck that smiling bastard."

So far I had drifted through vague mental states, of resignation and rebellion and confusion. I determined that things had to change and the first step was to make this personal. To overcome the loneliness that I felt, to make the anonymity of my situation a little more bearable, I decided to give my guard a name. From now on he would be called Smiler, a name to be used with a sense of irony.

Having given the enemy a name I decided on a second step. I assumed, given that they had not put a bullet in my head yet, that I was valuable to them. It was a leap of faith, especially when my earlier thoughts had run in completely the opposite direction. It was, I suppose now, a reflection of the turmoil and disorder in my head.

They had guns, they had the light, and they had numbers. I could not fight them physically, not in a bare-knuckle way, so I had to be smarter, I had to deny them what they valued, what they needed. The solution was as obvious as it was funnily incongruous. Ever since they had shoved me to the floor of the car in London I had

been convinced that they were going to kill me. Now, I realised, they very much wanted me alive. I, on the other hand, having been desperate to live, could now deny them their victory by denying them Marwan Tayeh. I could die and screw them over big time. I would channel the anger in my soul and laugh in their faces.

"That's it. No more food. I'm on hunger strike," I told the walls and the floor and ceiling.

I lay down and tried to focus on reasons for starving myself. I reasoned that the tantrums of the morning served no purpose. They would simply slam shut the doors and ignore me. The simplicity of inaction, of this fading protest, appealed to me. It gave me purpose. I resolved to make demands, and set about identifying those things for which I could negotiate. My life was all that I had to give them. It was a gamble, but then, I told myself, life is a gamble. Crossing the road is a wager with the combustion engine and irrationality. I had to trust my youthful judgement, a judgement based on the meagre sum of knowledge gleaned so far about my captors. Why would they go to the bother of transporting me out here? Why would they keep me alive with food and water? I was worth something to them.

And so I decided to die by my own means rather than theirs, and the tears started again. I was a wretched ghoul held in a pit, a wraith, a rat in a trap. I was worth more than that. I was Marwan Tayeh and that had to be worth something. I thought of my mother and of my father. I watched mental pictures of them flash across the wall in front of me, images of gardens and soft sunlight. I watched family slide shows of me with my step-brothers. It occurred to me as I focused on the grainy film flickering in my head that their faces were already starting to fade.

"You're worth something," I whispered. "You're worth more than this, Marwan, believe it, more than this."

I would make demands. I would find a way to make contact with the frightened, brutal men holding me captive.

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And so my madness revolved around the clock face. Over the next few hours the adrenalin faded, the spring wound down, and I felt decidedly fatigued. No matter how tired I was though, the play of image, anger, self pity and bleak determination ran unremittingly through the hours. I was the star in the unseen acts of a brief life beneath the crust of the world. Slowly, and with considerable revision, I formulated my response to the inevitable questions that would come when I stopped eating. I discarded the wilder fancies, settling instead on asking for the small and the mundane, settling on things that might make me just a little more human.

I rehearsed what I might say to Smiler, trying different tones of voice and phrasing. I wanted to make the maximum impact. He had already demonstrated an unexpected degree of nervousness around me and I didn't want there to be any mistake. Smiler had to understand what I wanted, that I was serious, because then he would tell a superior and the metaphorical chains of misunderstanding would break. I settled on an air of calm determination for my performance.

Later that day, later that night, at some point in the expanse of black time, I heard the trap door swing open and then the familiar scrape of boots on the rungs of the ladder. I was ready with the sack this time, having stowed it under the head of the mattress. With the last tread of rubber on concrete outside my cell door I pulled the sack over my head and waited. Keys jangled. The padlock on the door was unlocked and the bolt moved back. That same dull light trickled into my cell, opening up a chequered world of dusk and shadow through the fibres of my hood. The same bent and battered tin tray slid across the floor.

"Dinner time, Marwan."

It was Smiler again. He squatted with his back against the far corridor wall and watched me through the open door. I stared straight ahead and left the food on the tray. We both sat there in silence for a few minutes. Eventually Smiler hauled himself to his feet and stepped over to the threshold of the cell.

"It's best if you eat," he said softly. "There's no point being awkward. If you're a bad boy then I'll have to punish you. Understand?"

Slowly I turned my head to face the doorway. I tried to concentrate on Smiler's knees to avoid giving him the impression that I was looking directly into his eyes. I didn't want this to seem like an open challenge. I tried to speak clearly and calmly using my best English.

"I'm not eating anything. You can leave the bottle of water, but I'm not going to eat."

There was a moment of silence. The air bristled with the electric confusion of unbidden challenge and hasty counter. The silence was broken by the sound of Smiler's boot cap thwacking into the plastic water bottle. The bottle spun off the tray and skittered across the floor of my cell, coming to rest against the back wall by the slops bucket. I pulled my feet into my body, a simple nervous reaction, and in doing so realised that I was making a big mistake. Beneath my hood my eyes widened. I breathed in and flinched visibly. There was sudden movement across the periphery of my vision. The light dimmed and before I could react again I felt Smiler's breath against the rough cloth covering my face.

"You're not supposed to fucking look, boy. You've been looking, haven't you? You've been looking at me."

By now we both knew the rules of the game. This was an excuse. The same pistol that I had seen this morning was now pressed against my temple. The soft, almost childish timbre of Smiler's voice grew hard, diamond-sharp edges.

"No one's gonna hear us down here, mate. All I've got to do is squeeze. All I've got to do is say you tried it on. Simple."

The man pushed the gun barrel into the soft bone at my temple and I slid down and onto my side. I felt a knee press down against my rib cage. He leant his full weight to the blow and it became hard to breathe. I could feel the cartilage and muscle starting to give way under Smiler's persistent pressure.

"What was you saying, boy?" he hissed.

It felt as though Smiler was going to push the gun barrel right through my skull. I could see stars. The pain was so intense and the pressure on my temple so hard that I started to retch. Smiler's

breath was hot and sweet. Out of the corner of my eye, through my own tears, I could just about see that he was sweating, that he too was breathing hard, that he was locked into the violence of the moment. He was enjoying himself. Fighting for air I could only manage the faintest of whispers in reply to his question.

"I'm… sorry… please… but you can't… keep me like… this. Not an animal…"

Smiler leant down on me with his full weight. A crack. A hammer blow in my side. I expected there to be an instant physical response, an intense burst of pain, but felt instead as though I was being wrapped up slowly in a whale-bone corset. I started to labour as I breathed, feeling a sharp and growing discomfort as I tried to inhale. This initial stage of pain was like an inconstant pulse, surging through my torso with each laboured inhalation. Smiler heard the breaking rib as well. He left his knee buried in my side for a moment longer than he needed to before pulling back. I tried to move, tried to sit up again, and that was another mistake. Now the searing pain cut right through me every time I tried to shift my weight away from the fractured rib. I tried to cough, tried to get my breath back, but the effort and the injury was too much. All that I could do was lay there and pant.

Smiler bent down and moved the tray out into the corridor. As he did this he spoke quietly. The low menace in his voice reminded me of my father on report night, and for the first time in my life I sensed the difference between love and hate.

"You're my animal, Marwan. Don't you forget it. Be a good little pig and everything's gonna be fine. If you're a bad little pig, though, I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your fucking house down."

He laughed. The door slammed shut and the bolt slid home. I needed a drink desperately. I needed to pee. Every movement was agony. It took me quite a while, maybe half an hour, to gather myself up and find a way to nurse my broken body through the agony of kneeling at the bucket. I tried to lie down but couldn't get comfortable. I was wrapped in a hot, spiked band of steel. Eventually I found that the only way I could settle was to sit rigidly upright against the wall. As the ache finally dulled and I settled into

a fitful bout of half-life sleep a simple thought kept repeating itself. That went well, Marwan, that went so bloody well.

25

Time and routine – we measure lives by the watch-hand and the regularity of our shift between states of activity. In the days that followed Smiler's callous little display of brutality I counted the passing moments of my life through the waves of pain that accompanied my steps along the corridor for the morning's ablutions. I measured time in solid blocks of obscurity punctuated by the slide of battered tin across concrete. I glimpsed a simulacrum of moon and sun briefly through a brown lattice fog when the cell door opened. Smiler barely said a word to me now. He delighted in nudging me in the side as he helped me back from the shower, as though he were a five-year-old boy prodding a caged animal with a sharp stick. It was a game to him, a game that he enjoyed as long as he could make the rules. I stopped trying to speak with him. He called me a bad little pig. I refused to eat. He slapped me around the head. This was the sum total of my life for four days: mute acceptance punctuated by brief moments of dumb, brute defiance.

In the downtime, in between these fragmentary episodes of brutal human contact, I lived my pathetic life in a split and fractured landscape. The physical discomfort that marked out my time alone was matched by a succession of mental aches and pains. Smiler was not the only player in the game, but he held loaded dice. The game was simple, relentless and pitiless. Every time it came round to my turn to shake and roll, with every attempt that I made to scale the ladders of hope by constructing impossible plans for my salvation, with every throw of the dice, I just slipped down another snake. I cried for my lost youth. I cried for my parents waiting at the airport. I hungered, not for the bread and jam on the tray, but for a sense of self worth. I missed the simplicity of human contact.

26

Over those four days of starvation and indiscriminate thuggery, through twelve solitary periods of long stupefaction, I discovered doubt and personal recrimination, emotions about which I had previously known nothing. I was totally unprepared for the inevitable introspection of solitary confinement. The immediate and all too real history of Marwan Tayeh as revealed to me in those first days was one of madness. I sat and wrapped my arms around my aching chest. I sat and cried myself to sleep. I sat and waited numbly for the next broken rib. Refusing to eat, refusing to cry out when Smiler dug his elbow into my side as we walked down the corridor, was the sum total of my defiance. My strength came from keeping a secret. Only I knew that deep within the core of the shambling wreck that I had become, there was a small voice calling out with every insult, with every hurt, "Allahu Akbar." God is Great.

I hung on grimly, watching in the darkness through dimmed cow-eyes, waiting for that proverbial light at the end of this very real tunnel. I would have given my soul to all seven levels of Hell for just one drag on another cigarette.

It had to be morning because the tray on the floor in the doorway of my cell carried a plate of bread and jam and a mug of hot, milky tea. The simple, sweet smell of jam and bread was utter torment. The steam rising from the freshly brewed tea assaulted my senses making me salivate. I sat there as I had done for the last few days staring straight ahead and saying nothing. My stomach burned with hunger. Smiler slid the tray a little further into the cell. Except that it couldn't be Smiler. He simply wouldn't do that. I dared to look towards the doorway, where I saw boots and green fatigues but they were different. The disembodied voice coming from the passageway was different.

"How are you feeling today, Marwan?" it asked.

It took me a moment or two to collate this new information. Even in such a short period of time, in four days, I had come to the conclusion that my daily humiliations at the hands of Smiler would be an eternal torment, a fixed thing in this small universe. I pulled

together my ragged, ravenous threads of thought. I remembered to check that I had the towel wrapped around my still naked lower half. Underneath the obligatory hood I grimaced and prepared myself to play the game of survival. I tried to speak in my best and most recently learned English accent.

"How am I bloody well feeling? How do you think I'm fucking feeling?"

It took me a few seconds to recover from the effort of speaking. I realised that they must have changed the guard. The tension of the previous few days, the dread rigidity that fused every joint in my body and buried my conscious self under a raw tonnage of iron, was released in a single, long, low moan. Feeling flooded back into my body like white water in a dry stream bed after a deluge. I started to shake and tears broke through the dam of sullen resistance that I had built up during these last few days of torture. With the tears there came a hand on my shoulder, a soft hand, and a tone of voice that I thought lost to me: compassion.

"My God," said the voice, "what the hell's been going on?"

I checked a very natural urge to blurt everything out. Ideas and hurts bubbled up under my chin, but I swallowed them back down. I was still a captive. No matter how delicate his touch this new guard was still one of these English bastards holding me down.

"Noth…nothing," I eventually managed to say. "Nothing. I had an accident."

The new guard drew back from me. The silence between us was awkward and strained. Through the sacking I watched him pick up the tray and put it on the mattress beside me. The usual jam, bread and tea had been supplemented with an orange. As the guard squatted in the doorway he fiddled with his shirt cuff, embarrassed by his brief show of care and consideration.

After a few seconds he looked down at his boots and said, "Yeah, he's a bit of a one for accidents. You going to eat today?"

The orange swung it – the orange and the moment when we touched broke my brooding resolve. "If I eat," I asked hesitantly, "will you help me? I mean, can I ask to speak with someone?"

He thought for a moment and then shook his head. He was still playing with the frayed edge of his shirt cuff. "You can speak to me," he replied.

I lifted the edge of the sacking with my left hand and picked up the mug of tea. The explosion of heat and sweetness in my mouth felt wonderful. Any etiquette or manners that I might normally have attempted when in the company of strangers went completely out of my mind. I wolfed down all four slices of bread, folding them double and cramming them into my mouth. Gobbets of jam slid down my chin, sticking fast to the thickening coat of stubble on my face. I could barely breathe as I forced the food down my gullet and into the constricted void of my stomach. I belched loudly through the dregs of the tea and clattered the enamel mug back onto the tray. I felt blissfully full.

"Can I have a cigarette?" I asked, surprised by my sudden boldness, but I was desperate to finish my first meal in days with that final token that would mean release from my futile fasting and a passage to one short moment in heaven.

Silence. The guard retrieved the tray from the mattress and put it outside in the corridor. He stood in the doorway and said, "Shower."

Clasping the towel around my waist tightly, I hobbled down the corridor in front of the guard and then, once in the bathroom, I went through the usual motions. The effects of the food were immediate and surprising. I defecated properly for the first time since I had been brought here. It struck me as oddly funny how such basic things can make us feel so much better. A little contact, a touch of warmth and a bowel movement. We humans really are such simple things when you get down to the basics of it all.

Instead of slamming my cell door shut like Smiler, the new man let me sit on the mattress in the dim light from the corridor for a few minutes. He seemed unsure of what to do next. I guessed from his build and his manner that he was younger than Smiler. This new guard was thinner, less stocky, less bullish. Smiler obviously worked out, turning puppy fat into hard muscle. Smiler must be mid-twenties, I thought. The Kid was younger, in his late teens probably, and confused rather than angry. The boy was younger even than me.

"Cigarette?" I asked again.

I was becoming a master observer of the world through a lattice of loosely woven hessian. Keeping my head straight so that it

looked as though I was staring at the opposite cell wall I watched The Kid as he fumbled in his top pocket. He pulled a filter tip out of a black box packet and tossed it down onto the mattress followed by a single red tipped match.

"Anything else?" he asked.

The list in my head was endless, but right now, presented with a golden opportunity to ask anything of this young man, I could think of nothing sensibly momentous or important. My mind went blank. It was only later, wrapped in permanent night, that I asked the big questions of a closed and brooding door. Why me? What did they want? Didn't they realise I was Lebanese? Why were they holding me when they'd made such a simple, basic mistake? Did my parents know where I was? Didn't they know that they could trust me, that I wouldn't say a word?

At the moment of contact, with The Kid waiting for a response, I asked for nothing much at all. Just the basics. Just those small items that might make me human again.

"Yes. I'd like a candle or a bulb for the light. Something to read. Toilet paper. Some clean clothes. Cigarettes, of course – yes, some cigarettes. Definitely."

Silence. Nothing. I started to deflate. The brief euphoria that came with a new voice and a soft hand was as fragile as my cracked ribs. I knew, once the darkness came, that the loneliness would be unbearable. Then, just before the door slammed shut again, The Kid poked his head into the cell and said, "Not promising anything, but I'll see what I can do."

I was shocked into mute silence. That voice again. The softness of basic compassion. As the door slid shut and the bolt found its home I shouted out as an afterthought. "And I need to talk to someone, someone high up, someone who knows what's happening."

I left the cigarette on the mattress, savouring the simple fact that I could choose when to smoke it. I spent some time running this most recent conversation through in my head. I was pleased with myself. The trick, I thought, was not to antagonise them. You have to learn the lessons. You have to be firm, have to stick to your guns, but you have to show respect. It wasn't the sort of respect

earned by friends and colleagues, though. This was a form of deference that pandered to these poor men's insecurities.

Survival makes you cold and calculating. The Kid could be managed. I could make something of him, I was sure. Smiler, on the other hand, was going to be a problem. Even with my limited experience of humanity I could sense that there was an irrational streak in the man. He could cross the line without a moment's thought, which made him, or so my cod psychology told me, a sociopath. I hesitated to commit him to the world of the psychopath. It made me feel far too vulnerable.

From my own brief life, growing up in the security of a loving family and a stable and prosperous society, I had few further points of reference by which I could really measure the guards. I speculated on the civil wars and religious factionalism and its effects on young minds. Would it brutalise otherwise normal and intelligent boys? Was I trying to take one step too far with my reasoning? I didn't really have the means to describe what I was thinking.

I changed tack and worked through the requests that I had made. On balance I decided that I wanted a candle rather than a light bulb. That way I could choose when to have light rather than depend on the whim of whoever was on duty. As for reading material, anything would do, anything from a pulp romance to a comic book. Toilet paper was a luxury, of course, but then again, now that I was eating it would soon be a necessity. And finally there were the cigarettes. I didn't need a pack a day. It would be good for me to cut down. All I wanted were two or three smokes to lighten the load.

Thinking about cigarettes inevitably made the craving rise and I brushed my fingertips gently across the surface of the mattress to find first the cigarette and then the match. I dismissed a momentary horror. What if I wasted the match? Would I be able to stand the disappointment?

I placed the filter tip between my lips and struck the match head carefully against the breeze block wall. The match flared and caught. I almost dropped the match onto the mattress with the sudden explosion of light in my usually dark little home. Although my hand shook a little with fatigue and self-induced starvation, I

managed to light up and then sank gratefully beneath the smoke and the rush of the endorphin release as my body attempted to combat the poisons that I was breathing in.

The nicotine rush faded almost as quickly as it had hit me, leaving me feeling slightly nauseous but suddenly very aware of something new and wonderful. When the boy, my new guard touched me, I felt like a child again, like a naughty little boy who had been sent to his room only to be comforted half an hour later by a worried mother hen. And yet, it was more than that. The Kid was a gentle soul, I felt sure, and I found myself suddenly wanting him close by me again. I needed to hear his voice, to smell his scent, to know that I was not alone. I wanted him to hold me close and tell me that everything would be fine. I felt a little embarrassed by the thought of such closeness. I was never a tactile person. I had missed the signs given me by Deb while teaching at the university, and even when she brushed my hand with hers in the cafeteria, I had not responded. Just as I had done with my own family, I tended to keep people at arms length, invariably watching human relationships unfold as if I were standing beyond a pane of glass, but here I was almost drifting into fantasy about one of my jailers. After I finished the cigarette I lay back on the mattress and tried to convince myself that it was all a symptom of loneliness, a freaking-out under duress.

27

As with Smiler and his off-hand brutality, the basic pattern of my existence shifted and I accepted the relative kindness of The Kid over the next couple of days. The Kid kept up with the pleasantries and, although he was clearly my captor, I started to look forward to our brief interludes. I ate regularly and began to feel stronger I began to reassert some order and clarity in my thinking. I learned to control my body so that I didn't have to use the bucket too many times, hating the crawling stink of my own detritus, and, oddly, I did not want The Kid to be offended by my bodily waste.

The simple fact of taking regular meals made such considerations difficult to maintain. I had to rip up my jeans in lieu of the toilet paper, and of all of the things that I requested from captors, it was this simple product that now seemed so much less of a luxury and much more of a dire necessity. In the darkness I still drifted between states of melancholia and determination, but I also found a new emotion brewing: that of puppy-dog gratefulness mixed with a strange sense of excited anticipation.

My feelings towards this strange new world in which I existed, and more especially for the young man holding my life in his hands, troubled me greatly, adding volume to the already flooded sea of confusion upon which I bobbed along. I felt as though the air that he and I breathed together in my small cell was somehow sanctified, was in some way more fresh and sweet than at other times. My pulse quickened at the sound of his boot-steps, and with every one of these heightened moments I found myself reciting verses from long forgotten texts. How could I, a normal boy from the Beirut suburbs, a boy destined for the traditional path no matter how much I might stray in youth, how could I feel this warmth for a man who could as easily kill me stone dead as look at me? Breakfast almost became a dread moment, a mixture of the sublime and the abhorrent. Such things are not permitted. I dare not speak its name, not even in my thoughts.

All the while The Kid smiled at me when he left me a cigarette and a match. He left one after each meal. It was another small victory, another point to Marwan, and it gave me a glimmer of

hope. The Kid told me that the guards did four-day stints, which meant that tomorrow morning would be my last breakfast with him. It also opened up the possibility that I would be back with Smiler. I dreaded the return of Smiler.

I tried to unravel time in some vain hope of stopping the days from ticking over into the new shift pattern, but the inevitable morning dawned with the usual sounds of boots on concrete, sliding locks and the dull metallic alarm of my breakfast tray being laid on the floor by my mattress. By this last day of his guard rota The Kid was much more confident. He didn't stand in the doorway as though he might catch some ideological disease from the infidel. We followed the routine. Before I ate I went down to the bathroom, washed and sluiced, and tried to rub my teeth clean with my fingers. I was grateful that there was no mirror. The stubble on my chin was growing softer now that it was gaining its critical beard length and my hair was becoming ragged at the back of my neck.

Dressed in my soiled and tatty towel and shirt, I guessed that I must look like a comic book version of a shipwrecked mariner. The image almost made me cry. I could feel no wind on my face as I stood on this subterranean seashore. I could feel no sunny warmth on my skin nor could I luxuriate in soft and yielding sand under my toes. The closest thing that I could hear to the cry of a gull surfing on the edge of the land was the habitual shout of the guard after I had showered.

"Time's up, Marwan, come on, hurry up."

The Kid disappeared as soon as I started to eat. I heard voices at the trap door and the sound of something being dragged or scraped across wood. At first I thought it might be another body, another lost soul, but the sound was too light. I fought back the urge to kneel forward and peer around the door-frame, concentrating instead on the tart taste of a thin and cheap raspberry conserve on my bread. It was always raspberry. I decided that I would have to ask for a change of jam. The voices at the trap door faded and the shape of The Kid reappeared standing in the doorway.

"I said I'd see what I could do, Marwan."

From behind his back he flourished two plastic shopping bags. He placed them at the head of the mattress and then stood back, watching me, waiting like an expectant relative at a small child's

birthday party. He wanted me to open presents. It was absurd, and even as I thought this, I found myself cramming the last piece of bread into my mouth as I grinned underneath my hood. I grabbed at the first bag. The Kid stepped back into the corridor and allowed me to lift my hood up so that I could see the full glory of his bounty. Two new tee-shirts, white. Two pairs of boxer shorts, grey. A pair of brown corduroy trousers, clearly second-hand, but perfectly serviceable. Flip-flops, size forty-three.

I held the tee-shirts up to my face and even through the sack-cloth I could smell fresh linen. It was yet another small success in what would now clearly be a long war. Even as the thought skittered through my feeble mind, even though I instinctively understood that having fresh clothes meant investment in my life as a hostage by my captors, still I relished the simple aromas of washed cotton.

This was no time for subtleties. The selfish child in me ran riot. I tipped the second bag out onto the mattress and turned each fabulous new toy over and over in my hands. I pushed the hood up onto my head and started to laugh out loud. Tea-lights. A box of matches. A packet of ten cigarettes. A roll of toilet paper, soft and pink and quilted. Joy of joys, a toothbrush. A battered paperback copy of the Bible. A small spiral bound notepad and a short, stubby pencil, just like the ones my father might use to mark his score when playing golf at Ouzai. A bottle of cold, fresh water. I felt like a small boy again. I was once more the innocent overwhelmed by parcels with the coming of a new year of life. I was utterly fascinated by the simplest of gifts. I caressed each object, staring at it, turning it over and over in my shaking hands, discovering the simple joy of some bright plastic birthday nothing as if for the very first time.

"Allahu Akbar," I repeated over and over again in Arabic.

A cough. The Kid's shadow loomed over the mattress. Reality. I yanked the sack-cloth back over my face and tried to take deep, quiet breaths to still my racing heart.

"Thank you," I said softly, "thank you for making me human again." I stumbled over what to say next. Impossible thoughts rang out across the taut skin on my forehead like a frenzied ceremonial dance rhythm played on a great tribal drum. I wanted to say

something more, something personal, but how? I had to try. “Thank you… for being you, for being… close…, “ I mumbled.

The Kid squatted down on his haunches next to me and patted me on the shoulder. He too spoke softly. “That’s alright, Marwan. I like you. But don’t forget this…”

I felt the cold barrel of a hand-gun against my neck.

“Just because I like you doesn’t mean I’m your friend. Remember that, Marwan, and everything will be okay.”

I realised then what this was all about and I cursed myself inwardly for being such a fool. At the same time I felt a deep sense of relief. Without understanding any of it, I suddenly felt that I might one day see the sunlight and not be ashamed of pale skin.

The Kid leaned in a little closer. I could smell his breath, could feel his warmth on my cheek. “What you’re feeling is… normal,” he said gently. “Psycho-something. There’s a name for it. Identifying with one of your hostage-takers. They train us a little, you know, to look out for it. You’re not mad, Marwan, just all fucked up. There’s a difference.”

Another pat on my shoulder, firmer this time, and my blood ran cold. I shivered. The magical moments of childhood infatuation lay shattered around my knees like broken shards of glass waiting for the blind man to stumble his bloody way to perdition. The Kid stood and withdrew back to the doorway.

“I’ll give you two minutes to get changed. Put your old clothes in one of the bags and I’ll get rid of them.”

He closed the door leaving just enough light so that I could see to strip off my old clothes and put on the new. The sensation of fresh cotton against my clean skin after my shower was so simple and so beautiful. Emotion is sometimes like a waterfall, cascading and swirling over deep reservoirs. For a fleeting moment I felt that my new life might just be bearable, but then the truth, as ever, hit home with vengeance. None of this would be easy. I knew so little about people. I knew so little about myself. My dreams of achieving true rapport with The Kid were built on foundations of sand. This new life was going to be far more complicated than I could possibly imagine.

That was the great conundrum. I already knew what I had to do to survive, but how could I hope to do it when the rules could

change at the whim of an adolescent boy or with the brutal premeditation of a sociopathic thug? I concentrated on the one thing that would keep me safe for now. I stuffed my old clothes into one bag and my bright new toys into the other. I sat back in my usual submissive position on the mattress, coughed and waited for the door to open again.

"From now on it's like this, Marwan," The Kid said as he picked up the bag full of my soiled rags. "Once a week you get candles, matches and toilet roll. You'll get cigarettes most mornings and a bottle of water. We'll try to remember them. Once a month you get clean shirts, shorts and a towel. If you're good, maybe we'll find a magazine for you. Understand?"

I nodded.

"Read the Good Book, Marwan. Read about Jesus. He's your only hope."

I'm sure he smiled at me before closing and then locking the door. It was a weird sensation, but one that warmed me within. I listened to the scrape of his boots on the rungs of the ladder. I wanted to light up the room, wanted to chain smoke my way through the morning, but the small bag of gifts on the mattress next to me in the darkness was too precious to waste. Then the real meaning of The Kid's words washed through my soul, draining every ounce of my strength. Once a week. Once a month. The enormity of the time-scales hit me like a wall of water, a tsunami of fear and doubt. I was lost. The world had given me up. I was a ghost, the spectral echo of Marwan Tayeh. I cried again for the umpteenth time since my capture and incarceration below the wider world's ever- shifting horizons.

This time the tears were different. I had cried myself to sleep pretty well every day since arriving here, but I found no solace in sleep at the end of this bitter, salt-laced weeping. Weeks and months. Years. Decades, a lifetime maybe. The enormity of my solitude and the closeness of a forbidden word or touch suddenly seemed so intolerable. Thus began the depression, the madness that allowed time without end to pass unnoticed here in the darkness.

28

Time progressed through its universal cycle. My existence was measured by the inevitable smallness of bread and soap, of the stray fist and the gentle word. As far as external stimuli are concerned I remember little other than a dull ache of occasional electric light and the return of Smiler's simple, direct and low-level violence. Instead of a remembrance of time through the satiation of hunger I recall only periods of light and dark. Good cop, bad cop: the alternating patterns of behaviour of The Kid and Smiler. Despite the warmth of my feelings for The Kid I started to become emotionally numb, existing only when the wavelength of light changed or my nerves pinched my soul under Smiler's latest onslaught. I cannot differentiate days or nights or weeks. Rather I see from this time an endless loop of film in which a stocky, bull-headed man stands in a doorway and harangues me for being a bad little pig.

"You are a bad man, Mister Marwan! Why don't you eat?"

I think that Smiler took my lack of interest in his deliveries of food as a personal affront. I ate for The Kid but not for Smiler. He refrained from kneeling on me again, contenting himself with screaming obscenities at me and giving me the odd slap around the head or knees. With each passing day the weight of the blows always seemed a little heavier and his invective a little louder, lasting for longer. My stubborn, bloody-minded goading of him clearly got his gander up.

The guards must have talked amongst themselves. While I no longer wished to starve myself to death, I came to relish the mad glee that I felt when Smiler got really frustrated. I could imagine his friends upstairs ribbing him mercilessly. I had the power to make the man impotent, and although such power always carries with it the possibility of mindless thuggery, I played the only real game in town as hard and as fast as I could.

Through those repetitions of days with Smiler on duty, I sat on the mattress and watched the world spin away from me as though I were floating above a stage set. None of it was real. I continually replayed the events of my kidnapping but found no new answers there. The slights and disappointments of my childhood grew out of

all proportion to their actual significance. Marwan Tayeh was unworthy of life. Marwan Tayeh was an animal in a cage. I took to pacing the cell, back and forth in the darkness, refusing to light the room from my weekly ration of tea-lights. I hoarded my daily ration of cigarettes, denying myself the luxury of nicotine relief for hours on end, until, like a binge drinker I felt compelled to indulge in some weird chain-smoking ritual, gorging on tar and smoke until I was physically sick. I betrayed every one of my civilised instincts, revealing sharply the fragility of the shallow layers of sophistication in which we wrap ourselves.

I began to soil myself and my belongings. I taunted Smiler by throwing his meagre generosity back in his face every time that he opened the cell door. I revelled in my stink, the reek of a caged animal, forcing Smiler to walk close to me every morning as we headed for the shower. There was no need for Smiler to take his frustration out on me. I did the man's work for him. Then, during The Kid's shifts on duty, I found that keeping the smell closely wrapped around me, if a little severely, kept thoughts of his warmth and his touch at bay.

It was on one of Smiler's shifts, when his indifferent fist slammed into my kidneys again, that I decided darkness was the only answer. I thought about The Kid and the monstrous difference between the two men. In spite of The Kid's kindness I decided that the time had come when I had to stop the madness. I was drunk on frustration and self-recriminations. I was an addict strung out on violence and Smiler's dealing in opiate thuggery. Where once I had assumed that defiance through starvation might change things for the better, I now felt that an end was the only answer, my end. Maybe it was the continual switch between eating and hunger. Maybe my body was unbalanced and so, in the depths of depression, was my mind. Whatever the cause, that last rabbit-punch made my resolve complete. I would do Smiler's ultimate job for him.

When the lights went out, when the shuffle of boots on concrete drifted away, I started to run at the wall, hitting the concrete again and again, throwing my full weight at it, hoping with every groan and every new bruise that my fragile life would end. I wanted the relief of that final oblivion. Except that I failed. I longed for an

ultimate, irrefutable release but all I got was concussion. I awoke under the dim corridor light surrounded by four men. Smiler was not among them. I felt, quite literally, like death warmed up.

Weak with self-imposed malnutrition and the physical pain that came from my descent into madness, my body finally gave up the struggle for normality. They say that after I came round I spent two days gripped in the cold sweat of delirium, sleeping fitfully in between rabidly incoherent monologues and pathetic calls for my mother. They told me that The Kid even sat with me during the dark hours, watching blood pound through the artery in my thin skinned neck as my body fought for oxygen under the onslaught of fever and infection. I survived through the application of saline and the touch of a stranger's hand. I have some recollection of movement during these days, of hands lifting my body and bathing me, of the mattress floating away on a Mediterranean breeze to be replaced by something fresh and clean. Faces blur in the remembering, an image of a dream-state seen through brilliantly laundered gauze.

Perversely, this time became a moment of calm reassurance in the long drawn out days of my future imprisonment. The guards sat with me, pumping liquids into my desiccated flesh, keeping me alive with antibiotic pills massaged down my dry gullet. In the thinking time afforded me by slow recovery it became clear that while the casual maltreatment of heathen prisoners might be acceptable as part of the day-to-day routine of hostage supervision, the loss of one of their precious bargaining chips before the cards have been dealt, was unthinkable. More than one life depended on the safe delivery of this flesh and blood consignment from Lebanon, and in that I found a new strength, a new serenity, a new understanding. I learned, finally, to accept the hand that fate was dealing me. I turned from the madness of rebellion built on the unstable foundations of solitary impotence and started to want to live.

Those first few days beyond the delirium saw further changes take place. Smiler rarely ventured down into the burrow world of rabbit Marwan, preferring to leave others more attuned to the rhythms of nature to tend the sick foreign heathen in the basement.

It was fine by me. I told myself that I had neither the energy nor the will to worry any more I did still feel a slight chill and quickening of the pulse with every tread of a boot on the ladder outside of my cell, but it was different now. I simply breathed a little more deeply and awaited the day's fates.

Meals became more regular, appearing three times every day, with fresh chicken on the menu as a regular boost for my depleted protein levels. My skin hung loosely underneath my armpits. I still felt giddy when I stood for one of my now periodic walks along the corridor. I lost a lot of weight. My hair was down over my ears now, long and lank despite the showers and the shampoo. I sported a full growth of facial hair that brought with it a crawling itch and a soft irritation at the corners of my mouth. I had no real idea of time, other than the simplest measure: before madness and after madness.

"A month, Marwan," was the answer I received on the fifth day of my recovery. "All told, it's about four weeks since we found you with your head bashed in. Touch and go for a while. You were very sick, especially when the wound got infected. I'm afraid our remedies are a little crude – wide spectrum antibiotics. They took a while to have any effect, and, of course, you weren't eating so, yes, very… awkward. You'll have a bit of a scar on your forehead, but nothing too bad. When you get home, the girls will still like your face."

I felt a little sheepish at the mention of girls. A weird melange of The Kid's and Deb's faces popped into my head, grinning like a demented ghoul, and, although sitting on my mattress, I fell backwards against the cell wall. All was confusion again, which seemed to be the never-ending, underlying foundation upon which I was trying to build a new reality.

The Doctor was in his mid forties I guessed, wearing an open neck shirt, jeans, grey at the temples, clean shaven, blue eyes, cold hands. He took a stethoscope and an old hand-cranked blood pressure band from a leather satchel. He methodically took basic observations. Temperature normal. Blood pressure good. Pulse okay.

"How are your bowels?" he asked as he packed his equipment away again.

“Good,” I replied, still feeling the broad tightness of the blood pressure band on my right bicep. “Regular, I mean. The extra meal helps. I still feel weak though.”

“Mmm, yes, well, you will. Your body’s been in a bit of a fight, used up a lot of resources. Eat the chicken and rice, Marwan.”

I nodded and watched him stand up and move into the doorway. In profile he had a slightly aquiline nose, slightly ridged in the middle, and I couldn’t help noticing that his shirt strained a little around his mid-riff. The Good Doctor. Here in this damp little island, where the eyes of the masses dim with disappointment when still young, this man enjoyed the luxury of profession and vocation. Eat the chicken. I imagined him sat at a table, softly lit, with a family, bowls of steaming meat and vegetables between them. I could see smiling faces, maybe a radio on in the background, a picture not so very different from the one at home.

Home. The sadness of separation washed through me. I made then a mental picture and I hung it on one of the deepest, most private walls in my memorial gallery as a totem to ward off the ever-creeping insanity of isolation.

“Doc?” I asked quietly before he turned to leave.

He stood solid and firm, framed by the doorway.

“Yes?”

“Any chance of a shave and a haircut? Could you put in a word. Might make me feel a little more human.”

In the dim light from the corridor our eyes met, mine from under a shaggy fringe of dark, split hair, his set into a face tending towards the sheen of fat and middle-aged indulgence. He nodded.

“See what I can do.”

29

For the first time in my life I discovered the art of simple acceptance. I discovered that I possessed an ability to think without self. I flicked through The Bible that the guards had left in my cell and that until now I had ignored. Bible studies. Cigarette smoke drifting on the flicker of a tea-light. For the first time since comparative religion sessions at my senior school I read the Christian scriptures, the Old Testament, tales of Abraham and kings and giants and pillars of salt. The bush burned and tablets of stone fell at my feet. Comparisons. So much shared history. So many years and long forgotten souls.

Everything seemed to boil down to the winning of souls, about winning one to the other, a conversion to something that we already shared. In between the still addictive counting games, I developed a simplistic, solitary philosophy suited to my physical and mental capacity. One God. Virgin birth. Angels and demons. Divine revelation. Predestination. I made a mental list. For and against. Eternal paradise. Eternal Hell. Either way, in any way, my new philosophy for life always delivered a simple creed of confusion, both personal and eternal. And yet I found a small degree of happiness in realising that I no longer had to argue. The vehemence of truth no longer mattered. I could reason and I could accept. The way of things just is what it is, and that is happiness in itself. The confusion that I felt about all things seemed now to be the natural state of affairs.

I read about Christian confusion. They believe that theirs is a true religion and although they also believe that our brothers and sisters in Judaism have a true religion, it is the Christian message alone that bears scrutiny. Judaic revelation is incomplete and Islam is a false religion in the sense that we are misguided in our separatism.

I thought about Islamic confusion. We respect Jews and Christians as People of the Book, but only we understand that they have wrong beliefs and only partial revelation. Just for good measure our Christian brothers believe in an original sin inherited from Adam, with all of its tendencies towards evil. But what can you expect from people who follow the true prophet of a God

whose own message to them has been corrupted by the Devil in the Far West?

We are, I concluded, one and the same people. We are brothers who fight and scratch and gouge, because we are none of us sure of our Father's love, peace be upon Him, all of which thinking lead me down a winding path of doubt. If our Lord is a God of love and compassion, then how can He have cast all of us out from Eden? How could such a God send us a son to die for our sins, and when done with just leave us in the agony of the last two thousand years? None of it made any sense to me.

I thought about The Kid and Smiler. I considered them too to be brothers at war, made the more vicious by the ignorance of poverty. I constructed a hypothetical link between dispossession and extreme motive. I wondered how these two men had been brought up. Did they love their fathers as I loved mine? I conjectured and felt sympathy for them. Theirs was a despair that comes to a life without purpose, to a soul for whom there is no revelation beyond the recognition of desperate impotence. Again I saw confusion at the heart of things, and always that one word in answer: dispossession. How can you be a man, a content and serene man, when the gift of the world is always held by another just out of your reach?

In a tangential leap of dogmatic proportions it was, I determined, all about the failure of education. And stepping into the breach we have the word of our mutual God, peace be upon Him, channelling and programming, ordering and making destiny. Having no other words by which they could describe their anger, these boys, my captors, burned for their Saviour.

The Kid and the others, Matthew and Mark as I have come to call them as the misting of memory reduces them in my mind's eye, the ones who spoke about their God and their belief, they all tried to impress on me the truth of love and vengeance. They told me to my face that they liked me. Smiler simply snarled in the background, making sly, suggestive winks, telling me that he would explain in his own good way when the moon was low. His would always be a tough love given freely at the dusky ending of the day. It was like a love of dogs, of some farmyard animal, loved while useful, loved while sitting by the fire on a cold evening, one

ear cocked for the intruding fox, but not a love enduring or warm when the cold winds of survival blow.

"Stay alive, Marwan." I began to repeat this simple phrase during my meditations on our collective state of being. Stay alive.

The doctor was as good as his word. The next morning my guards arrived mob-handed. The usual routine of door, tray, shower and food was broken. The simple fact that there was no tray, that I was rushed through my ablutions, that I was made to change out of my underground clothes into a new pair of jeans and a clean, white shirt, all of these became portents. What did it mean? With the loss of the familiar, of the routine, comes that old friend, fear.

So short a time of peace, I thought, it's not fair.

My heart thumped against the thin, pale skin that barely seemed to cover my ribs. I winced at the sound of complaining metal. A door lock. The staccato delivery of altered sound. A sudden change in atmosphere. Boots and combat fatigues. The smell of oil on a bolt mechanism. I stood up, instinctively pulling the hessian sack over my head as I did so – a reflex action – reacting to this strange new morning by adopting the tried and tested methods of survival. A hand pressed firmly in the small of my back. Chatter. Laughter.

"Good man."

One of my guards pulled the hessian sacking from my head. Smiles and sunglasses.

"You look great – nice strides." A heavy hand slapped my left shoulder.

"Cheer up, Marwan. You look like you've seen a ghost."

One of the guards thrust a newspaper into my hands. It was torn. Articles missing, a crude form of censorship. All stories related to hostages had been ripped-out of the paper causing me some frustration later in the day as I tried to read reports from a weird, were-world that existed with large sections of essential content missing. It didn't ultimately matter. I was grateful to get a glimpse of this strange place called normal life, a world full of half-revealed facts.

Once I had dressed, my entourage walked me back down to the bathroom at the end of the short corridor outside of my cell. A chair was placed in the middle of the room. Stood behind the chair there

was a new man holding a pair of scissors and a towel. The new man was thin and short and seemed oddly frail, as if a slight breeze might blow him away into a damp and dark corner of the garden. He stood waiting behind the chair, impassive, bald and liverish. I watched nonplussed as The Kid picked up a cut-throat razor and a tube of shaving gel from the floor next to the far wall. I could smell dampness seeping in through the concrete floor and tiled walls. Despite the signs, despite the familiarity of the objects in the room, I started to shake. Light caught on the exposed razor blade, flash-blinding me. I could feel the cold earth closing in around me. I felt rather than saw hands on my shoulder, guiding me down onto the vacant chair.

The new man leaned forward, smiled, and said, "And what would Sir like today, just a light trim? Anything for the weekend?"

Laughter from the corridor. The Kid grinned at me.

"It's okay, Marwan, really. We just need to tidy you up a bit. You've been down here a while and you're starting to look like a cave man. The boys are afraid you'll whack them over the head with your club."

More laughter. Another pat on the shoulder. I felt the towel being tucked into the back of my new shirt. A comb. Tangled hair. The threat of the razor blade vanished as the barber pulled the comb through my matted locks, drawing a sharp hiss of pain from my quivering lips.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shouted, pulling my head away from him.

The shower-head dripped and then sprang into life. I was pushed forward and under the water so that my head disappeared beneath the stream of water. After a minute or so my head was pulled back, quickly towelled and again I felt the comb's teeth strain against knots, but this time, eased by the water, the knots began to unravel. And then the irony. I could feel the scissor blades against my scalp. The bastard was cutting my hair back to just a centimetre in length.

The Kid started to lather my face and neck. The razor. Our eyes locked once before I screwed them tightly shut. Was it another joke, a way of putting me at my ease before the inevitable severing of the carotid? But then I saw beyond the blade and there in The Kid's eyes a low flame burned. I knew again the warmth of his

touch on my skin and all was well with the world. I felt the blade move slowly and surely in The Kid's hand, and so, by degrees they turned the cave man into a walking, talking twentieth-century doll.

It was a day of miracles, of change writ large, and as each stone in the wall of routine and fear was knocked away I found myself warming to the idea that things might be different. Climbing the stairs unaided, although the guards' hands still hovered around me, was like emerging from hibernation. I was dressed to kill. I was a butterfly spinning on the first warm spring breeze after its wings have dried.

My first impressions top-side were of space and warped, expanded time. We we're in an old warehouse, brick built and long, with a ceiling made up of slanting ridges like the cogs on a gear, covered in broken plastic sheets. I spun round with my arms outstretched, growing human once again in this echoing bay of tranquillity. I whooped and hollered, letting my voice ricochet off the far-flung walls. I watched dust motes rise on weak thermals. A sparrow chirped from a cast iron rafter at the far end of the warehouse. I blinked repeatedly as my eyes choked on colours and my nose became blocked with the smell of clear air. Even after I stopped spinning round, drunk on freedom, my head continued to reel. My legs gave way and I sank to my knees, feeling momentarily sick. The sheer and outrageous impossibility of the outside world was too rich a dish.

In the slow, gawping return to my senses I found myself asking an odd question: why are there always hands on my body? I was lifted like a drunk by two guards, each with an arm under mine, and we walked to an area set up with a table and chairs. On the table, at the far end, a television played silently, showing, I guessed, an English day-time soap opera. Beyond the table there were a couple of overturned packing cases on which stood an electric kettle, various mugs, a small two ring butane cooker and a red plastic bowl full of dirty water. A varied selection of packets of teabags, biscuits and cakes lay beside the kettle in a general state of distress. Beyond the packing cases stood a fridge, and all of the electrical items were attached to a multi-gang plug, the cable from which snaked-away across the floor.

They made me sit at the table. The same doctor that had attended me previously took new observations, making a general but non-specific fuss of his bewildered patient.

I heard a new voice from the shadows, from the depths of the space behind me.

"Hello, Marwan. I hope you are well."

Good Arabic, but with a strange accent. The sound of my own tongue further added to my general state of confusion. There were no external points of reference in my life any more I felt as though I was the dumb-struck aboriginal grasping desperately for meaning as the explorers walked up the beach, taking their first colonial steps towards empire. The world horizon beneath which I now lived was definite, finite, and small. Even the warehouse seemed to break the rules of physics. Numb now, I gazed at the silent television screen, watching black and white figures move through a scene of domestic strife, unable for the moment to comprehend what a lawnmower might be used for. The man with the disembodied stranger's voice sat down next to me.

"Today is a big day, Marwan. I'm sorry about the last few weeks. Sorry about your illness, but it can't be helped. Security, you know the score. But, I'm glad to say that's all over. A big day."

You latch onto anything that gives hope. In the Great War, when the concept of concentration wiped out the lives of millions, there were always those who remained, those who survived and who told their stories. It is the triumph of humanity to have hope, and here, across a continent, sitting on a plain wooden chair in rare daylight, I heard a new word: 'over'.

I looked at the stranger for a moment. A suit and tie. He was balding but not quite ready to admit it. He was trim and clipped, like a freshly tailored yew hedge. "What do you mean, over?" I asked.

"Over," delivered quietly and with a wry smile. Yellowing teeth. A heavy smoker. "But first, we need to let your parents and your government know that you're alive. And there are still a few formalities to get through. So, Marwan, can you turn to face the camera and hold the paper up in front of you?"

The paper. Then it dawned on me. The paper would show today's date. As I turned I saw the barber again, this time in his role

as official photographer. A few adjustments. Posture. Head. Raise the paper a little. I heard the whir of the lens as the barber focussed in. Click. Flash. Click. Flash. Smiles. That inevitable pat on the shoulder.

"Good. Well done, Marwan, now, some cake?"

According to my new friends the cake was something called Battenberg. Sickly-sweet squares of pink and white mass-produced sponge surrounded by thick marzipan. It was a wonderful moment, a surreal phase in my recent procession towards solitary understanding. I sat at the table surrounded by guards, all of whom were armed with M-16 carbines and pistols, eating cake and drinking hot, sweet, milky tea. We watched a quiz show where the contestants could win holidays and electrical goods, anything right up to a small family car, just for guessing the price of an item that they probably could not afford to buy. It is the same at home in Lebanon. We are all enticed by the prospect of free goods, of making a good bargain. It struck me then that it would be so ironic to win a lifetime's supply of electrical goods in a country where the power browned-out more often than not.

The audience loved it. The guards cheered and jeered. Inane chatter. They behaved like chattering monkeys, one and all. We shared a honeyed, dripping slice of the woefully blinkered human condition for a few minutes, clean and tidy and lunatic. The quiz show closed without anyone winning the car. The guards told me that nobody really ever won the car. They reckoned that once in every series the television company staged a winner to keep everyone interested. It was, they assured me "dumb-ass" television. Gonzo. After the quiz the channel switched to a news bulletin and the well-dressed stranger reached over and hit the off switch.

Through it all, through the jokes and the bonhomie, all boys together in the relief trench, I couldn't shake a nagging sense of indignation. How could they behave like this? How could they treat me like this after all these weeks? But mixed in with the sense of resentment I was also very conscious of the threat. A word. A single false move and those guns would carry out their terminal function without a moment of compassion. Guns and men. Guns in the hands of men without hope. It all boiled down to my new philosophy of the ultimate confusion.

I tried, in between the guffaws and the good humoured joking, to concentrate on a truth: that my mother and father would see the photograph, that they would know. Everything seemed such a contradiction. My mother would take no comfort from knowing that I was unsafe, that I continued to live with my neck under the sword. I suddenly loved my parents more clearly and more totally than I had ever done before. For them my world was a mass of ghosts and half-seen, moonlit landscapes. They had nothing real that they could grab hold of. They had no target they could hit, not like the wall in my cell that still bore the blood stains left by my head. Laughing out loud with the guards I quietly but surely thanked God, peace be upon Him, for their love.

I was allowed to keep the new clothes.

Once the suited man had switched off the television we rapidly descended into a quiet silence that fell like dusk across the vast expanse of the warehouse floor. The mood changed. The guards dispersed, one or two clearing away the plates and cups, dipping them in the bowl of water and wiping them with dirty dishcloths before stacking them back on the overturned packing cases. Others took station at the points of the compass. I was left alone with the stranger.

I decided to start the ball rolling. "Can I ask some questions?"

He held up one hand and said, "Maybe. First I have some things to say and maybe they'll provide you with some answers."

Again, good basic Arabic.

"My name is Stefan. I am an American. You are here because we have to make a bargain. Your people have imprisoned some of our friends, the ones who survived after the hijacking. We want them back. We want other friends back as well, ones taken by the illegitimate government in London. You are our bargaining chip, our promissory note, Marwan. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I mumbled. I paused for a moment before asking, "You said it was over. What do you mean?"

Stefan took a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, flipped the lid and shook out two cigarettes. He lit them both and handed one to me. "It doesn't really matter. You… all of you, you'll go home when we get the boys back. It's nothing personal. War is simply what it is."

"But you used the word, you said it was over," I persisted, my voice rising slightly. I could feel panic welling in my gut. If he didn't mean that I was going home then what else could it be? I tried not to think the obvious.

"You should've gone home, Marwan. A nice boy like you, you should've gone home when you had the chance. But you're an outsider in a war zone. You were an opportunistic capture, but it doesn't matter any more. Now that we've got you we can get at your masters."

I fought back the urge to scream at him that I was only a day away from home when they took me. Instead I worked on the old and tired argument. I didn't really believe in what I said, not now.

"I'm Lebanese. I'm just a student from a small country. The Persians aren't interested in me. The only people who give a damn are my mother and father. Can't you let me go for their sakes?"

A strained smile. "I really wish I could, but it's not up to me. Not any more See those shoes there under the table. Put them on, Marwan."

Shoes. Brown trainers, weathered and frayed, but solid. My hands shook as I pulled the trainers on. They were a size too big and I felt like crying again. Was I about to die with my boots on?

"You're moving on, Marwan. That's what I mean by over. We've sold you to another group, more experienced with this sort of thing. We all want the same outcome, Marwan, for you and for us. They'll take care of you now."

He whistled softly. The two guards who had been on washing-up duty came over, this time with rolls of duct tape in their hands. They bound my wrists and arms first, then my ankles and knees. To make sure that I was secure they next taped my bound arms to my torso. Behind me I heard the sound of a heavy diesel engine barking at the walls of the warehouse. I could smell the sweetly acrid fumes from the exhaust. Hands on my body again. Together with the suited American, the two guards lifted and carried me, trussed like a roasting bird, and carefully laid my body in a metal box underneath the flat bed back of the lorry. Just before they closed the compartment The Kid leaned in and taped over my mouth.

“Good luck, Marwan,” he whispered, and kissed me lightly on the forehead.

30

I lay prone in a metal coffin slung underneath a flat-bed truck, sheathed and bound, breathing with difficulty through my nose because of the tape over my mouth. I lay like a living corpse, unable to wipe away the sweat and the dust that clogged my eyes. Over those first grinding miles I fought against the bonds, twisting my arms and wrists against the tape, but all that I did was make the tape coil tighter and tighter so that it cut into my skin. Beside me, to my right, I could hear the whine of the transmission shaft as it ground away through the everyday time and space of the world beyond the metal box in which I was slowly suffocating. An unremitting river of sweat ran into my eyes. My hair was dank and dripping. I developed insane urges to itch and scratch, my skin burning and inflamed My nose ran in the closely confined heat, dribbling mucous across the tape over my mouth and onto my newly shaven chin.

With every turn and every bump in the road, with every jarring pothole, my bones rattled like dice in a cup, and then the endless aching began. Unlike my previous trip in the trunk of the car, where I had some space in which to flex, this box was only just big enough to hold me. I could move neither to the sides nor in the vertical by more than a few centimetres. I felt my feet becoming numb as the tape bit into my ankles, and slowly that numbness spread, rolling inexorably up my calves and into my thighs. The feeling in my fingers drifted away, giving me a vague sense of having been swallowed by a monstrous, mechanical snake.

Through it all, as the jars and the jolts and the rolling corners sent jagged sparks circulating through my nerve endings, I groaned and tried to blot the world out by closing my eyes, by willing myself into coma. The truck made its way through traffic. I listened for cars and voices beyond the diesel growl. We approached junctions, the heavy braking making me slide feet first towards the front of the truck and sending needles of dull pain up my legs. The truck would idle for a moment, waiting for traffic to clear or for lights to change, and as the truck moved off I spat oaths of vengeance in my head, while I fought for breath through my clogged nose. After each halt the truck then began its ponderous

attempts at acceleration, jerking through the gears, sliding me slowly towards the rear of the box where my head would hit hard metal. I tried to knock myself unconscious, but there was not enough room to get any force into the blow.

In despair I tried a new tactic to stave off suffocation. In my head I tried to sing snatches of songs from my childhood, but the stifling emptiness of this demonic and industrial womb-space drove the shapes and sounds of words and melodies into a frantic jumble of static. I gave up humming and instead tried to erase everything from my mind except a picture of my mother and father. I tried to reach a contemplative state, a balanced meditation, where my parents looked back at me from the veranda of our house in Jnah, the two of them smiling sweetly and holding hands. Just as I started to get the image into some sort of focus, at the critical moment when I started to remember details about the garden, their clothes and the house, right then the truck would bounce or shake over rough English roads, and these carefully assembled pieces of the picture puzzle would break and scatter.

The heat was unbearable, and after an hour or so in the coffin I had no strength left for order and cohesion. My thoughts ran riot, one after another, disjointed, becoming a twisted nightmare sequence of unrelated rants. Although I could not voice my anger because of the tape across my mouth, I raved and screamed internally, breathing hard and wetly through my nose, snorting my rage and venom at the world, at my guards and outrageous bloody fortune.

I think the trip took about two hours, the second of which was one long febrile, mad-dog but inevitably silent tirade. Anger was all that I had left here in the shadows. I felt like a wraith, like the ghost of a man, a creature of no substance, and although the sound and the rage existed only within me, it was this fevered frenzy that kept me sane. I could barely move nor could I make a physical sound. I could not mark the world with my anger, but by looking my demons in the eye, by taking that black heart of oblivion in my imaginary hands and squeezing it until it burst, I found the strength to stand as a man in the darkness. I would not let them destroy me. I would not.

The tempo of the journey changed, becoming one of short, slow crawls rather than the monotone long-haul of the open road. The snake-truck and I edged through walls of new sound. The echoes and the reflections of motion off city streets are different from the broad, swallowing expanse of the country. I continued to shout and flame in my head, but the venom was spent. These new sounds gave me hope of journey's end.

All journeys have an ending. The truck pulled up and over a kerb and then bumped along a patch of rough ground. Gears and air-brakes. Reverse. That a human mind can endure such blackness and remain essentially rational is quite amazing. This thought came to me as I gradually became aware of that momentary silence when an engine dies and doors have yet to slam. I also thought about the anger. I was determined now that the bastards would get a full dose of the bile in my spleen.

The cab doors opened and shut. I heard footsteps and voices. Barked orders. A key in a padlock. It struck me that the bastards had locked me in. What if we had crashed? Would they have left me to roast in the flames? I knew the answer, and this too gave me strength. I was going to flay them, I was going to rip the skin from their backs and serve it to them on a bed of chilled spite.

The door to my compartment opened and I screwed my eyes tightly shut against the light that flooded in. I breathed fresh air and felt the coolness of early evening on my skin. I tried to wriggle towards the opening, but a hand stopped me. I felt a gun barrel in my ribs. The rage within subsided for a moment with the coming of daylight and the chill sedative of cold metal. I heard an unfamiliar and urgent voice.

"Be quiet. Don't move."

I lay there for twenty minutes, unable to see anything clearly. The guard made me turn my head towards the back of the coffin space, and he reminded me of my current impotence every couple of minutes or so by thrusting the muzzle of his rifle into my midriff. I tried to breathe deeply, desperate for them to tear away the gag. Now that the journey was done I wanted my hole in the ground, I wanted to return to normality, to the routines of captivity. I wanted a cigarette so badly.

The side of the truck lay in shadow by the time my captors returned. They man-handled me out of the coffin under the truck and lay me face down and corpse-like on the ground. One of them bent over me, lifted my head by the hair and wrapped a bath towel around my head so that I couldn't see anything more than I had already. We did the dance of the dumb potato sack once again, only this time we appeared to be walking up steps rather than sliding down into the damp earth. I counted two flights of stairs and then we levelled off and walked along a short hallway.

My porter put me down in a small room. I felt hands on my ankles and then the ripping of a knife through the tape. My legs burst back into life as the blood flowed and I shuddered as the feeling in my limbs surged forth once again. My arms and wrists were freed, but the tape over my mouth was left untouched. Having checked that the towel was still secure, The knife man took my left wrist and hand-cuffed me to what felt like an old cast-iron radiator. Beneath the towel, still gagged and mute, I sensed natural light.

Not knowing how the routines of captivity might be altered in this new place, not knowing anything about who my new masters might be, about how they might act, I sat back against the wall and waited, not daring to take the towel from my head for some time. Eventually, once the exquisite pain in my relieved limbs abated, I realised that apart from the handcuffs I was alone and free to move around as much as I could given the limitations imposed by my new style of bondage.

Slowly, fearing the potential blow from the butt of a gun, I eased the towel down around my neck. Gingerly I tried to peel the tape from my mouth, but I could feel the skin pulling away from my dry and cracked lips. There was no option but to rip it away quickly. It was all that I could do to hold the roar in my throat back so as not to bring guards hurtling into the room. I sat, gasping for breath, running my dry tongue over my swollen lips, trying desperately to summon up enough saliva to slake a burning thirst.

The room was small and square, no more than three metres by three, and completely bare. The floorboards were dark and dusty, and the walls, although once painted cream, were scarred and flaking. A bare electric light-fitting hung from a bowed ceiling. There was no furniture or decoration, no signs of life. I tried to

work out where I was. Two hours in the truck, perhaps, but I had no idea whether we had taken a straight route or doubled back. How fast can a truck go? From what I could see, from the flights of stairs, I guessed that I was in some sort of apartment, and judging by what was left of the high, ornate skirting boards, the place was old.

Set high in the wall opposite the door was a grubby and cracked window, a skylight, and through it I saw clouds scudding across a darkening horizon. I laughed out loud, forgetting the squalor and the danger. I tried to stand to see if I could catch a glimpse of a skyline, of anything that might show me something of the real world, but the window was set too high. I sank back against the wall and stared at the deepening colours of dusk. I feasted on an open sky for a few quiet moments before hearing the tell-tale thud of heavy boots on old wood.

The movement was quick and definite. I saw camouflage combat trousers and boots. I saw a tall, rangy man in a faded blue checked shirt. He took three long strides to where I was sitting and buried the butt of his rifle in my stomach. I howled once, feeling the bite of heavy wood ripping into my vital organs for a second time, before I remembered to keep quiet, before I remembered the towel around my neck. Frantically I tried to lift the towel over my head, and once the towel was in place I tried to cover my head with my arm in case the brute with the rifle decided to plant his cudgel right between my eyes.

There were no more blows. I heard the man take a step back and ground his weapon. He screamed at me from the safety of the doorway.

"Welcome to the Hotel. Now, shut the fuck up."

He turned and walked away. I heard laughter from further down the corridor. I sat in the lowering darkness with the towel over my head and a thudding ache in my guts. I did not move again for some hours. I waited out the flooding emptiness, just as I had learned to do in the hole. Thoughts crowded and jostled in my head through my drowsy hours of my incapacitation. I relived the black smothering of the journey. I watched my parents as they waved and smiled at me from the veranda of our house. I saw Usman grinning over a bottle top. I looked over the river Thames once again at the

bleak horizons of the south London camps. I pasted pictures of all these things and many more on the inner walls of my mind, and tried to remember what it was like to be human, to be on the outside looking in, to be Marwan Tayeh, the voyeur, the gawper and the goggler.

The night was well advanced by the time the guards next came to me in my room. Although the towel was thicker and more tightly woven than the hessian sack in my last prison, I could still make out shades and shifts of light. My room was dark, but the door was open and the hall light was on. I heard odd scufflings and the opening and closing of doors, assuming that it was my guards moving about my new and as yet undiscovered home. A toilet flushed in the room next to mine.

Without warning two men walked into my room and switched on the ceiling light.

"Up we get, boy. The man wants to have a word with you."

I held onto the towel so that it did not slip from my head and did my best to stand up. One of the men removed the handcuffs from my left wrist and left them dangling on the radiator, a sure sign that I would be back before long.

"I need the toilet," I said. "And a drink."

I had seen neither of the two men before. I wondered where the guard in the blue check shirt was. I prayed that he was not "the man".

"Time enough. First you have to see the man," replied one of the guards.

They each took one of my hands and led me blindfold along the corridor. I had taken the precaution of leaving a gap at the bottom so that the towel hung loosely from my cheek. I saw door-frames. There were two doors on the opposite side of the corridor to my own room, and both of the doors were closed. Next to my room was a bathroom, and at the far end of the corridor I walked onto curling blue linoleum. A kitchen. They sat me down on an old wooden chair that creaked under my meagre weight. From my front a man spoke.

"You can take off the towel."

I hesitated.

"But then I'll see your faces. At the last place they didn't like that."

"It doesn't matter. Not here. We are a little more secure down here."

I took off the towel and looked around, trying to take in as much information about my surroundings as I could. The kitchen looked tired and dated but workable. Underneath the glare of a bare strip-light there were cupboards along two walls, a solid and heavy electric oven, two fridges, a sink and drainer. A flimsy looking table ran along the third wall. I twisted in my seat and saw the two guards standing by the doorway, arms folded across their chests. They looked serious and efficient and business-like.

In front of me, seated on a similar, rustic wooden dining chair sat the man. At first glance I could see nothing remarkable about him. He wore jeans and trainers and a loose brown shirt. He looked as though he might be mid-thirties, clean-shaven, short brown hair. He would be utterly nondescript but for the fact that he sat opposite me and held the power of life and death over my head.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand. Why…"

The man leaned forward and patted my knee. "Doesn't matter. None of it. You're ours now. We're the real thing, not like your mates from Slough."

Slough. I had a vague idea of maps beyond the boundaries of London. Slough was to the west, just beyond the airport. I assumed that the journey west continued and I tried to think of places that they might have brought me to; Oxford, perhaps, or Reading. Surely they were too close as the journey had taken about two hours. Where else? Bristol?

The man leant back in his chair and made it obvious that he had an automatic pistol stuck in his belt. "Amateurs," he continued in a slow monotone. "Nothing but opportunistic thieves, boy, brigands, small time. We, on the other hand, are soldiers. Soldiers of Christ."

He stood up and walked around me, measuring his steps, keeping his voice low and calm. "You see, boy, we want to clear a few things up."

I watched the man as he moved around the room. He appeared to be methodical in the way that he moved and thought, but something else struck me about him. He was too calm, as if he

were hiding some ragged alter-ego, something that I was by now all too familiar with. A part of me, the lingering essence of the creature in the box, wanted to lash out at him, but I kept my calm, breathing slowly, not wanting to antagonise the beast. The ache in my guts still rankled but I had no desire for a repeat performance.

"My name is Marwan," I said, trying to sound relaxed and confident. "Marwan Tayeh. I'm twenty-one years old, nearly twenty-two. I'm a Lebanese citizen. I volunteered to come to England for a year to teach Arabic to your students."

The man continued to walk back and forth behind me, making me twist and turn to keep him in my eye line. "Yeah, I know all that, boy. That's not what we want you to talk about."

He returned to his seat and took the automatic pistol from his belt. The man sat quietly for a moment, flicking the safety on and off, before he spoke again. His voice was stronger and more urgent this time around.

"What about the G.I.D.? How are you connected with the Mukhabarat? What's your real job here? Who were you spying on? Who are your contacts?"

I sat in front of him, watching as he played with the gun, unable to think of anything to say to him. No one had mentioned spying before. How could he think that I was mixed up with the General Intelligence Department? I was just a boy trying to escape from other people's expectations. I was just a stupid little boy.

"I don't know anything about those things. Like I said, I'm just an aid worker. ArabAid, you know, trying to help out. I don't have any links to the security services. I'm a Lebanese citizen. That's all. I just want to go home."

It came out in one long torrent. I could hear myself pleading with the man. My voice was cracked and dry and faint.

He smiled at me. "Ah, Marwan, Marwan. We all want to go home. That's the thing. I can't tell you my name for obvious reasons, but, you see, my surname is Aragonese. My family came over here two hundred years ago. After the slaughter of our people by the Moors we ran to France for a long while and then here. I want to go home too, Marwan."

His expression changed, lowering and deepening. He looked like black thunder. "But I can't go home, can I.? Not yet."

A pause. The man stood in front of me and stared at me. His eyes burned my soul. I tried to piece together the time-lines The fall of the Christian kingdoms in Aragon and Castile took place when? At the end of the fifteenth century by the Julian calendar? Five hundred years ago. And what did he mean by the phrase: "not yet"? Did he really harbour dreams of returning? And what did that mean for me?

The man leaned forward once more and spat words into my face. "Tell me about the G.I.D., Marwan."

I could feel the old anger rising again, like a cobra, swaying gently, fixing its prey with a striking eye. I tried to look away so that the beast within would be stilled but he grabbed my chin and forced me to look directly into his eyes. I saw there the flames of despair that turn childish potential into the fear and loathing of hate.

He screamed at me. "The G.I.D. Tell me about you and your bastard mates."

With my chin still cupped in his hand I spat venom back. "Get it into your fucking thick skull. I'm Lebanese. Nothing to do with all this shit. Leave me alone. You're just a bully. You're pathetic, all of you. Screw you."

He was on top of me in an instant. The pistol whipped across my nose, breaking the skin and splattering us both in gobbets of my blood. I felt the chair tipping backwards and although I tried to grab hold of the man in front of me to stop myself from falling backwards, the stars in front of my eyes created a storm of interference disabling my faculties. I grabbed at thin air.

My head hit the linoleum and bounced. I heard footsteps. A boot slammed into my ribs, hitting the spot where only a few weeks ago Smiler had broken one of my bones. The pain arced through me and I rolled over onto my side, hugging my torso with one arm while protecting my head with the other. I became a foetal being once more. I was the wraith, the ghost child, the impotent warrior laid low by fear and hurt and pain.

I screamed. I took a rabbit punch to the kidneys. The two goons by the door circled slowly and aimed punches and kicks at my frail body while the man stood over me and shouted out his frustrations.

"Feel it, Marwan, feel it. You filthy animals will get what's yours."

A fist to the stomach. I doubled-up.

"We have history, boy, history on our side. And now we've got American dollars and guns. We've got rocket launchers and training camps."

A toecap in the kidneys. My back arched as I screamed for mercy.

"Once we get this fucked-up little island sorted, we're coming for you. The Crusades were never over, Marwan, we've just taken a bit of a breather."

A boot heel on my outstretched fingers. The shattering agony of it. "Please…," I whimpered.

"Cruce Signati. That's us. Soldiers of Christ. We're going to take back what's ours. We won't rest until we've cleaned you out."

Blood poured from my nose. One of the guards knelt across me and started to rain punches down on my head. I felt everything and nothing. The world swarmed with black buzzing creatures and the cobra twisted and turned, desperately trying to fend-off the blows with impotent, broken fangs.

"Not until Jerusalem is ours again. And then we'll wipe you bastards off the face of the earth. Infidels. Heretics. Heathens. Dissenters. All of you. You're all going down."

I lost any sense of time then, although the welcome embrace of unconsciousness was denied me. I felt every blow, every ache, every mewling crack of bone, as they dragged me back to my room. I lay there, still foetal, crying through the bloody drips from my broken nose, while they wrenched my left arm from my sore and battered ribs and fitted the handcuffs. The door closed and I heard the metallic scrape of a key in a lock.

At some point during the remainder of the night, barely able to move because of the wracking pain, I defecated in my new trousers. I lay there in my own ordure, alone in the dark in a stripped bare room, wishing for death to take me. I wanted to go home, I craved a cigarette, but I could have neither, and the indignity of my sordid life made me wish for the ultimate release.

By degrees, though, as the aches and breaks settled upon my poor life, becoming part of the normality of Marwan, the captive, I

tried to sit and collect my thoughts. Survival was about doing the basics. Enduring such times as these was made possible by doing the simple things that remind you that you are a free man. Despite the bruises and contusions, despite the band of metal that tightened again across my ribs, I managed to strip off my trousers and shorts. I cleaned myself up as best I could with the towel and threw all of my soiled clothes into the far corner of the room. I sat there, half naked, chained to the radiator, awaiting the coming of dawn through my skylight. Listening to the soft lullaby that washed through me, the song of the beating, I reasoned that if I could just stay awake until dawn, if I could just once more see the open sky, then I would survive another day. It was all that I could hope for now; one more day.

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Given the mental stresses and the physical degradations of the day, it was inevitable that I fell asleep chained to the radiator. I awoke to the sound of the door being unlocked and, although it was agony to move now that my limbs had stiffened after the beating, I managed to kneel and cover my nakedness with the bottom of my blood-spattered tee-shirt. The door swung open and the guard in the blue check shirt walked into the room. He put his rifle against the wall by the door and turned to me.

"Bit of a scenario, last night. Don't worry about it. The Boss likes to set a few markers when we get a new boy. I'm sure you understand now you've had an evening to think things over. Sorry about the nose… and the black eye."

It all seemed so matter-of-fact. He spoke as if my appearance was the stuff of every day experience. I supposed in his world that it might very well be, but I could not reconcile the savage thuggery of yesterday with the softness of the early morning light that streamed into the room through the window. I touched my nose and winced. My left eye felt swollen and puffy. The guard put his fingers to his lips.

"Now, you'll be good today, won't you, Marwan. No funny business, right?"

He went out into the corridor and I heard the sound of items being dragged along the bare floorboards. The man pulled a metal framed camping bed into the room and set it under the window. Then he brought in a blanket, a change of clothes, a fresh towel, and sundry little luxuries for my new life; soap and shampoo, a couple of books, a box of candles, and, Heaven be praised, a full packet of cigarettes and a disposable plastic lighter. The final thing that he brought in was a length of chain, maybe two metres long.

He whistled once and one of the other guards, one of the men who took part in my methodical beating the previous evening, came and stood in the doorway, pointing his gun at me. Through all this I just knelt there in a state of mute resignation, holding my aching bones together, trying to keep the man in me from falling apart.

"Now, Marwan," said the guard in the checked shirt. "It's like this. Usual routine. Sure you know how it works. Morning shower and toilet. Evening toilet. Otherwise hold it in."

He pulled a plastic bag out of his trouser pocket and delicately shovelled my soiled trousers, towel and shorts into it. He gestured for me to take off my bloodied tee-shirt, which he also stuffed into the bag after I threw it across the floor to him. In return he threw me a clean white towel. He turned to the guard at the door and kicked the bag across the floor.

"Burn it, yeah?"

The man in the door way wrinkled his nose and kicked the bag down the hall towards the front door to the apartment. Under the watchful gaze of the guard with the gun, under the assured protection of his American-made carbine, the man in the check shirt wrapped and fixed the chain around the solid metal pipe that ran from the radiator and around the foot of the room to the corridor wall. Then he unlocked the handcuffs from the radiator and fixed them to the end of the chain.

"You'll have a bit more …erm… room to manoeuvre. Now, you'll be a good boy, won't you? I'm going to take you for a shower. Bring your new clothes. After that there'll be breakfast. I'm Robbie, by the way."

I could not find the strength to speak. It was enough of a struggle to stand upright. My ribs jarred and screamed in pain. I fought for breath and nearly passed out as the blood began to circulate. I felt a steadying hand on my elbow. Slowly, with me shuffling along like an octogenarian, the two guards walked me to the bathroom and sat me in a rusty and chipped enamel bath. The guy in the checked shirt, Robbie, pulled a lever on an ornate but lime-scaled fitting at the head of the bath and water cascaded over me. Beautiful, luxurious, warm water.

"When you're feeling a bit better you can do this yourself. We'll help just this once, eh, mate?"

Robbie pulled me slowly to my feet and poured shampoo over my head. I stood there, completely naked, and let him lather up the shampoo and rub it into my scalp. He passed me the bar of soap.

"Draw the line at your tackle. You'll have to go down there."

I nodded, and as I soaped my body down I counted the bruises and cuts. My nose felt like a balloon, and every time I turned to face the water, the jets made me see stars in my swollen eye. I was covered in purple welts and patches. My fingers, the ones trodden on by the guards were stiff and fat, but I could still move them, so I guessed that they were just badly bruised. My blood, flowing over the ribs already broken once by Smiler, pounded through my veins, wrapping around my chest like a winding sheet. I felt faint and staggered but was again steadied by a strong and muscular hand at my elbow.

Once out of the shower, Robbie helped me to towel off and then dress while the other guard kept me carefully in his sights. I brushed my teeth with a flattened toothbrush that sat in a mug on an old sink. The mug had no handle.

When I was finished Robbie took my arm once and smiled. "Not bad. Apart from that nose. Still, can't have everything. Right, let's get you back to your knew home."

The pensioner shuffle. I sat on the camp bed while Robbie fixed the handcuffs. As he stood up I tried to speak.

"Th…thanks."

"Eh? Oh. All part of the service."

He folded his arms across his chest as he looked down at the pathetic, misshapen creature huddled on the canvas of the camp-bed "You see, Marwan, it's a war. Down here we are the war. We are the law. No government stuff here, mate. So, want my advice? Keep your nose clean… oh, sorry… and don't answer back. No heroics. You'll be alright. Now, breakfast. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

It seemed such a strange question to ask. I was still dazed from the beating. I tried to focus. What did I have? What does a shadow-man possess or need?

"I don't really know. A radio or a newspaper. Something to read. Pen and paper. That sort of thing. Just something to pass the time."

Robbie laughed and turned to the guard standing in the doorway.

"Mick, he'll want the bloody telly next."

Robbie picked up his gun and walked out of the room, leaving Mick on point duty. A few moments later he returned and put a tray

down next to my camp bed. Tea. Bread. A small catering pack of butter. An apple. A bottle of water.

"No can do with the radio and stuff. You'll just have to amuse yourself. There's a couple of books amongst the bits and pieces I brought in earlier. Read those. Have a nice day, Marwan."

He and Mick left the room, locked the door and left me to my own devices. I had not eaten for twenty-four hours, and despite my grieving aches and pains, I wolfed the food down, enjoying even the milky, insipid British tea.

Thus began again the endless routine in a new location but with the same old rigmarole. I was alone again with new friends who seemed to mix a general amiability with random psychosis. The same old habits. The same old monotony of caged existence.

Immediately after I finished breakfast I chain-smoked three cigarettes. They made me cough violently, sending rods of iron through my chest and ribs, but I did not care. The taste and the rush were exquisite. I was clean and dressed again. I could smoke. I could see the open sky. That faint background smell of drying faecal matter was fading with the rise of the day. I even looked at the books; a trashy novel about an American heiress being kidnapped for ransom, and the inevitable copy of the Bible. Robbie obviously had a sense of humour. The bastard.

In those few moments smoking my cigarettes I decided to ask my new friend, Robbie, some questions. During the beating that I had taken that previous night, the words of Robbie's boss stuck firmly in my head, words about Crusades and vengeance. When Robbie returned to collect my breakfast tray and lock me down for the day I stood up and touched him on the arm.

"What is it, Marwan? What do you want?" he asked in an almost avuncular voice.

"Can we talk for a moment, about last night, about the things your boss said?"

Robbie put the tray back down on the floor and looked at me quizzically. He motioned me to sit back down on the camp bed. "Not much to say, really. He's a soldier of God. I don't know anything much about Aragon and all that stuff, but I do know he's a hard bastard. Burns with it, know what I mean."

I nodded but then realised that it was just a ritual response. I did not know what he meant and said so. "No, actually, I don't really understand. Do you really think there'll be a time when you'll take back the world? Is that what the Americans tell you? Is that what they say in your chapels?"

Robbie stood firmly and squarely in the centre of the room, hands on hips. He leaned forward a little to emphasise his point. "Don't give a shit what they say. It's what I know, it's what's up here, that counts. Robbie pointed to his right temple. "And what I know is that it's all screwed up. You want to know what it's all about, boy? I'll tell you what it's about…"

Robbie took a step forward and stood over me. That bantering tone of voice that he started the conversation with had flipped instantly into something far more aggressive. "Back in the day, back when you were all slaves under your Turk Emperors, my family had a farm. We had a good life. Yeah, it was hard but we had a bit of land, a bit of something to pass down, you know. We were doing all right. Then the war comes, the Great War, when you lot turned on your fucking Empire.

Well you know what we thought, out here by the sea, we thought we'd have a bit of that freedom. So we ally ourselves with the Sultan in return for a new world, a world where we're not excluded from trade, where we're not on the edge of it all. My grandfather was a volunteer, a Janissary, you know, one of the Foreign Brigadiers. Got shot up near Aleppo, shipped home, with a few folding notes and your Sultan's fifth-hand thanks."

Robbie turned and started to pace around the room, warming to his subject. I sat quietly and meekly, waiting for the story to continue, waiting for Robbie to work himself into a righteous rage, waiting for the inevitable fist.

"Course, you lot win, and you get your new world. When was it, Treaty of Damascus, twenty-one, twenty-two? Doesn't matter. You lot get your freedom. New countries. You get oil and machines and self-determination, the Council of Nations. Council of fucking Islam, an Eastern eye on the world. But what do we get? Fucking reparations. Bled dry. Recession. Then the old government, the royals, lose it, don't they. Everyone goes on strike, everything gone, soup kitchens, families torn apart. We lost it all, my family,

everything. So did the others. Banks foreclosing, rich getting richer, guns on the streets. Been the same ever since, one load of corrupt bastards after another, screwing the poor over again and again and again. That's when it all started, mate, back then when you got your freedom. You and yours took us to the cleaners and hung us out to dry."

Robbie shook his head, as if clearing away clouds that might obscure his vision of the world. He stopped pacing the room and turned to face me, walking slowly over and squatting down in front of me.

"I know it's not you, not directly, but that doesn't matter." He whispered softly, but with steel edges in his voice. "It's what you represent. The Boss, well, he's got dreams of holy war. He wants to march into battle behind a burning cross. Me, I just want to get even. They killed my sister. They took our land. They left us to rot out there in the fields just like the crops. They burned our schools and took away the medicine. These religious boys gave us back our dignity. They've brought teachers and doctors where the government can't be arsed. Yeah, we have to listen to a lot of preaching, and some of the lads go a bit goggle-eyed but it's okay. I'm a man again, Marwan, and that's what matters."

I looked into Robbie's eyes then and saw a fire burning. I could not quite grasp the logic of his argument. The bare facts were true. After the Great War there was a period of retribution, a time of depression and re-adjustment, but we had all moved on. The rest of the world settled into a peace of sorts and got on with the business of living and making money. These people, Robbie and his kind, seemed to me to be locked into a past that had long since faded on the dry and dusty pages of our history books.

"But you can't go on like this." I said softly, still looking into Robbie's eyes. "I mean, one day you've got to open up, you've got to join us."

"Join you?" Robbie spat out the words and grabbed my handcuffed wrist. He twisted his hand, burning my already aching skin. "Join who, Marwan? No one gives a fuck about us apart from the Yanks, and that's only 'cos we've got oil now and we're a thorn in your bloody hides. And your lot? They send kids like you to teach English girls and boys Arabic, to make them into good little

citizens of your world. They'll be converting next, wearing headscarves and all that shit. It's invasion either way: American preachers and guns or some sneaky twisting by the Arabs. Given the choice, Marwan, we'll take the guns with the good book."

Robbie let go of my wrist and shoved me backwards across the camp bed and into the radiator. He stood and glowered at me, the fire in his eyes threatening to flare and explode. "We've been whipping boys for too long, Marwan, for way too long. It's time to take a stand, and right now you're it."

Robbie turned and stomped over to the door. He picked up the breakfast tray, gave me one last baleful look, and then quietly locked me up for the day. The whole conversation swirled around in my head. It sort of made sense, on a superficial level, but as I tried to think through the logic of it, as I tried to make myself understand how it must be to live Robbie's life, I found myself drowning in a sea of uncertainty. My body ached with the beating. One eye was nearly shut. My nose felt as though it were growing by the second, and now my head hurt with the ragged and unbalanced equation of Robbie's words.

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Over the next few weeks, as the procedures and the rituals bedded down, as Robbie and Mick and the other guards who rotated on shift, mixed bonhomie with casual insults and violence, I started to listen and to watch.

Over the first few days, as my body healed after the beating and I grew more confident, I noticed some subtle changes in the sound of the place. Where before I was alone in my silence, down in the hole, here in the apartment there was a difference. Aware at first of only my own shuffle and ache, I gradually began to distinguish other movements and routines within the close confines of these bare walls.

In the mornings, before the guards turned up to feed me and to accompany me to the bathroom, I could hear another door being unlocked. On one occasion I thought I heard the dull thud of metal on wood. The footsteps in the hall were ragged, as if there was a subtle echo to the guards' booted footfall. I heard a strange accent one morning. The words were muffled, but the tell-tale thwack of a fist in the ribs was something I recognised: the short, sharp reflexive action that said, "be quiet."

Again, after my own morning rituals had been completed in the now customary fashion, where only the guards would speak outside of my room, I heard the third door in the hall being unlocked. I heard the same dull and subdued noises that accompanied my own ritual washing, except that this time they seemed to double up. After the obligatory shuffle to the bathroom I expected to hear the breakfast tray and the door, but another body seemed to be moving along the well-worn groove of morning ablutions. The shower ran three times, once before my own morning wash and twice afterwards.

Around the third night of my captivity in the apartment, late into the small hours, I heard a faint tapping coming from the pipe that connected the radiator in my room to the circuit of pipes that ran through the apartment. These signs, this talismanic evidence of other lives, thrilled me. Wrapped as I was in the cotton wool of solitary confinement, unable as I was to express any of my thoughts in concrete form or to engage in conjecture with another rational

human being, nonetheless I spent hours imagining faces and clothes and names to accompany the hollow tapping sounds in the night. The sheer closeness of other bodies, of living, breathing fellow travellers, completely changed my view of the world. I discovered new horizons, and daily I journeyed across the plains of my meagre captivity in search of the treasure caves of Ali-Baba and his forty thieves. During the weeks and months of my incarceration there had only ever been the emptiness of night and the confused ramblings of my own competing thoughts and images. Now I had something that I could concentrate all of my hopes and fears upon. I was convinced that there were other people here, other hostages.

I ate my meals with relish. I had a duty to exist because I felt sure that by surviving I would find companionship. I washed dutifully because I wanted always to be presentable. I hoped that each day would bring that longed-for moment. I spent hours trying to recall the faces and names of the taken, wondering which of the select band might be behind those other doors. I held imaginary conversations with them, planning a safe route through the hurts and psychological infirmity of captivity. I introduced these people to my games, and in my head we laughed and we talked. After all these weeks alone I longed for company. I craved the touch of another's hand, soft and warm, a hand that did not smell of oil and gunmetal. We were a happy band, an imagined brotherhood.

My mood lightened visibly. In spite of my slow recovery from the beating, with the aches and bruises still smarting but fading, I was now eager to be up and off every morning and every evening. My nose was still a mess, but less puffy by now. I could touch it without whimpering, and somehow found comfort in the strangely skewed ridge that had formed at the top of my septum. I smiled at my captors when they came in. I tried to engage them in conversation, desperate for them to reveal some snippet of information in an unguarded moment. Every fibre in my body bent to one purpose: contact.

It took about a week for me to pluck up the courage to steal the teaspoon. The morning progressed as usual, and after ten minutes of being left alone with my breakfast the guard returned to my cell to collect the dishes. I usually left my teaspoon standing in the mug, but this morning I secreted it under the blanket on my camp

bed. As the guard took the tray I sat and tried to smile. I was unusually polite, and immediately thought that he would smell the rot of betrayal, but he did not. He smiled back, made a little small talk, and sauntered out of the room.

In case Mick or Robbie or one of the other guards made a fuss about the spoon, I made up a story about finding it under the bed, meaning to give it back to them but forgetting to mention it. I knew that if they discovered the missing spoon they would give me another beating, hopefully just a slap and some hot words, but either way I was sure that I would survive.

They never noticed.

That night, I moved the camp bed away from the wall, spread the blanket on the bare floorboards and lay with my head next to the heating pipe. It was still autumn and the pipe was cold. I wondered whether the heating worked in winter.

I lay there for a couple of hours. Desperate not to miss those faint taps, but my mind drifted off again, rampaging through fantasies and memories. I mixed-up the possibilities for the near future with childhood laughter. I remembered the spites and the triumphs of the playground, and those soft evenings sitting on the boughs of my beloved Turkey Oak.

At some point I must have drifted off into an uncomfortable sleep. I awoke with a start, my neck stiff and sore, and I swore under my breath, nearly breaking down in tears. I must have missed the tapping. I called myself every name under this weak English sun, and slapped my face hard to restore full alertness. I had no watch. I knew not what time it might be. I listened to the sounds of the apartment and realised that it must be late. The television in the kitchen was silent. The guards must be asleep. I convinced myself that I had missed this first chance at establishing contact with my darling brethren.

The sense of disappointment, of failure, was crushing in the darkness. I lit a candle and a cigarette and lay with my ear to the pipe, feeling as though I were worthless. I deserved the silence. All those years spent watching others, all those years of anonymity in the crowd, came back to haunt me. I considered my life so far. What had I achieved? Nothing but…

Tap-tap

A pause. I waited, holding my breath until I nearly burst.

Tap.

Silence. I held the teaspoon in my right hand and hesitated. After all these weeks I was about to send a message to a wider world, a world that existed beyond the boot cap and the rifle butt. I swallowed and breathed hard and fast. I had to force my hand to move, so thick and viscous had the air in my cell become.

A single stroke.

Tap.

Silence.

And then it struck me. How would they know it was me? Might they not think that the guards had cottoned-on to them and were playing a joke? Were they even now expecting the doors to slam open and the night air to be filled with the dull thud of fists and boots and wooden stocks?

I cursed. How could I be so foolish? I tried to think logically. Two taps, then one tap. A mirror image of the shuffling footsteps in the morning. A simple way of saying that we two are still here: that the single occupant of the room opposite mine was still there. And then another single tap. Had they too heard my footsteps? What about the interrogation and the assault? Would they know?

Silence. Maybe they too were trying to work it out.

I repeated the tapping on each of the next two nights. I waited for the guards to switch off the television. I waited for the sound of their footsteps in the corridor to recede back to the kitchen. I waited for the nightly check of the doors. Once all was quiet I lay with my ear to the pipe and smoked, blowing blue-grey clouds into the air above my camp bed.

On the first night I tapped but again heard nothing in reply. I overcame the desolation by resolving to try every night until the night phantoms finally got it. I would not be denied this one simple affirmation of life. On the second night, after a pause, after a minute of solid, impenetrable despair, I heard a response.

Tap-Tap.

Another pause, but shorter this time.

Tap.

I knew then that I was truly not alone. I lay there in the dark, hugging the tea spoon to my chest. I smoked three or four

cigarettes in short order, the last of the packet, and dreamed of being able to offer them around to other similarly dishevelled men. I felt love suffuse me, an uncomplicated and simple love for my fellow man. All was well with the world and my God, peace be upon Him, was happy in His Heaven. I lay there in a blissful stupor until the chill of the floor started to lock the muscles in my back. I moved the camp bed back against the wall and crawled underneath the blanket, still hugging the spoon. Of all the nights that I had spent sleeping under the English sky, this was, I think, the most relaxing. I slept like an overwrought child.

From that night on, over the next four weeks of dull routine and the endless locked down time of mental mind games, we sent out our timid little message each night. We two are still here. I, the other, am still here. I, Marwan Tayeh, am still here.

33

Knowing that you are not alone, that others bear the burden of living like you do, is a strange sort of comfort. You alternate between the absolute frustration of never being able to make physical contact, aware all the time that the only thing separating you is the lath and plaster of flimsy internal walls. At times I felt as though I could burst through the fabric of the building, but I always came back to the same singular realisation. As fragile as the plasterwork might be, it would always be bolstered by the terminal brutality of small arms fire.

I felt as though I was living in a dream, where every night you run at the black chasm and launch yourself into space, convinced that this time you will reach the other side. Your arms and legs flail against a thin atmosphere, propelling you forward, the air rushing across your face. You arc across the void, yelling with delight in your apparent flight, only for the shouts to turn to screams as the rim of the chasm rises in your eye line. The dream always ends in the same way. Fingers scrabble at the bare, root-infested soil of the far chasm wall. You slam face-first into dirt and rock. You slide down into shadow, and you wake bathed in sweat.

Beyond the dream, when the light streamed in through the skylight, I almost felt safe and at peace. My sense of being, of existing forever in this limbo state of captivity, had become normal. I was institutionalised, but only in so much as I could centre my thoughts now based on an inner belief in benign acceptance. My certainty was millennial, as if the gulf between me and the other hostages was fin de siècle prophesy made real. The divide between us simply made my faith stronger. By believing in these amorphous others despite the continual tests and doubts of the darkling night, I had become a chosen being. Come the end of days, I must rise up and be saved.

The banal routines of the day continued for another month or so. It was difficult to keep tabs on days. I usually remembered to scratch a line on the wall above my camp bed, but not always. We shuffled in turn to the bathroom at the beginning and end of every day. We ate two meals every day. Once a week the guards threw me a bone, a new book or a magazine with ripped out pages. Never

a newspaper. We washed and we ate and we slept and we amused ourselves, all of us in our own little worlds, individual viral cells within the body of these English freedom fighters.

One morning, maybe a week after first contact, my guards took me to the bathroom as usual. Robbie made the usual quick check of the room and then left me alone. The door remained open by an inch. I stripped off my clothes, entered the shower and let the warm water cascade over my frail and degenerating body. Bones. My flesh hung limp and ragged from a sharp and angular chassis. My hair was long and scraggy again, and my beard was now thick and full. The steam from the shower condensed upon tiled walls and on the mirror above the basin. I let the water run long and hot, letting my sense of self, time and place dissolve in the luxury of falling water and rough soap.

I had at best two or maybe three minutes of heaven. I knew the routines and the timings off pat now. I hit the taps and groped for my towel. Rubbing hard against my thick, wet hair, with my eyes tightly screwed shut, I dried my face, and as I towelled down my arms and my chest, I opened my eyes and looked in the mirror. It was thick with running condensation, except for a symbol smeared by a fingertip on the right hand side of the glass. I stepped forward and stared, nonplussed, unbelieving. It was an arrow, traced in thin candle wax, pointing downwards.

It took me fully sixty seconds to scramble my way through confused thoughts that this sign created in my head. A communication. Life beyond the walls. I tried to think clearly. What if the guard came in? I turned on the tap, put paste on the communal toothbrush, and tried to hum as I cleaned my teeth. All the while I scanned the wall and basin for some sign or token. I ran my right hand along the underside of the bowl and down the pedestal. I found nothing. There were no loose tiles, no cracks nor crooks nor crannies. I started to panic. Was I missing something? Was it a trick?

I squatted down, still brushing like mad, wild eyed and humming loudly. I looked up and there it was. The basin was fixed to the wall by two long metal brackets that extended out from the wall along a groove moulded in the porcelain. Wedged between the metal and the porcelain there was a small scrap of folded paper. I

pulled the paper out and spat into the whirlpool of running water. Without unfolding the message, I stuffed it into my trouser pocket, and then, frantically, I rubbed the mirror down with my towel, smearing a thin layer of wax everywhere.

"Hey, Marwan, come on, shift." Barked from the corridor. "What the fuck are you doing in there? Come on. Yalla imshi."

I gave the mirror one last, frantic wipe and prayed that the guard would be too impatient to notice anything. I felt in my pocket for the reassurance of that one simple scrap of paper, breathed in deeply, and pushed the door open.

"Sorry, boss". I tried to sound bluff and confident. "Bit of last night's chicken stuck in my teeth."

I smiled. The guard grimaced and shoved me along the corridor. I stumbled and fought hard to prevent that ever-present gorge of anger from rising. I told myself to accept the world, to be calm. I breathed hard and walked the few paces back to my room, bracing myself against the flat-palmed shoving in the small of my back. It was a ritual.

Once back in my room I let the guard chain me to the pipe, settling on my camp bed with a show of outward serenity. Robbie left the room and returned a few moments later with a tray containing the usual fare: tea, bread, jam, an apple and water. He seemed to be taking much longer about his duties this morning while I felt as though I had a piece of phosphorus in my trouser pocket. My skin burned with anticipation. But I had to wait. I must be careful. I ate and drank with a butterfly stomach. That morning I took the obligatory slap in the face for my tardiness in the bathroom with a refined, almost beatific grace.

The door closed. I was alone again for another day. I lay on the cot with my back to the door and fished the piece of paper out of my trouser pocket. I unfolded it slowly, measuring each crease between my fingers, aching for the comfort of words and yet totally afraid of what I might read. I barely breathed as I traced the outlines of a few grubby pencilled words written in Arabic.

Wipe mirror!
Welcome to the Hotel…
Aban Ganji,

Beniamin Kachigian,
Menachem Dov
You?

I read and re-read the note a thousand times that day. I remembered Menachem Dov. We had met at a party in London. I remembered the telephone conversation with my mother just after he was taken hostage. As for the other two, I could not recall the specifics of their abduction, but guessed that Aban Ganji was probably Persian and quite possibly one of the two television men taken over the summer. The other name had to be Armenian. I racked my brains for an hour trying to put faces to the Persian and the Armenian, but I could not recall anything other than grainy news footage. I cursed myself for not paying more attention.

As for Menachem Dov, here at least I could flesh out the name. Our meeting had been brief, but it was enough. I painted a picture in my head. Six-foot. Mid-to-late thirties. Thickening. A floppy mane of black hair. An easy line in party talk. Warm, brown eyes. Sports jacket over denim shirt and jeans.

I posted my reply the next morning. Having no paper, nor pens, I adopted a simple procedure. I tore off one square of toilet paper, folded it, and then wedged it underneath the sink. I had experimented during the day by nicking my finger on one of sharp corners of the camp bed frame, but I never did master writing in blood. I considered using my own excrement. In the end I decided that a basic sign was all that was needed. I did ask the guards for pen and paper, but nothing materialised.

I will never quite understand that period. Over the next two weeks we shuffled and slept and dreamed as usual. Thoughts forever crowd together in your head, obscuring any clear view of the world. I tried to exercise, suddenly feeling a need for strength and fitness. My world normally revolved around the empty hours of chaotic imagination, but now I had other people to think about. The chain fixed to my wrist was a problem, but I found that I could do basic press-ups and squats. Exercising was a way of driving out the demons and making a little personal space inside my head. The feeling of exhilaration after a good thirty minutes straining and

sweating and driving your body beyond its customary lethargy becomes addictive. The aftermath of exertion, in my depleted state, always took the form of a waking doze, during which the space created in my crowded head gradually filled up again.

One benefit of it all was that I started to see one or two faces clearly again, if only in those brief moments before the jostling thoughts and memories got too rough. I could see my mother and my father. There was always a cloud of blue-grey cheroot smoke wrapped around their heads. I could stand shoulder to shoulder with Menachem Dov. My step-brothers looked upon us all with sad expressions on their faces. Usman grinned and raised the inevitable bottle of beer in my direction.

Although I waited with baited breath every morning, there were only two further occasions when I found a note stuffed under the sink. Every morning without one was hell. I could barely stand the disappointment, and it was only another bout of makeshift, post-breakfast work-out that restored my sanity. I tried to rationalise my way through the long days, assuming that it must be far too risky for my fellow prisoners to communicate every day. I struggled with the ever-present impatience of youth.

The first note read:

Keep the faith
Bear it well and keep safe
God be praised.

The second note, which arrived a few days later, read:

Watch out for Robbie
Screwed in head
Good luck
Aban and Benia

I left the usual square of toilet paper in reply.

Thanks
Already getting to know Robbie

All my love
Marwan

I found the obvious declaration of the first note to be almost depressing. What else was there to do but keep the faith. Faith with small ‘f’. As for God, praise be upon Him, I had little time then for the whole religious shebang. It was enough that I woke each day and prayed for the far more humane message under the sink. Divine revelation would have to wait.

As for the second note, I simply shrugged. Robbie was clearly a psycho. I already knew this to be true. He dreamed the undreamable. In his irregular visits to my cell during the day we discussed many things, although mostly we ended up bantering about my escape. Through the jokes and the crude religious posturing, he almost seemed to want me to escape, or at least to try. I believed then that he was trying to drop bricks into the ponds of my mind. He wanted something to happen so that he could justify taking direct action. All he had to do was to wait for the ripples to reach the shoreline of my emaciated imagination.

Robbie’s visits were now part of the routine. We chatted every so often, him grinning at me, sometimes even sitting next to me on the camp bed and putting his arm around my shoulder. I knew what to expect. He told me about his dreams of his dead sister. He babbled on about fate and his God’s will. He wandered into my room of an afternoon and without saying a word, he would walk up to me, make me stand and hit me in the stomach with his balled fist.

The one thing that I loved about the second note was the signature. Aban and Benia. We were on first name terms without ever meeting. We were brothers. And so, amid the fists and the idle talking and the countless little back and forth steps that we all took over those weeks, the messages and the names coalesced. I tapped out the warmth of my love for them all in the darkness of night with my teaspoon.

34

Some weeks after receiving that first message, with breakfast due any minute, I heard heavy boot steps and then a door slam open. For a brief moment I thought that we were all saved, that government forces had smashed into the apartment and would, in a few seconds, lead us hostages out through tear gas and back into the wintery sun of cold and forbidding England.

Only the one door slammed open. I heard shouts and muffled blows. I heard the tell-tale thump of metal hitting wood. Instead of the usual twin track shuffle to the bathroom, I heard heavy footsteps and garbled orders.

"Mind his head, arsehole."

I recognised the sound of feet being half-dragged along the hallway, heading for the outer door. More shouts followed from the other room.

"Put it on... Just fucking do it."

Something or someone crumpled to the floor. The scrape of boots. A dead-weight being moved.

After that everything went deathly quiet. I strained at the chain, desperate to try and reach the door. I heard a key in a lock. The door opposite mine. I assumed this was where they held Menachem Dov. Another slamming of wood against plasterboard. I could hear clearly this time.

"Up. Get up. Now!"

The orders were guttural and utterly brutal.

Another voice, the first syllable uttered in my hearing by one of my compatriots.

"Wha…"

The dull thwack of a rifle butt in a stomach.

"Up. Get the fuck up…put this on. Do it. Do it!"

Boots on wood. The click of a safety catch. Chains falling to the floor. A groan. The smack of skin on skin. The sound of a blind man being hurried along, hitting his head on a door frame.

"Out. Out. Move it people."

The dull weight of bodies and testosterone faded into silence as the monstrous beast moved away and down the stairs. My universe was quiet again, an unholy quiet, as though gravity had flipped out

of existence. I knelt, tethered, at the end of my chain, straining to hear the sound of a carbine loosing its deathly payload. I floated in the black void, imagining not the sweet smile of my saviour but the sour breath of the angel of death. This was it. This was surely it. I was going to die. After all this melancholy solitude, after all this shit, I was going to die today. I shivered. I asked myself the same question over and over again. How could we ever have believed the heroes in all those films? Who can ever die like a man? I cringed. I cowered and shook.

Minutes passed. I almost began to believe that it was the others, that I would be spared, that maybe there is something in the universe other than random chance. Then I heard running footsteps on the stairs. A barked order. The key in my lock turned. I shuffled backwards on my arse, scrabbling to put distance between myself and the door, which slammed open just as I had imagined it would. Robbie and The Man entered, quickly followed by two other guards.

"Up. Get up. Now!"

I cowered before them, staring at them in wide-eyed horror, hopelessly confused. It took terrible seconds for my brain to switch into survival mode; long enough for Robbie to march forward and side swipe me with the butt of his rifle.

"Get the fuck up," he yelled.

I scrambled to my feet, head bowed, my arms thrust out in front of me in supplication. My shoulder smarted like hell. One of the other two guards fumbled with the handcuffs and then I heard the chain drop to the floor. Everything went black and musty. Rough hands on my body. Tape wound around my ankles and wrists. I could smell sweat and damp earth. I wore another sack over my head.

"Out. Let's get moving, boys. Get him out."

They made no pretence at carrying me. With one man holding me under each armpit I was dragged out of the flat and bumped down the stairs, my shins taking a mother of a battering as they hauled me out into the morning air. Doors crashed shut behind me. I heard the low rumble of diesel.

Oh God, I thought, not the truck, not again.

The two guards holding me by the arms stepped up and pulled me across the low sill of a van. Again, my knees and shins bumped and scraped on dull-edged metal. Once in the van they made me sit on a plank fixed over the rear wheel arch. I felt the touch of another body next to mine. From the centre of the van I heard one of the guards whisper.

"Everyone of you fuckers stay quiet. Not a sound, or else."

Apart from the growl of the diesel I heard nothing else, but I could feel. I felt bodies. I sensed fear and bewilderment, mine included. There is no solace in the confusion of movement, but I took a little heart in the undeniable presence of other men as impotent and bewildered as I was. The front doors of the van banged shut and I heard the gears whine as the driver engaged first. We lurched away, swinging left. The movement of the van made me lean into the body next to mine. Our shoulders and hips and knees pressed together. Our fingers touched. We withdrew from the contact immediately, lost as we were in the darkness, but that one simple touch remains with me to this day. It was the first real human warmth that I had experienced in weeks, in months. I felt filled with compassion for these poor souls travelling into the unknown with me.

The fear in the back of the van was palpable, not least coming from our guards. They were nervous and edgy, hissing at us to stay quiet all the while. The hostage next to me trembled violently every time one of the guards spoke or prodded us with the muzzle of his rifle. We were all on the verge of panic, half-crazy with fear and confusion. I sought out those fingers once more, and tried to offer some reassurance. It was as much for my benefit as it was for my new-found friend.

We travelled for no more than ten minutes, spinning through back streets and city thoroughfares. The van came to a halt and the driver got out. I heard the rattle of an up-and-over garage door. We drove into blackness and the engine noise changed to one long cough before falling silent. The garage door rolled shut. The rear doors of the van crashed open and the guards climbed out. I could instinctively feel the weight of brass-encased lead being aimed at us. The air, even filtered through the sack over my head, was full of diesel exhaust.

I heard the distinctive voice of our would-be crusader, The Man.

"Him first."

Hands and feet tangled in the cramped space.

"You, yes, you."

The world filled with the sound of scraped skin and battered bones. At intervals of ten minutes the guards returned and repeated the operation twice more. I was always the last one to feel the loving kindness of my captors being etched into my soft flesh. I was left alone with Robbie.

"A new home for you, Marwan. A bit nicer than the last one."

I tried to focus. My head was still swimming with the confusion and the shock of the move.

"Yes… okay." I mumbled through my sackcloth shroud.

"A bit busier, as well. The good thing, mate, is that they're letting me stay with you lot. You're not a bad one, Marwan. Some of them are fuckwits, but you're okay." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I like you Marwan, if you know what I mean."

I prayed then and there to all that is Holy that I would never know what he meant. We sat in silence for the next few minutes while the rest of the guards dealt with my fellow hostages. I thought again of those moments with Jamie when my confusion and my emotions became entangled. I remembered with a hidden smile the eyes of the girl at the university, those come-to-me eyes that I so entirely missed in my naivety. Now I had one more feeling to add to the list of fondly remembered moments in my still unfulfilled emotional life: that touch in the van, that trembling caress of fingers hidden from Robbie and the guards. I tried then to steel myself for whatever would come next. Robbie was staying with us, which meant a continuance of that other relationship, the one with his fist and his boot cap, but it was no matter. My experience of life might seem deplorably meagre to many, but still had those moments to cherish, and I believed, sitting in the back of that van with Robbie, that I would have a life full of such joys. It was my destiny. I would not die here, not today.

35

Once again I moved through a shadow world of stairs and blind corridors before being deposited, still blindfolded and ignorant, on another mattress roll, this one, like the others, a dirty cream colour. I sat in silence, afraid to disturb a single atom of this still and heavy atmosphere. When you are alone, to have even the slightest familiarity of walls and doors and floors shifted constantly, breaks you down and leaves you impotent and resigned. I listened dumbly to the sound of receding footsteps and the soft snick of a door closing and being locked. It took me a few moments to realise that my captors had left me in a relatively unfettered state. My guards had not fixed handcuffs to my wrists nor had the by now all too familiar clank of chain accompanied my move. I should have jumped up and run around the room once the door closed but I was too exhausted to summon up the energy. I sat alone under the black shroud of my hood and counted out the next few minutes of solitude by listening to my own breathing.

Slowly, as if a soft, breezeless tide were creeping up a gently sloping sandy shore line, I became aware of waves in the distance, and slowly I tuned into the echo of my exhalations. I thought it a form of madness at first, a splitting of myself across an endless coastal landscape: as though I was drifting in and out of the range of my own muffled hearing. The possibility that there might be an external source of the echo simply did not occur to me. I was alone. I was always alone. My experience of reality in this captive state did not allow for the fact of another body on this isolated shore. So intent did my listening become that my own breathing became shallow, became an annoyance. I shifted along the mattress to be just that little bit closer to this alien sound.

"Why don't you take your hood off?"

A voice. The unhurried softness of it hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest. I recoiled from it, as if receiving a coercive jolt from a cattle prod. I saw stars before my hooded eyes. Utter confusion. I bit my lip hard enough to taste the salty metal of blood. I was flipping into some final, irrecoverable state of insanity. The wide open skies of this shore line suddenly collapsed on me, burying me deep into the crust of the earth. I was a tunneller, a blind mole-man,

and the weight of the rocks above my head threatened at any minute to drive the breath out of my lungs and to crush my bones to dust.

"It's okay. Take off the hood. I won't bite."

The rocks and the dirt of the tunnel exploded around me when I heard that voice for the second time. I was back on the beach, staring wildly along the coast for the source of this magic. Then the sudden possibility of human existence beyond the gun barrel started to take shape amid the chaos and swirl of the suddenly agitated surf upon my hitherto lonely shoreline. I remembered a passage from an early English novel, one that I studied at university. I was transported back to the moment when Robinson Crusoe sees that footprint in the sand. There really was another human soul existing within the close-bounded universe of my island home.

The impossibility of there being another person in my room wound itself around my cortex, turning my fingers and thumbs into fat, sausages. I fumbled with the edges of the black sack covering my head. I felt afraid of the light, afraid of what I might discover. Was the voice a product of my unhinged imagination? Would I be able to stand it if all I could see were bare walls and empty space? At the same time I felt like a small child again, receiving that one huge present so longed for. The possibility of contact was so close now that it filled the entire world. I grasped the material of my hood and slowly, slowly, lifted it, ever mindful of the mirage. Could my distorted mind be playing tricks on me? Was the ultimate nature of my lunacy to take shape in a world of imagined friends, of odd and sundry voices rattling off the walls of my empty head?

I kept my eyes shut, partly to ward off the inevitable truth of my mental infirmity, and partly because I knew that I would need a moment or two to adjust to daylight after the shadows. I squinted through slit eyes. The voice had appeared to come from my right hand side. Tentatively I turned my head and there on another mattress roll, sitting in still diffused form, I saw the incredible outline of another human being. As I opened my eyes, little by little, the shape took on more detail.

Short cropped hair. Clean shaven. Sitting in the lotus position. Smiling, Gap-toothed. A tee-shirt, off white, with a patch of rusty-brown in the middle of the chest. Frayed jeans. Dirty, bare feet.

And then recognition. The face was one that I recognised, a welcoming reflection of another world that rippled with second-hand familiarity. Menachem Dov. My one time party acquaintance, the man with the languid but always inviting manner, who had thrilled me with tales of reporting derring-do all those months ago in expatriate Earls Court.

That moment of recognition will forever be etched in the fabric of my memory, a revelation depicted in shining copper-plate. I stood up slowly, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. I steadied myself and then walked across the room towards the angel incarnate that was Menachem Dov. My senses reeled. I wanted to run, to smash into his flesh and explode like the atoms in a super-collider, to bury my entire being in his simple otherness. And yet still I doubted. The mirage. Would I not, in truth, simply hurl myself through the ghost of a memory and into the solid wall that marked out the limited horizons of my solitary confinement?

My spectral friend unfolded his legs and also rose up from the floor. He stood in front of me, arms hanging loosely by his side, smiling warmly. I took ever-smaller steps, not daring to believe, and yet, as he rose and stood there, as he breathed the same air, I knew that he was flesh and blood. I took another step. I held my hand out, groping forward through the tears that filled my unbelieving eyes, desperate to feel the electricity of his form and field.

To my utter surprise and absolute delight, Menachem simply took my outstretched hand in his, shook it vigorously and said in a strong and jovial voice, "Marwan. Good grief. Marwan from the party. What in the name of God are you doing here?"

It was, especially for a seasoned reporter, quite possibly one of the dumbest questions that could be asked. We both stood there for a moment, Menachem waiting, quiet and still, and me dancing a palsy of relief and joy. We held hands, feeling the warmth of skin on skin, close enough to taste each other's sallow, indoor odour, and then we broke out into peels of ringing laughter. It was a ridiculous bloody question.

We hugged. We cried. We talked for hours, breaking off only to slip our hoods on and sit quietly on our mattress rolls when the guards brought in the evening meal. Everything was a wonderful new experience. It seemed so strange to hear the sound of two trays sliding across the floor instead of one. True to his word, Robbie was in attendance. He said nothing when delivering our meal. He just smiled at us, a sly and crafty smile, the grin of the clinically insane behind rusty Bedlam bars, except that in this case the lunatic carried the keys to the cell upon his belt.

After the ragged stresses of our transfer and our previous solitary confinement, compounded by a myriad of sour and wonderful new experiences and the discoveries of the afternoon, both Menachem and I were starving. We bolted down our chicken and rice as quickly as we could. Ten minutes later, after sharing a warming moment with tea and cigarettes, throughout which Menachem told awful jokes, Robbie returned to settle us down for the evening. He took us in turns to the bathroom, still saying not a word, until, with us both sitting on our bed-rolls wearing our hoods, he knelt down beside me and spoke softly in my ear.

"I told you it would be a better place, didn't I, Marwan? You've done well, mate. You've learned your lessons like a good little boy. This is your reward. Stay frosty, eh?"

Robbie stood up and turned to leave the room and lock us in for the night, but he paused just before he reached the door.

"Same goes for you, Jew. No trouble or…," and he laughed, low and menacing. "Well, you know what's what, don't you, Jew. Tell your new best friend all about it."

The door closed and the locked turned. We were alone again, alone together, and it was bliss. We spent the evening talking, endlessly talking, burning a candle down to the drowsy stub, talking about our homes and our people, about our lives and our loves. My contributions were small and insignificant, I worried that I might bore my new-found cell mate with the paucity of my experience, but Menachem was so easy to be with. He could talk the hind legs off a donkey, and whenever we reached an impasse or hit the brick walls at the end of some back-alley in my history, he changed the subject with an effortless ease that I so wished I could possess.

We shared a geographical commonality along the borders between Lebanon and Palestine, and through it so much common history, which made the personal nature of our lives and stories mutually accessible. That first night we smoked ourselves silly, knocking back our bottled water as if it were neat vodka, becoming giddy with the sound of each other's voices. In all my time in London, drinking whiskey and beer, I do not think I was ever as happy or as drunk. Life was suddenly infinitely intoxicating. Words flooded out of our mouths, and despite the limited range of my experience, I found the ease of the man infectious. On that brilliant night there began the simplest and most direct of loves, a love that bound us together through the days to come.

Just before we snuffed-out the remains of the candle, Menachem came and sat next to me, putting an arm around my shoulder. He spoke softly, his accented voice warm and reassuring. "You're doing fine, my friend. Just watch out for Robbie. He's not right."

I nodded, resting my head on Menachem's shoulder. The closeness of another human being was magical, restoring my faith and my strength and my belief in myself.

"You know, don't you," Menachem continued, "about his sister?"

"He's mentioned it, but not in any detail," I mumbled, feeling the first tender caress of fatigue after a long but exhilarating day.

"Mmmm. Sure. She was killed by government forces a year or so back. In London. At a check-point… just before she pulled the string that would have exploded the belt wrapped around her midriff. She was a suicide bomber."

I raised my head and stared at Menachem.

He held my stare as he spoke. "Robbie's head is screwed. Part of him is grieving for his little sister. Part of him is proud of her. And then there's the part of him that hates her, the part that screams in his nightmares, the part that tells him he's worthless. Our friend Robbie is burning for martyrdom. He's ashamed he's still alive. A big part of him, the part that lashes out at us, envies his little sis. He wants to sit at Jehovah's right hand. That's why we get good Robbie and bad Robbie. The more he likes you, the more you have to watch out."

I tried to take it all in but the sheer volume of the day was beginning to overwhelm me. Menachem lifted up his tee-shirt, revealing a sea of black and purple and fading yellow bruises. I reached out and touched his chest, tracing the shape of a boot heel.

"I used to be his mate, too. That's what he told me. Be careful, Marwan. If the pain really gets to him, this is what he does. Right now it's me he takes it out on. I hope, for your sake, it stays that way."

We sat for moment, eyes locked, in quiet contemplation. Then Menachem got up, smiled at me, and went over to lie down on his own mattress. He snuffed out the light.

"Good night, Marwan. Sweet dreams."

Yeah, you too," I replied, and rolled over so that I could stare into the darkness and see in my mind's eye the life force of my fellow traveller. I was scared that this was all still a dream. If I lay there watching, staying awake, then everything would be safe and sound come the morning. Nothing could go wrong if I stayed alert and kept the dream-time in plain sight.

I need not have worried. We both lay there in the darkness unable to see each other, until Menachem lit one last cigarette. I followed suit. We spent a few more minutes silently watching the bobbing embers of burning tobacco, before stubbing out the butts and drifting off into welcome, peaceful slumber.

36

We were largely left to our own devices over the next couple of weeks. Robbie disappeared, perhaps on some sort of leave, and our days revolved around the endless telling and re-telling of our lives. We shared stories of the awful, the everyday and the mundane, but every single moment of sharing was wonderful. For the most part I listened as Menachem filled my head with anecdotes and impossible tales of a life lived overseas, a life embroidered beyond the camera lens. As on that first day I often felt like a conversational lightweight, but by degrees, as we came to know each other, we found new topics and speculations to discuss, conversations that I felt that I could make some worthwhile contribution towards.

We talked at length about our futures, about the nature of the world, and my youthful enthusiasms butted-up against Menachem's seasoned cynicisms. He was always urbane and full of zest, even when the shadows fell in their darkest shades. We found in each other a strength of purpose and an acceptance of things that alone we might never have discovered.

We existed in a world of intermittent but minor-scale violence accompanied by weird and unexpected instances of compassion. Over these days and weeks our guards would, by turns, sit and chat with us, joking and telling stories of life in the West Country, tales of farms and girls and brimstone preachers. At other times, when their orders growled with pain and confusion, we suffered the blows and the smarts of fist and hard metal. For the most part, our guards seemed wrapped-up in a cloak of desultory boredom. Although between us two the stories and the jokes and the games continued unabated, nonetheless the days merged together and we all grew tired of this necessary but wearing role-play with the guards.

If ever one of us awoke with that brooding depression that was never far from the surface smile, the other always seemed to rally round and, with care and light-hearted humour, would lift the mood. I discovered in Menachem, for all of his worldliness, an almost constant source of optimism, whereas I, still feeling my way

into manhood, could swing through the scales of euphoria and black melancholy with comparative ease.

On occasions I still smouldered with that inner anger, but I came to see through Menachem's observations that we all, captives and guards, felt a similar sense of outrage and impotent fury. Over time, and having passed through so many similar stages of emotional turmoil, Menachem had come to understand that giving way to these feelings was simply counter-productive. In accordance with the theory of life that I too had begun to adopt while in solitary confinement, I tried to develop a similar Zen-like acceptance of the here-and-now.

The one thing that our companionship did achieve was the restoration to us of the essence of being social creatures. By living so closely with each other we were constantly reminded that we were living, breathing, feeling children of the wider world. To watch your soul-brother take a beating for some off-hand remark or imagined slight, is to have your heart cut, slice by slice, into ribbons. After the jokes came the razor slash, and we each comforted the other as the bruises and scabs healed.

We existed in a world of words and imagined intellectual propositions, spending hours talking through the possibilities for the citizens of this benighted planet. We each discovered the complexity of games and fantasies, inventing new ways to fill the long hours of immobile captivity. Menachem introduced me to a world of shabby-chic fitness, and we competed with each other in impossible contests; press-ups and squat-thrusts, star-jumps, stomach crunches, and bicep lifts.

I think, with the benefit of hindsight, that we spent those first couple of weeks living either on an almost unattainable high or deep below the surface of normal expression. There was no middle ground. For the most part we breathed the thinnest atmosphere at the summit of happiness, the reason being that for both of us this period marked the end of solitary confinement, and although the random presence of mortality was never buried far below the surface of our conscious awareness, we revelled in the simple closeness of another human being, of another soul who understood the odd and unreal ways of our particular and peculiar little galaxy.

One of the major topics of conversation was the identity of the other bathroom note-leavers. Menachem believed them to be Aban Ganji and Beniamin Kachigian. In the two weeks or so that Menachem and I had been together we had discovered no new notes, but we felt sure that they were still with us. Judging by the utilitarian nature of the decorations and fittings in the bathroom, we decided that we were being held in a disused office block, and that our compatriots might be held on a different floor or in a different wing. Nevertheless, we checked for notes every morning.

The other burning question that we debated time and again was this; where are we? Our original journeys from London had differed, with Menachem moving straight to our previous location rather than being held underground like me. The other two or three hostages in the building had also, it seems, been brought straight to our last home. By triangulating the times and apparent directions of our transfers, and using Menachem's more detailed knowledge of the country, we decided that we must be somewhere to the west of London, probably the Thames Valley. Given that we were held in an old office block we surmised that this must be in or close to a major town or city.

We speculated on possible locations: Oxford, Reading, Bristol or Bath. To me they were just names, but Menachem had spent two years reporting on events in England prior to being taken hostage and he visited many of the cities and towns in this part of the country during that time. By piecing together this circumstantial evidence and combining it with a few scraps of intelligence that we gleaned during our interrogations, we also decided that we were currently the guests of Cruce Signati, who held sway along the Thames Valley corridor and down in the deep heart of the South West.

Menachem thought that he knew exactly where we were being held. Our last transfer had been short and abrupt. Before we moved he had taken to climbing up onto a window ledge in spite of his chained wrist. Looking out at the skyline through a narrow slit of window left unboarded in his room so that he could have a little natural daylight, he thought that he recognised the hills of Bath. He and his crew had filmed there a couple of times previously. It was, we felt, as good a place as any upon which to hang our captive hats.

It also meant that we were being held in the heart of enemy territory, well away, as far as we knew, from any government agency or army, and so our proffered location offered us little hope of successful escape.

We resigned ourselves to playing a waiting game, during which Menachem told me about the vagaries of his life, about how he never quite made any decisions, but through a word here and a mutual friend there, he had just gone with the flow. He floated from one job to another, initially working as a reporter with a small, local newspaper in Jerusalem. From there, via one party conversation or another, he landed a series of job offers that culminated with him moving to London as foreign correspondent for Consolidated World News, better known as CWN, one of the many news agencies that supplied stories for the Middle East newspapers and satellite television channels.

For my part I explained how the selfish boy had grown up into the young man who now sat on a grubby mattress in a barren and foreign land. Menachem despaired when I told him that, while my social experiences had been developing well enough, I had as yet managed only a series of messy fumblings with girls.

We discussed the mores of a Muslim and Jewish upbringing, and about how the stricter regimens of both were slowly crumbling as prosperity and globalisation blurred the boundaries between us. We compared ourselves with our captors, and despite the anger that burned within, we confessed to feeling a sense of sorrow and pity for them. Theirs was a brutally poor world where the channels were narrow and rocky, and where violence was the one universally common currency.

It fascinated me that all of us, Christian, Jew and Muslim, shared different but similar beliefs under the watchful eye of the one true God. In talking about our families we discovered just how much we truly loved them, and by association we tried to imagine what it must be like to raise a family in a land where opportunity was so narrow and so corrupt. For me, perhaps for the first time in my short life, I came to understand just how magnificent a man my father was.

Throughout this period, as Menachem and I got to know each other, as we shared our lives and our hinterlands, I felt a new

beginning, a new stirring, within me. I thought often about home and about London, and especially about Usman. We young blades had clicked so well, and yet now I felt that it was a shallow interlocking, a fragile friendship. With Menachem I felt the strength of our friendship far more strongly. Perhaps for the first time in my life, beyond the frivolous acquaintanceships of youth and university, I was truly getting to know someone as a friend, and through this I felt as though I might find the means to know myself. In these strange circumstances, surrounded as we were by men without hope, locked down at the edge of the world, we found in each other a reason to dream once the nightmares faded.

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Despite the hope and the warmth that comforted me during those first few days with Menachem, that conversation about my father was the catalyst for a spell of deep depression. After two weeks of endless chatter and subtle revelation, after the constant highs produced by this new and wonderful friendship, I drifted down into the maw of the beast. I grew ever more lethargic in conversation. I tried to continue the games and the competitions but always lost, never having the heart for it. Although Menachem continued to laugh and joke, although he strained so hard to contrive new amusements, the sudden and utter futility of my life was all that I could comprehend.

I considered a return to my hunger strike, but a combination of lethargy and Menachem's cajoling kept me eating. I wreathed myself in clouds of smoke when the cigarette supply allowed, even smoking an unhealthy portion of my friend's allowance. He never complained about my blatant usury, although he would, when the atmosphere became too dense to support life, make his inevitable and irrefutable point about my behaviour. Menachem watched benignly as I switched between emotional states, alternately ignoring or goading the guards. He watched as they fussed for a moment when I seemed to be ill. He watched as they too became frustrated and started to smack me around.

Through it all, through each and every one of these long drawn out days, I let a sense of self-pity wash through me. Despite the joys of new friendship I came to think of myself as a failure. My magnificent father would never again hold his wayward boy in his arms. I was the ultimate disappointment. My mother must surely realise just how little merit there was in the soul of her only boy-child. I was, to be frank, a pain in the arse, a wet blanket of the dampest order, and I felt as though there would never be an end to the digging of the shallow grave that held what was left of my worthless life.

At some point during this period of depression, Menachem persuaded one of our guards to give him a notebook and a pencil so that we could play word games. While I often refused to take part in games of Hangman or Dot-Boxes, preferring to while away the

hours in my own dull and self-centred head-space, Menachem took to writing notes to our brother captives and leaving them wedged in a gap between a tile and the base of the sink in the bathroom that we were escorted to twice a day.

After some five days of dealing with my depression, five days of frustration and boredom and sympathy, just when I thought Menachem might ask the guards to send him back to solitary confinement, he came back from his evening ablutions and winked at me. I was feeling even sorrier for myself than usual. His gesture went completely over my pessimistically egotistical head. Only after the guard cleared away our trays and locked us down for the night did Menachem come over and sit next to me.

"Hey…come on Marwan. Things aren't so bad. Really…"

I felt the uncomplicated warmth of his embrace once again. I could smell fresh, sweet soap on Menachem's hands. He pulled me closer to him with his left arm, while fishing a piece of paper out of his trouser pocket with his right. I was still deep in the fugue of selfish misery, and I barely comprehended the importance of this simple movement. Menachem unfolded the paper and started to read in a low and soft whisper.

"M. So good to read u again. Ben OK. A little fragile, but I'm good. Sorry to hear same with u n Marwan. What about this? We both ask for time together? Maybe we ask for 1 hr per day association. Good for health. Get the bastards to look at Ben n Marwan. What do u say? Write back. If good then we start tomorrow after wash n food? Take care, friend, Ab."

Contact. That sudden explosion of possibility. Something deep within me stirred. The world seemed to swing from the blackest depths to the sunniest heights, and all I seemed capable of doing was grimly hanging on to the elastic chord between these two poles. Listening to Menachem read out that note I realised the shameful truth. The centre of the universe does not reside within Marwan Tayeh. I asked about Ben and Ab. It transpired that during my week of foul, self-centred temper and depression, Menachem had been leaving notes. He heard nothing for a few days, but tonight Aban had responded.

Menachem had met them once in the early days of his captivity and from that meeting he described both of them to me. Reading

between the lines he was saying that Beniamin was probably in a much worse state than I was. Menachem remembered Ben from the odd ex-pat gathering. They had shared a beer or two together, and Menachem thought that Beniamin was a sensitive soul, not one of the more resilient expatriate types. Ben was, in short, nowhere near selfish enough to survive well in such circumstances as these, unlike himself and grumpy Marwan.

When Menachem told me that he thought our situation might really be doing some damage to Beniamin Kachigian, I felt very ashamed of my week-long tantrum. It was like a switch being thrown. I felt foolish and embarrassed. Menachem just held me close and we smoked in silence, a silence broken by a single, pithy observation from my true and wonderful friend.

"You're a bit of a twat sometimes, aren't you, Marwan."

38

Time is an elastic concept in captivity. We had no clocks or watches. Our captors denied us newspapers and magazines. Television and radio were things remembered from what seemed like a childhood fantasy. Occasionally, when asked a direct question, our guards might tell us what month it was by their calendar, that it was October or November. For the most part we relied on the vague memory of days and the scratched marks that we made to count them on the walls of our cell. With every move the record of our days started all over again, and we could never be quite sure, once we arrived at a new place of incarceration, that we could remember the previous count at all accurately.

The morning after we received Aban's note and we had left our agreement by way of reply, Menachem began the process of wheedling and joking with our guards to try and effect the desired meeting with our fellow prisoners. Before the guards arrived for morning ablutions he outlined his approach to me.

"Okay, Marwan, I want you to pretend to be really pissed off, really depressed. I'm sure you can do it, especially given your recent, bloody-minded attitude to life."

I laughed, enjoying once more the humour and the barb and spark that came with it. "Sure, you know me," I replied lightly, "moody bugger at the best of times. I'll give them a real show, the full Shariff."

Mahmud Shariff was a famous Syrian actor, star of stage and screen, a sixties heart-throb, whose smouldering black eyes and luxuriant moustache had scarred the hearts of women by their thousands. He was long dead by these troubled times, having succumbed to the extremes of AIDS in the mid-eighties, to outraged popular disgust, especially amongst his former female admirers.

When the time came, when the door opened and the habitual scrape of the tray announced wash time, I sat there in morose silence, staring at the wall. The guards dragged me to my feet and out of the room. I washed feebly, forgetting to shampoo my hair, and when I returned to the cell I sat on my mattress and picked idly at my food. The lead guard, Steven, a relatively new guy on the

block, seemed confused, alternating between real concern and short-tempered, bullying frustration. When Menachem returned from his shower, and with my breakfast barely touched, Steven walked up to me and kicked my thigh.

"Come on, boy. Eat up"

I watched Menachem out of the corner of my eye as he sat down quietly and picked up his mug of tea. He winked at me conspiratorially.

"Sorry, Boss," Menachem said, mustering to his voice as much counterfeit concern as he could. "He's not been himself for a few days now. Very depressed, you know? Maybe we can help, though. Some magazines or books might do the trick, maybe a radio or something. Some games, anything really to get him out of himself. If we don't do something soon I'm afraid I'll do your job for you, if you get my drift."

Menachem made a cutting motion across his throat with his thumb.

Steven considered this for a moment before prodding my foot with the toe of his boot. He did not seem overly inclined to help.

"Feeling a bit sorry for yourself? Shame, boy. You shouldn't have come over here meddling when you're not wanted, then, should you."

Menachem tried again, taking up and expanding on the theme of his own frustrations." Look, I know how you feel. I sort of see it now, you know, our people crawling all over your country. But that's all history for us poor sods. Can you imagine what it's like being cooped up in here with that miserable bastard all day and all night? I swear… if you don't help him I'll bloody well top him myself. I will. I'll do him. All I'm asking for is a something to perk him up. All I want is a helping hand. You can see what he's like. He can be a moody bastard, but when he's on his game he's okay. Sometimes he's fun. I'd really rather get back to that than have to waste my time kicking his head in, know what I mean. That's supposed to be your job."

Menachem laughed. Steven weighed things up for a moment and then he too chuckled. He kicked my foot one last time, but playfully.

"Okay, okay. Can't have the hostages knocking lumps out of each other. Can't promise anything either." He turned to Menachem and asked, "Is there anything specific, anything you really want?"

I continued to sit there in silence, staring at the wall, refusing to make eye contact with either the guard or Menachem. I played the part of the pouting three year old to perfection.

Menachem shifted on his bed-roll, kneeling up as if in prayer. "As I said, games, radio, books, mags, anything really to brighten up the days." He paused and smiled broadly. "There is one thing…"

Compared to some of our guards, Steven seemed reasonably articulate. He knew instinctively that the pay-off was coming. Menachem did not disappoint.

"Look, I know I'm not supposed to mention it, but when you moved us here there were four of us in the van…

A look of slight surprise crossed Steven's face.

"It's a prisoner thing, you know. You get a sixth sense. Anyway, I was thinking. We've all been here for a few weeks. Would there be any harm in letting us all meet up once in a while. You know, maybe an hour a day for a bit of rest and relaxation? It would be good for Marwan. Good for me too to get away from that brooding bloody Leb face for a while."

Steven stood stock still for a moment. Then he turned towards the door, shaking his head. Just before he closed the door he spun round and fixed Menachem with a long, hard stare.

"I'll give you this, mate. You've got balls. Do you know what I should do? I should kick the crap out of you for even mentioning the others. That's what I should do. Then I should report it and watch the others kick the crap out of both of you. But, you know what… seeing as it's today and it's you, you cheeky shit…"

He paused again, looking down at his boots for a moment, as if imagining them buried in Menachem's face. He grimaced as he looked up first at Menachem and then at me. "…but maybe you've got a point. That one'd drive me bloody mad. I'll pass it on."

With that he closed the door and locked us in. We had another ten minutes or so before Steven or one of the other guards returned to take away our breakfast trays. Menachem was the first to speak.

"Shariff? You were acting, weren't you? You haven't slipped back? If you have I swear I'll smother you under that bloody mattress."

I kept my face deadpan for a moment as I sipped at my now lukewarm tea, but I could not hold the pose. I grinned broadly.

"Not if I see you coming first, you fat old camel," I replied, and crammed a large hunk of bread and raspberry jam into my mouth. I mumbled and spat food as I finished my observations. "Anyway, if I keep this up for too long, the moody silences and the hit-and-miss showers, you won't come near me for the stink."

Menachem raised one eye-brow, grinned back at me, and then set about his own breakfast with unusual relish.

Menachem and I sat talking for an hour before we heard the key turn in the lock once more. We pulled on our hoods and braced ourselves. We never knew how things would go, the mood of our captors capable of turning on a pin head. The door swung open and Steven walked in with our would-be Crusader, the one we called The Man. He watched us for a moment, standing on the threshold of the room, seeming to savour our discomfort. As he stepped into the room both Menachem and I flinched. The Man smiled and waved his hand as if giving us the 'at ease.' He seemed relaxed and soft, quite out of character, which made the meeting all the more sinister. The Man sat on the floor in the middle of the room, resting his chin on his knees.

"Gentlemen…I've thought about your request. I'll be honest with you. You seem to be in touch with the others, anyway. They've made a similar proposal. I was going to have the guards knock seven shades of shit out of you all… please, take off your hoods."

He looked long and hard at Menachem and then at me. I stared back at him, hoodless and unchained. I could almost reach out and touch him. Part of me wanted to lash out, but the voices in my head were confused. His words seemed to be too pregnant with possibility to risk anything stupid. I was convinced that Menachem would kill me if I added to the week of crass boorishness by being unspeakably dim now.

"So, gentlemen," he continued, "seeing as it's Christmas Eve and I'm in a good mood, I'm not going to punish anyone today. In fact, I'm going to give you a present. I'm going to give you what you want. From now on you'll get an hour upstairs once or twice a week. There's a disused office up there, open plan. All of you together."

He smiled again, a thin, broken smile, like a cat sitting with its paw on a mouse. "Usual rules. Be good. There'll be guards with you at all times. Any shit and they'll deal with you. You know what I mean. Permanently."

The Man waited for us to respond, and as craven as it felt, both Menachem and I took the cue and thanked him profusely. We promised to be good little boys. He stood up then and waved our thanks away, clearly feeling good with the giving of gifts. Steven collected the breakfast trays, winked at us and shook his head.

Steven locked us in as usual, and as soon as we heard the tumbling of the door lock, Menachem and I jumped up and, keeping our voices as low as we could we hugged and danced around the room, grinning inanely at each other as we spun and kicked our way through the dust and the debris of our narrow lives.

Christmas Eve. The giving of gifts. The end of a year. Five months in captivity for me, just under eight months for Menachem. The enormity of it all suddenly weighed heavily upon our dance and we slowed to a thoughtful, whispering walk as we thought about our loved ones back home. Just as we struggled through the dark days of this captivity so too did they toil and fret through dimming hopes and wasted hours. Today, though, neither one of us wanted to let the blues get into our bloodstream. We talked as we walked, wondering what light we might bathe in when we opened the door to new friends here in the nightmare.

At three o'clock that same day, Christmas Eve, just as the weak winter daylight began to fade towards dusk, two guards, one of them Steven, the other a newly-returned Robbie, came into our cell and gave each of us a bottle of cola and a slice of thick, moist fruit cake on a paper plate.

"Another bloody present for you," said Robbie, "by way of a little celebration. You can toast the birth of Our Lord with your new mates."

They led us out of our cell and along a wide corridor and past empty and dilapidated glass-shelled office spaces, through a set of double doors and up one flight of concrete steps. The pretence of the hood was forgotten. On the next landing we walked through another set of identical utilitarian swing doors and into a large open space, a space that covered the entire width and length of the building. Floor panels lay exposed here and there, with the guts of the place, cables and wires, exposed and trailing across the floor. At the far end of the room one of the windows had been shattered and a cold and icy breeze filled the room, making what was left of old strip blinds flutter madly against the window frames.

Robbie took up station by the swing doors, while Steven moved to take up his position by another set of doors at the far end of the room. Standing huddled by the broken window we saw two other, similarly dishevelled men. Two more guards, both of them wearing thick parkas stood in the corner of the office, sharing a smoke.

We turned and looked first at Steven, our good shepherd, and then at Robbie, the Good Lord's avenging angel. He motioned us forward with his rifle. "Go on, boys. Don't waste time. The clock's ticking."

Menachem and I walked slowly at first, feeling nervous and tongue-tied, like young-girls attending their first chaperoned party. Even though our captivity had been relatively short, even though our memory of social activity was still recent, the effects of our confinement clearly bore down on us. Neither one of us was quite sure what to do. From the far window Aban and Beniamin started to walk towards the centre of the room. I wanted to run. I suddenly wanted to shout and scream and laugh. I wanted to cavort like a Dervish, and I was sure that Menachem felt the same too. He walked beside me and seemed strangely controlled, as if holding back the elemental surge in his soul by sheer force of will.

The seconds that it took to cover the fifty the fifty metres or so to the centre of the room seemed like an age, an age of quiet restraint tearing on the jagged rocks of impatience. We waded through the growing swell of expectation until we all stood

awkwardly in the middle of the room. We four just stood there, staring at reflections of our selves, at wild and savage beasts newly released from their cage.

Aban was first to break out of this dumb reverie. He took a tentative step forward and held out a hand for Menachem to shake. For a moment I thought that this would be it. After all the hype, after all of our excited anticipation, would we really just shake hands politely and discuss the weather?

Menachem could contain himself no longer. He too stepped boldly forward, held out both of his arms, grabbed Aban in a huge bear-hug and yelled out pure joy at the very top of his voice. For a second or two Aban just stood there, mid-hug, looking stunned. Then he too broke the chains of captivity, and locked Menachem into his own arms so that they could start the dance all over again. In a flash both Beniamin and I embraced, and then all four of us, arms around each other's shoulders, huddled together and so began the insane babble of briefly-realised freedom.

I have never cried as freely and as unconditionally as I did that afternoon. For some ten minutes none of us could see properly. There was not a dry eye in the room. I even caught a glimpse through my tears of one of our guards wiping a speck of dust from his cheek. Robbie was the only man who seemed to be unmoved by our union. He simply made a show of checking his watch every few minutes.

The absurdity of our meeting struck me then. Here I stood with fellow travellers, going nowhere. We had no destination. We all lived in a succession of moments, the endless now, with no past and no future. I tried to block out this sense of pointless waste by focussing on the shapes and forms of my new friends.

One of them was tall, maybe one metre ninety, and well built, while the other seemed slight and frail, but clearly possessed of an inner steel. Beniamin Kachigian, the Armenian Christian, was the tall guy, and everything about his physical presence suggested the word 'hero,' but his physical strength was betrayed by a febrile look in his eyes. He seemed reluctant to commit. Aban Ganji, the Persian, was made of wire and although he looked like he might flutter away on the breeze like a dead leaf, he was clearly the tougher of the two men.

Once the euphoria of the meeting subsided a little, we four settled into the habitual comparisons that dominate male conversation, sharing our stories of capture, and gabbling away ten to the dozen in a mixture of Arabic and English about our shared experiences in the hostage hotels. It seemed that I was the only person to have experienced life underground. Through it all Beniamin, while forcing himself to join with us from time to time, seemed to be holding something in reserve, as if he could not quite let go of his inner thoughts. There were boundaries that he was reluctant to cross. He listened intently enough, but was always wide-eyed and nervous, flinching visibly every time Robbie shouted out his updates on our preciously spinning time together. There was something feral about Beniamin's mannerisms, as if he were a rabbit in a deep, dank warren, aware that ferrets were already prowling the tunnels and that there was no chance of escape.

Our time together passed in a flash, so busy were we with our conversation and our sharing of simple human contact. We drank our sweet drinks and ate our cake, turning to toast the guards and offer them our thanks for this moment. The sugar rush turned us into babbling schoolgirls, so unused were we to the otherwise commonplace stimulus of lukewarm cola. So much of what we said was lost in the sheer exuberance of the moment, and of all the things that we probably chatted about only one subject sticks in my mind. Once we finished with our tales of capture, we moved on to the subject of other hostages. We all wanted intelligence. We all wanted to know that there was a point. Had anyone gone home? Was anyone dead? Menachem and I knew only about ourselves, and now Aban and Beniamin. We wanted more. Aban duly obliged.

"Look, it's not a pretty picture," he said in response to Menachem's questions about the other hostages. "There's just us four here. I've heard the others are up country somewhere, Birmingham, I think. Seems there's some sort of trading going on, sharing out the prisoners amongst the militias, sort of an insurance policy, a way of getting maximum bang for your Riyal."

Aban looked towards where the nearest guard stood, checking to make sure that we were not overheard. "Anyway, I've cultivated one of our guards, the one over there by the… don't look…"

He was talking about Steven.

"Sort of promised I'd read his Holy Book. It's interesting stuff and we have the odd chat. I think he thinks I might turn, you know, convert. He told me about the banker, you remember, the one where they left the bodyguards in a lake of blood?"

I nodded. I remembered the pools of gore on the streets from the television news broadcast. I suddenly remembered how I had reassured my mother that I was perfectly safe, that I would be home soon. My heart ached for her.

"Seems they tried to ransom him but his employers refused to deal with terrorists. Point blank. Something about government policy. So, after a few weeks, when they realised they weren't going to get what they wanted, they decided to waste him. Dumped him in a wheelie bin in Regents Park, apparently."

That one simple, blithely delivered statement rocked me back on my heels. Menachem, too, looked shocked. For each of us there is a moment when, once we have made it through that initial period when every sound and every movement is laced with fear, there comes a day when you think that you might make it out alive. Why would they keep you fed and dry? You convince yourself that there is a point. You always tell yourself that you will see home again. Aban's story reminded us just how fragile a thing a life is. This evidence of death, of random nature in the raw, undermined these brittle constructs of hope.

I felt for Menachem's hand and he responded. Aban saw us and he too reached forward to take our hands in his. We sat quietly for a moment before both Aban and I gestured to Beniamin to join us. He just looked at us as if we were the mad ones.

"They're going to kill us, you know," he whispered, his voice full of sibilant intensity. "No doubt. The banker's a sign. I try to stay alive, you know, I do, but I don't think it'll be any use, not in the long run. I try to tell them. I'm a Christian. Like them. I'm a special case. It's a mistake. I don't think they can hear me…"

Beniamin's voice trailed-off. He refused to take our hands. He stared over my shoulder at the doors at the far end of the room.

Something churned inside me. I wanted to grab hold of Beniamin and shake some sort of sense back into him. I wanted to pin him down lest he try to fly to freedom out of the shattered windows. I thought back over my own attempts to plead my special case. I was Lebanese. It was a mistake. But then, when you got a handle on things you realised that we were all mistakes. There was no special case. I felt an enormous sympathy for poor Beniamin, not because of his captive state, but because he was so clearly lost.

Aban ignored his cell-mate and continued to speak as though Beniamin was not really there. His eyes seemed to signal resignation. They clearly held this conversation on a nightly basis and I wondered how anyone could stand such a thing, no matter how much sympathy one held in one's heart. Was I that screwed-up when I was in one of my moods?

Aban continued to speak softly. "He's not so good. The guards leave him alone, mostly, but he's getting worse. I've asked for a doctor. Maybe if you asked too, now that you've met him. Maybe together we can persuade them. He doesn't sleep much. Just sits there and mutters. Even if we only get some tranquillisers, it would help. Him and me. I need some sleep. I know that sounds selfish, but I'm no use to him if I get messed up as well."

Menachem looked directly at Beniamin and tried to smile reassuringly. To Aban he said, "Sure. Seems like they're in a good mood today. Strike while the iron's hot."

I nodded my assent and tried to mimic Menachem's smile for Beniamin. He looked away immediately.

From the far end of the room we heard the sound of thick-soled boots on the raised flooring. Robbie and Steven. The two guards by the window were on the move as well.

"Time's up, gents". It was always Robbie who seemed to be in command, the old war-scarred sergeant. "Up we get. Leave your bottles and plates there."

Aban, Menachem and I rose up and clasped hands one more time. Aban then helped Beniamin to his feet and said, "Together, my friends, together. We'll get through this together."

I squeezed his hand. "Together. Of course we will. So good to meet you. Both of you."

Menachem started to speak. "Togeth…"

“Enough, boys. Time’s up.” Robbie’s rifle pointed at our clasped hands. “Downstairs, boys. Off you go.”

Robbie and Steven prodded us with the guns and pushed us away from our new friends. As we walked towards the doors that lead to the stairs and our room, we turned round to watch our fellow prisoners as they waited for us to leave the room. Aban waved once before the guard nearest to him gestured to him to be quiet. Beniamin stared out of the smashed window, lost in the labyrinth of his fevered thoughts.

39

According to Christian scriptures the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. We found out later that evening just how much truth there is in these ancient sayings. A short while after our evening meal, with the sky black and cold beyond the strip of window left unblocked in our room, we heard footsteps outside our door. The key turned in the lock as always, and in walked Robbie and The Man, their ever-present leader, their Knight Templar. They stood shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the room. They appeared to be unarmed. The Man was the first to speak.

"Had a good day, lads? Enjoyed meeting your fellow Heathens?"

Menachem and I sat on our mattresses. We nodded stiffly. Something about our captors' manner, something about this unexpected intrusion into our evening solitude, seemed very wrong. The Man nodded and Robbie stepped outside for a moment and then came back into the room bearing more gifts; a chequered board and a box of draughts pieces, and a bulging plastic bag. He put the game down by Menachem's feet and then emptied the plastic bag onto the floor, revealing a couple of new books, a newspaper with the usual censored cuts obvious on the front page, a packet of chocolate biscuits, and some pens and paper. Robbie screwed the bag up into a ball and threw it out into the passage. Then Robbie closed the door.

"It's Christmas," said the Man, "the time of goodwill to all men. I hope you enjoy a game or two. We aim to please."

He smiled, but there was something wrong with the way the muscles twitched across his jaw. Robbie turned to face me. The Man turned towards Menachem.

"Trouble is gents, I've been thinking about all this nice stuff we've done for you. This is war. I don't want you thinking we've gone all soft on you. I don't want any of you forgetting your place, as it were."

He rubbed his hands together. That smile again, the one borrowed from the Grim Reaper. The Man nodded once to Robbie, then he stepped forward and thrust a boot into Menachem's ribs. Robbie lurched forward and kicked out at my legs. Another little

gift. Casual violence revisited. A little personal reminder of a suffering world at this time of celebration.

I lost sight of Menachem as I rolled into a foetal ball on my mattress. My world, so bright and expansive earlier in the day, became a discreet and tiny sphere of silent blows, a world in which I twitched and moved my hands to cover each hurt, only to feel a carefully aimed fist land on a newly exposed part of my body. I felt my ribs groan again under the onslaught. A fist caught me on the cheek and I felt the stinging edge of a ring gash my skin. Blood poured out of my nose. I heard Robbie grunt as he put his full weight behind each savage strike. My head bounced off the floor and I tried to draw my knees up ever closer into my stomach while covering my head with my arms and my hands. I heard the same sounds, the sounds of raw meat being tenderised, coming from Menachem's mattress.

And then the old, never tamed, anger flared. I opened my eyes and saw Robbie begin to arc his boot towards my chest. Instinctively I tried to absorb the blow, and in doing so I grabbed hold of Robbie's boot. I held on for dear life, twisting his foot so that he lost his balance, more out of surprise than through the force of my sudden retaliation. He waved his arms about, trying to regain his balance, but still he started to topple over. Despite my screaming bruises and the blood soaking across my tattered face, I managed to spring up and land astride Robbie's chest. I knew my actions would be futile, would probably make things worse for all of us, but I did not care. I had to fight back. Blood dripped from my bruised nose onto Robbie's face as I aimed my own fist at his now exposed jaw. I drew back my arm, screaming at him all the while.

"Leave us alone, you fucking animal. Leave us alone! Leave us a-fucking lo…"

Everything went black. Light and dark infused each other in a shattering of stars. The heavens split wide open and I fell into a void, a pit of dense, black, smothering raven feathers.

40

Menachem told me later that as I pounced on Robbie, that as I drew back my fist to smash it into his face, The Man had simply turned and aimed his next kick at my head, sending me spinning into the corner of the room. After I hit the wall I just lay there, stone-cold and gone. At that point, fearing the worst, Menachem had crawled over to The Man and kneeling in front of him he had pleaded.

"P-L-E-A-S-E…"

The words came out of his mouth covered with spittle and blood.

The Man helped Robbie to his feet and dusted him down, as though nothing untoward had happened. He chided Robbie on his clumsiness and they both chuckled. Then The Man turned to Menachem and spoke menaces softly as he caught his breath.

"He's got spirit, your mate. That's going to be a bit of a problem for you. And for him. If you can maybe you should have a word with him when he wakes up. If he wakes up…"

With that the two of them simply walked out of the room.

Later that same night, in the small hours of Christmas Day, I lay on my mattress, nursing the mother of all headaches and feeling every breath burn through my clogged and battered nose and ribs. I heard the door open again. Robbie walked into the room carrying his rifle. He saw that I was awake now but barely able to move.

"This is what happens to Jew scum, Marwan. This is your fault."

I saw out of the corner of one swollen eye that Menachem was awake too. He knew what was coming. We both knew. Menachem was already curling himself up into a ball as the first blow from Robbie's rifle butt landed on his thigh. Robbie concentrated his blows on Menachem's legs, beating him black and blue, while I lay there, impotent in my fury, whimpering.

"Please… please don't… don't… stop, please… for your Christ's sake…"

My tears mixed into the ruddy-brown caked-on grime that already covered my broken face. I rolled over and stared at the wall, but hearing every blow and pant and groan. Menachem took

each and every bastard whack in silence. He simply lay there, laying himself down for me.

After an age, after all possibility of life seemed to be spent, everything turned to silence. I could hear Robbie panting for breath. I turned a little and twisted my head so that I could look at him. Robbie was sweating visibly, wiping his brow with the bottom of his usual checked blue shirt. He returned my gaze for a moment, hefted his rifle, and once again walked out of the room without saying another word.

I waited for the key to turn in the lock. As soon as it was safe to move I unwound my aching body and crawled over to where Menachem still lay, mute and unmoving. Through my tears I managed to stroke his forehead as gently as I could. My hand trembled with every movement. Menachem lay on the bare floorboards and groaned slightly at my touch. My first impulse was to try and move him onto his mattress, but as I tried to lever his battered body towards the mattress he simply groaned again, moved his hand to cup mine, and then wagged a finger under my nose.

I sagged then, unable to summon any more strength. It took everything that I had to stop my hand shaking as I dribbled water from Menachem's bottle onto his cracked and split lips. He mouthed a "thank-you" and then we both lay there in silence for some time. I held Menachem as best I could without hurting him, trying to reassure him in my most gentle embrace. When my dead-weight became too much for him we eventually manoeuvred ourselves so that we could lie side by side on the dusty floor, holding hands.

Listening to the night-dead creaking of the building and to the faint strains of a television playing further down the hall in the room where the guards brewed our tea and relaxed when not on duty, I wondered again about this friendship. Leaning up on my elbow I looked down at Menachem's swollen face and saw in those bruises a love that can never be adequately expressed in words. This man was bleeding for me, just I was breaking for him. The world shifted in that moment, spinning just that little bit faster on

its leaning axis. I pressed two fingers to my lips, kissed them, and then transferred my healing love gently to Menachem's lips.

With tears filling my eyes, I whispered to him in the dark. "I love you, Menachem Dov, I love you so much." I bent forward and kissed him once on those cracked and stained lips, feeling his warmth on my skin. Thinking that he would be asleep by now I was totally unprepared for his response. As we touched lips he raised his head slightly and moved his left arm up to brush my shaggy locks away from my forehead.

"Love you too, you silly boy," he said softly. After a few moments passed, a few moments in which I felt all of that confusion that came with my feelings for Jamie down in the rabbit hole, he continued, "It's okay, Marwan. We need to love to be human. It's okay to be like this here."

We moved slowly, achingly across to Menachem's mattress, where we lay holding each other, each of us too sore to do anything other than wrap the other in a blanket of true affection and warmth. As we lay there and drifted off to sleep, I thought again about the girl at the university and about Usman and about the world that would be mine when all of this madness was ended. Menachem was right. It was okay to feel like this here. It was our way to remain feeling, loving, caring human beings. As I drifted off to sleep in Menachem's arms I thought, Happy bloody Christmas. It is a strange world, and today was the strangest amongst these days of unlooked for compassion and callous brutality.

41

Menachem and I nursed each other through the dull, closed days of January, meeting Aban and the increasingly skittish Beniamin at the whim of our guards. We first joined with them again a couple of days into the New Year, and saw upon them the tell-tale marks of a similar beating. Our conversations turned by degrees from the immediate shared experiences of this captive life to the telling of our histories. It seemed important, somehow, that each of us should know the other's stories. Another beating might be our last. This shared history might be all that is left of us. As the youngest in the group I tended to listen more than I spoke, and I enjoyed a vicarious and voyeuristic expansion of my hinterland through the far more interesting stories from other people's lives.

One of my favourite games over the months through to the coming of early spring birdsong was to recount those alternative life stories and to imagine myself in the place of either Aban or Menachem. What would I have done in this or that situation? How would I react if I found myself facing similar choices? Would I have been as bold as Menachem and entered into a passionate affair with an English woman, a civil servant, just as he had done? Would I have dared to chase a French politician through the streets of Paris to ask that one final question, a question that resulted in Aban spending three days in a French gaol?

Beniamin did not respond to our group therapy sessions. While we talked he sat alone, near to us but not with us. He became increasingly isolated, and while we chatted about the world he rarely contributed to the conversations. When he did join in he usually voiced some new local conspiracy theory. For the most part he just sat there and stared at the walls. Beniamin took to rocking back and forth as he sat near us, emitting low groans and sighs. These were obvious signs of stress, of a mind unravelling.

We took turns to try and comfort him, to break through the barriers that he hid behind, but the inevitable strain caused by Beniamin's uncommunicative mental wandering was creating a gulf between us. Aban was giving up on him, reluctantly, but most definitely, and the gulf widened every day. Neither Menachem nor I were able to bridge the chasm. I felt guilty. Over those weeks I

found it ever more difficult to maintain the façade of concern. Beniamin simply did not respond to kindness and no matter how sorry or sympathetic I tried to be, it was impossible to establish any meaningful communication. I loved Menachem, my soul-mate. I loved Aban, my brother. I could not love Beniamin then.

We cared desperately for his safety, though. We discussed ways in which we might help him, but so much of it ended up being futile. Our speculations and plans came to nought in the face of the guards' indifference. Gradually Beniamin drifted away from us. He became an encumbrance, like a mentally deficient younger brother, someone you love but if you are honest you wish that they were somewhere else. That, at least, is how I managed to reconcile myself to the difference between what I ought to think and what I did think.

After the Christmas beatings, as the days slowly started to lengthen, we resumed our normal routines. We existed in a closed world of regular bathroom visits, two meals per day, weekly changes of clothes, and the odd delivery of new books and shredded newspapers. The one good thing about the newspapers was that they allowed us to keep track of the date, thus allowing us to put some sort of structure and time-scale to our narrow lives.

Left alone in our cell for hours on end, Menachem and I played endless rounds of draughts. Using the pencils and paper, we marked the counters as chess pieces, each of us playing four pawns short. It took some time for Menachem to regain his usual urbane confidence following Robbie's extemporary demonstration of his virtuosity with the butt of his rifle, but little by little, as the days merged back into the suffocating rhythms of lost lives, we established a new equilibrium.

We talked and we played games. We met our new friends. Once our bruises and cuts healed sufficiently we resumed our competitive exercises. At other times we sat quietly, lost in our thoughts of home and loved ones, content simply in the nearness of another human being. We always remained watchful, scanning the faces of our guards for any changes in mood, but none of them seemed particularly interested in us. Robbie dished out his casual insults and the occasional fist, but even he seemed pre-occupied. We saw neither hide nor tail of The Man.

With the coming of night and lock down, Menachem and I now slept together, moving our mattresses next to each other. There was a simple beauty to our love then, a necessary beauty. We both knew that this relationship was peculiar to our situation, that neither one of us would or could wish it to continue beyond the walls of confinement. We became a single entity in those days and nights at the disused office, pooling our strength and our wits in this endless game of survival. Being able to lean on Menachem as I did, being so young and so inexperienced, gave me the strength to endure and to accept. Our kisses and our caresses in the dark night hours somehow brought comfort and assuaged the loneliness that otherwise threatened to engulf us. We often wondered whether the other hostages felt the same, but we could never quite imagine Aban and Beniamin finding the same closeness.

42

Towards the end of March we noticed a change in the atmosphere. Our captors seemed edgy and suddenly inclined to intolerance. We were forced to don our hoods again in their presence, even when meeting with the others. Menachem took another small beating one morning simply because he was too slow in getting up from his mattress for his shower. I received the odd kick because I found it impossible not to speak out. We drifted on a sea of callous neglect. Our guards were hurried and nervous. From time to time we heard rapid staccato conversations in the corridor. Our heart rates jumped every time one of them came near us. They were all permanently armed now, and more inclined to prod and poke and speed us along through our daily routines. Robbie rarely called in for one of his little chats any more

On a clear and otherwise still night, Menachem held his hand up during one of my long and rambling recollections about home. He wanted silence. Menachem rose and walked over to the boarded window. I watched him for a moment or two, not understanding what all this was about, but then I too heard a low and distant rumble. We assumed at first that it was thunder, a spring storm rolling over the Cotswold Hills, perhaps, but then Menachem pointed down towards the road outside our building. We listened again and recognised the diesel growl of trucks moving one after another down the road in convoy.

The storm front was made up of two distinct components. Below us the road was full of trucks in low gear crawling to the West. Beyond that we could hear thunder in the distance, but there was no lightning flash to accompany it. We listened for some minutes, timing the thunder claps, and realised that it was a constant noise rather than an intermittent crashing of the heavens. Menachem looked up at the thin strip of night sky that we could see. He put a hand on my shoulder and spoke softly.

"Shell fire."

I looked at him in amazement, like a child seeing a book of algebra for the first time. "What…but…"

"It's definitely artillery. I've heard it before. There's some sort of barrage taking place. To the East, which means whoever is firing must be from London."

The dim light of understanding shone a little more brightly in my head. "You mean they're fighting? Fighting close to us here? Do you think it's possible? Is the army, the real army, on its way?" For the first time in nearly a year I began to feel hope rekindled from the ashes of this otherwise cold and sterile life.

Menachem nodded slowly and then turned to face me, looking deeply worried and distinctly scared. "It's not that simple, Marwan. If that is the real army, the government army, then it means that our guys are losing ground. You've seen the way they are, up-tight and fidgety." Menachem paused for a moment trying to find the right words. "We could be in for a rough time. Things could get difficult."

We blew out all bar one candle and sat down together on my mattress. Somehow the moment called for quiet, cigarette-laced contemplation in the twilight. We both roamed alone with our thoughts for a while before turning back to face the real world of hushed whispers and care-burdened eyes.

"Whatever happens," I said, holding back an unexpected rush of tears, "we must try to stay together. We can't let them separate us. I couldn't bear it, not again."

"We won't. They won't. Whatever happens, my friend, nothing will come between us. I mean, how on earth would I survive without you fucking about and getting me half killed? You're a slovenly, wilful and bloody-minded bastard and I love you, man."

Menachem kissed me on the forehead, a simple gesture, the most basic token of human kindness, and I felt a little of his strength flow through my veins. We sat together all night, talking about the possibilities and the scenarios that we might face. I marvelled throughout at the simplicity of true friendship. I loved this man with all of my heart. In this moment of crisis, the culmination of uncounted events and endless collections of days spent so far away from my family, from my loved ones, I felt as though finally I was growing up. I saw in my mind's eye a slow and majestic river running towards the sea. The babbling brooks

and chaotic rapids of my youth hit the valley floor and merged at last with the main stream of adult life.

43

Morning came and with it the urgency born of another transfer. We hustled through the, by now, usual steps: a rapid and perfunctory wash, followed by a hasty breakfast of bread and water. The looming thunder of artillery from the previous night had stopped but still the diesel-growl of moving men and transport played out in the background. We had no choice but to abandon our meagre collection of belongings as we were hooded and hurried down into another waiting van. We sensed the nervous agitation of the guards, an anxiety verging on panic. They manhandled us roughly throughout the journey, and answered our questions with terse monosyllabic grunts. We crawled along congested streets and lanes, routes that took us deeper into the west of England. After about an hour the van drew to a halt and one by one the guards forced us to leave the van and kneel down in cold, damp mud.

An order was given. The guards removed our hoods. The four of us knelt in line in the middle of a derelict farmyard. Rusting machinery littered the ground around us, spewing trails of mud-encrusted cable, wheel spokes and baling twine across the yard. Empty blue plastic feed sacks caught on barbed wire fencing fluttered on the morning breeze. For a moment I gazed in wonder at the rolling hills and the huge, blue sky above my head. It had been so long since I had last seen the horizon in its full glory.

Another order. "Hands on heads!"

One of the guards trotted-off to the farmhouse and returned a minute or two later holding a portable video camera. He perched on the open rear sill of the van and aimed the camera at us.

"Squad…positions!"

We heard footsteps behind us, and turning so that we could see what was happening, we saw four men armed with pistols walk up and stand behind us. The Man walked into camera shot.

"Oh… fuck… fuck!" I whispered to Aban.

I stared straight ahead of me, screwing my eyes tightly shut, as if this would soften the blow. This was really it. They were going to kill us. After all that we had endured this was how it would end. Four bodies dumped in the dirt at an abandoned and decrepit farm

somewhere in the nether reaches of this damnable, awful little island.

Menachem breathed in deeply twice. "Dignity. For your family's sake remember dignity… and that I love you all."

With my eyes still tightly shut I began to seek the miracle. "Allahu Akbar… Allahu Akbar… Allahu Akbar…"

The Man started to speak to the camera, gesturing to his four captives and their executioners. "Today, March thirtieth, is an infamous day. Because of your actions, because of your assault on our brothers in arms, because of your oppression of belief and the one true God, these men will die today. Give up your struggle against the inevitable. Stop the war. Give us our freedom and join with us in Holy Crusade. Restore with us the true power of God in this land. These men die today as a sign of our righteous anger. Stop your assault, soldiers of corruption and devilry. Turn away from your puppeteer government. Do this and we will spare the remaining hostages. In the name of our Lord and of Jesus Christ, join us and find salvation."

He turned from the camera and faced us directly. We four watched him in silence, uncomprehending, stunned and dumb.

"Beniamin Kachigian. Marwan Tayeh. Aban Ganji. Menachem Dov. Heathen brothers. Sons of oppressors. Make your peace!"

Every nerve ending in my body screamed in anger. Adrenalin pumped through my veins and arteries. For a split second I wanted to rise up and die like a man. I wanted to rush at the bastard and take him down, biting and scratching, gouging and tearing, and yet, as the impulse flared, I remained immobile. I could not move. Tears began to well up. I felt my bottom lip begin the inevitable quiver. I realised that my mother would see this. The tape would be broadcast across the world. My father would die a death when he watched the television news. My step-brothers and their families would sit there in stunned silence. I could hear the wailing coming from my parents' bedroom, their door locked against the outrageous cruelty of this screwed-up world in which we lived.

I looked down the line. Menachem bowed his head and, with his eyelids flickering rapidly, he mouthed a silent prayer. Aban stared straight ahead, glassy and rigid, the wire in his blood turning him to magnificent, pale marble. How I envied them. How I wished I

could find their inner strength in this time of dying. Instead, I sagged onto my haunches, my shoulders drooping, feeling the adrenalin surge abate to leave behind the rusted shell of a wasted life. I bit my lip, desperately trying to hold back the tears with the taste of my own blood.

A movement. From the corner of my eye I caught the briefest shift in shadow and air. I looked up and watched as Beniamin Kachigian started to rise from the mud. He looked around for a moment, seeming calm and almost happy, and then he took a step forward, arms outstretched, reaching out for The Man.

"I'm Christian," he said softly, "like you. We are brothers. This is a mistake."

He took another step forward. Still Beniamin smiled and spoke with a quiet inner resolve so lacking in our meetings of these last few months. "You should not do this. It is not what God wants. I know… He has told…"

The Man stepped forward too, pulling a pistol from his belt. On camera he whipped the pistol across Beniamin's forehead, felling him in an instant. Beniamin crumpled in front of our eyes.

The Man stood over Beniamin's prone body and spoke quietly but definitely, "You. This one. Over there."

Beniamin's executioner hurried forward. He picked up Beniamin's unconscious body and dragged him off behind the van, well out of camera shot.

The three of us now knelt alone and naked, each one of us seeing a last horizon through wide, terror-filled eyes. In that moment Menachem's words finally wormed their way into my soul. Dignity. I would not cry. I would face my fear and face it down. Menachem leaned towards me and touched my elbow with his in an attempt to reassure me. Everything seemed so confused. I tried to focus, tried to find the strength that we had shared the previous evening when we lay together listening to the distant shell-fire. I would not let my friends down now. I would be strong enough.

The camera still rolled. Our executioners stepped up and put the cold barrels of their hand-guns against the back of our heads. We all closed our eyes then, communing with our fleeing souls this one last time. Another tear struggled out from under my fevered eyelid.

I bit back on my fear, desperately trying to control my bowels and the vomit rising in my gullet. I felt utterly spent and so, so tired.

Click. To my left. A hammer falling on an empty chamber. A sudden release. Incomprehension. Utter disbelief.

Click. A firing pin hitting insubstantial air. The bastards. The absolute fucking bastards.

Click. I felt the vibration in my skull. The weight of a gun barrel lifted away from my skin. Relief. The sheer, unadulterated collapse of the reprieved soul. Not for the first time in recent history I admit that I urinated involuntarily, but this time it felt good. I did not care. I was alive. It was proof. As crass and as infantile as it must seem, the simple fact of it, of my awareness of warm discomfort, was simply a wonder to behold.

"Cut!"

Laughter. Loud and raucous laughter.

Again, that thought, shared amongst the three of us. You fucking bastards.

Our executioners stepped up behind us and patted us on our shoulders, laughing and cajoling and barracking. They dragged us to our feet, spun us round and marched us towards the farmhouse, all the while chuckling and joking, as if their cruel, their bestial role-play made us the best of friends.

From the rear I heard The Man shout out an order. "Robbie. Get Marwan some new strides."

Robbie laughed out loud beside me. "Should've seen your face, mate. Priceless. Maybe the boss will let you watch the vid later. Absolutely fucking priceless."

The barbarity of the mock execution finally hit home. I wanted to lash out and I could sense that Aban and Menachem were feeling the same inner rage. Someone should pay for this abomination. Instinctively, though, we knew that this was not the time. We were toothless, helpless babes in the roughest playground in the land. We walked stiffly together towards the farmhouse, holding back the tsunami of hate that we each felt at that moment for these brutal and heartless gangsters.

The Man was never content, though, and he saved the final coup de grace until we reached the open doorway of the farmhouse. He barked out another order and our guards made us stop and turn

back to face the open farmyard. We heard another command. Then, muffled slightly by the van behind which Beniamin had been dragged, we heard a single shot ring out across the empty English landscape, to be accompanied as the echo died away by the flutter of crow wings and a chorus of startled cawing.

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In writing this story I have tried to be honest about the events and their consequences, but even now, safe in the bosom of my family here in Beirut, I find it very difficult to describe the immediate sensations and feelings that overwhelmed us after Beniamin's needless and inhumane execution. Words ring hollow. So much is lost.

The bare facts are these. We were held now not in the farmhouse but in a barn. They fitted chains to our legs, fixing them to the rotting hulk of an old tractor. Even though it was now spring the nights were cold and we had only blankets and straw for bedding. We lived in a stall, complete with bower, while two guards remained on station by the barn door at all times. They rigged up a patio heater, a small gas stove and ran an electric lead from the farmhouse so that they could watch an old portable black and white television.

We marched as a group under escort twice a day to the farmhouse for food and latrines. We were so dazed, so devoid of spirit that never once over the next few weeks did we consider retaliation or escape, even though the overall security here on the farm was probably as lax as it had ever been since our capture on London's busy streets.

Aban, Menachem and I talked but only in desultory fashion. We listened to the television whenever we could, but the guards kept the volume low and we only ever caught snatches of programmes. They always switched the television off when news bulletins began. For the most part during the week following our move and Beniamin's death, we three sat in brooding silence, painfully wrapped-up in thoughts about the fragility of all things.

For Menachem and I, this shift in the dynamic of our captivity inevitably led to changes. We were now three rather than two. We shared our pain and our lives with Aban, and so we drifted apart again in that one physical sense. What mattered now was a shared friendship amongst all of us to try and overcome the shock of Beniamin's sudden and needless execution.

I do not think that either one of us felt sad about the change. It is one thing to take comfort and warmth in another's arms when you

are so far from home and constantly locked down in the dark, but here we shared our space not only with Aban but also in sight of our guards. It was enough now that we had companionship. Beniamin's death made us all grateful for the moments that we could still continue to share.

It seemed odd at first to lay alone in the dark, separated by a few feet of dust and dry hay, and I expected there to be far more of a wrench, far more of a breaking asunder, but in truth I felt a sense of relief too. I took comfort in that old mantra; it is what it is. Time moves on and things change. There seemed to be little point in fighting for something lost and gone. It was time to move on, and in my heart as well as in my head that made sense.

There is a warmth and a delight that comes when you recognise the moment when things change. Once you find the strength to break through the selfish, self-serving pity that you feel for you own situation, there is a strange clarity that emerges from the chaos of tragedy. I thought about history, about my own, about Aban's and Menachem's past lives, and especially about Beniamin's severed time-line I drew my conclusions and, in fitful bursts of communion, shared these with my fellow captives.

For me it was an absolute truth that history had become meaningless. Life must be about the moment, about the now. Our past is an irrelevance, a weight, a chain, much like the one that limited my movement in the barn. Referring to this past, letting the weight of chain dictate your reaction to the present danger, simply condemns you to repeat your mistakes. I determined that I could change my life, by simply taking each moment for what it was. I could behave differently with each cycle of events.

As for the future? I decided that there really was no such thing. Any plans that we might make, any hopes that we might share, were all built on sand and without foundation. Plans and dreams are fragile and amorphous constructs designed to give hope rather than shape to the living now. I had no hope. I had no faith. Beniamin set the example. Live for the day, live for the minute, live for the second. Marwan Tayeh had no history worth remembering nor did he have any future worth striving for. There was only this place, this draughty, dirty barn, and only ever the company of these sorry,

dishevelled and desperate men. I decided that the world simply is what it is, and we, the hostage and the captor, were dumb animals locked into a chemical dance without plan or direction.

My friends in bondage, good Aban and loving Menachem, refused to allow for such a nihilistic view of life. Instead, they insisted that faith and hope are vital drivers of the human state. Mute acceptance was, for them, nothing more than a resignation, a denial of one's responsibilities. They argued with me, and we set to it so loudly at times that the guards had to break us apart before we got to physical blows. I would not have had it any other way. We shifted our positions in the stall by centimetres, so that Aban and Menachem and I shared one wall, where we could huddle together for warmth of an evening and continue our philosophy debates late into the night.

After a couple of weeks of cold, farmyard existence, our captors clearly decided that we were all safe and sound, well behind the front lines, and that we were not in any immediate danger from the government army. They moved us into the farmhouse proper, into a first floor bedroom, where they provided the usual random kindness in the form of the obligatory mattress rolls, a few books and candles, the essentials of captive life. With the coming of relative normality so the ephemeral nature of my passions morphed again. Inconstant Marwan assumed a more positive aspect, and as the human mind bends fact and fiction to suit the day, so I gradually loosened my grip on the knots of my inward-looking but impotent rage.

One sunny morning, with the bedroom windows thrown open to fresh, clean country air, with the first house martins and swallows skimming the breeze, and with the chatter of birds in hedgerows, I awoke early and crawled over to where Menachem and Aban lay dozing. Now that we were locked in our new cell the guards had once more dispensed with chains and hoods, so I was able to manoeuvre freely. I lay on my side next to Menachem and, propped up on one elbow, I watched him breathe slowly and rhythmically.

Without raising his eyelids he said in a sleepy drawl, "Morning, you stupid Leb arsehole."

Menachem rolled over onto his side, wiped the dust from his eyes, and we held each other. I shut my eyes, smelling the stale odour of indoor flesh. I felt another hand on my arm. Aban was awake too.

"See," said Menachem, talking quietly over my shoulder. "The boy needs his morning cuddle."

I bridled at the word 'boy' and dug Menachem in the ribs. In an instant I found myself rolled onto my back, with Menachem sitting astride my chest and Aban kneeling beside my head. I looked up and saw the impossibly huge shapes of two grown men towering above me, both of them looking down at me with looks of wry amusement on their shaggy, bearded faces.

"So,, said Aban to Menachem, "what are we going to do with the child?"

"Kick the shit out of him. Do the guards' dirty work for them. Probably best all round."

Menachem squeezed my chest with his thighs so that I could barely breathe. He laughed out loud. Aban laughed. Wheezing slightly, I too started to laugh, and so started the day on that beautiful April morning. We giggled and joked and ribbed each other like twelve year olds in a school playground, carrying on through breakfast and well into the afternoon.

Moods and caprices. Such is the volatile nature of sanity in the world of the hostage. Every thought is writ large on the waxing moon, only to fade to indolence with the waning of the day. This bright and sunny morning brought with it, for all three of us, the realisation that there really is a future and that as flawed as our perceptions and plans might be, we must always scheme and hope.

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It was around this time, perhaps as late as early May, that the nature of our imprisonment changed yet again. The nervous edge that dragged the harsh blade of reality across our skins continued to build. Our captors seemed continually preoccupied with news bulletins. We felt, strangely, a little jealous, as though we were an afterthought now where once we had been the centre of a universe. The latest round of the civil war, we decided, was not going their way. The rolling thunder of that evening in Bath dogged everyone's thoughts and steps.

Before breakfast we heard the rumble of a large truck in the farmyard. Because of the remote geography, because we were relatively isolated here at the farm, our guards had never thought to block-up the window to our room. Who would see the light? Who would worry about a stray, shaggy head in a window out here?

Watching from the window we saw six men climb out of the back of the vehicle, an old refrigerated delivery truck now painted a mottled green. Two of the men walked with decided limps, while others sported bandages and one had his right arm in a sling. With a little help from our resident guards, they unloaded back-packs from the truck, together with rifles, a couple of machine guns, boxes of ammunition, and some cartons containing tins and packets of food. As soon as the truck was emptied of their sundry belongings our own guards loaded the truck up with the meagre contents of their own lives and trades, and then clambered aboard. Finally we watched Robbie and The Man climb into the cab.

We felt a stab of betrayal. Not one of them came up to say goodbye. After all that we had shared, however brutal it was, we actually felt hurt. No matter that Robbie was a sadistic thug. No matter that The Man's brutal disregard for life had snuffed out Beniamin Kachigian's mortal existence. We really did feel as though we were being abandoned by lovers – lovers whose destructive, mean and violent conduct we hated and craved. It is a strange and disturbing emotion, this sense of loss, when every sane part of your being, when every considered thought, screams at you to rejoice. I sat and stared at walls where the plaster flaked and

wooden laths lay exposed. We three, the tripartite jilted lover, wished them good riddance with heavy hearts.

But then you start to speculate. Who might these new guys be? What will they be like? They looked as though they had suffered badly, maybe fighting at the front. Would we get some news? Would they take out their own pain on us?

After the truck pulled out of the farmyard our world settled back into the noisy routines of hedgerow squabbles and the distant lowing of cattle newly released into the fields from their winter pens. From below, probably from the kitchen, we heard the tramp of boots and the arrangement of quarters. We realised that we were hungry. We needed our latrine break, but these new guards seemed far more intent on serving up their own tea and food than in comforting their prisoners. We waited the morning long but no one came to our aid.

We decided to take matters into our own hands. On the back wall of the bedroom there was an old fireplace, the back plate of which had long ago crumbled away. The resulting hole in the wall opened up onto the flue from the ground floor. We three stood in front of the fireplace, unzipped our flies and urinated into that hole. We knew that gravity would send our waste tumbling down into the grate below, and would probably earn us an exemplary slap or two, but we were unanimous. We were not dumb animals. We deserved better treatment than this.

As is the way with men, as we stood there relieving the overnight pressure in our bladders, we discussed the morning's odd goings on. Aban started the conversation mid-flow.

"What do you reckon, boys? Changing the guard at Buckingham Palace?"

Menachem nodded. "And did you see the state of them? Every one of them is carrying an injury. There's real fighting going on, just like the artillery we heard a few weeks ago. Something's up."

"Do you really think it's the government?" I asked. "I mean, they looked pretty screwed in London last year, didn't they. The militias had the southern camps in flames. Bombs everywhere."

Menachem flicked and dribbled. "Could be… or they're at each other's throats." He paused for reflection. "Although I wasn't

aware that any of the militias had big guns, not on the scale of the bombardment we heard the other week."

Aban agreed. "Yep, you're right. We only ever saw RPGs and light mortars, a few rockets, nothing on the grand scale. Maybe the Yanks shipped over an artillery regiment or something."

We all finished, shook, and zipped. Returning to our mattresses, fully expecting to hear outraged shouts from downstairs followed by the sound of stamping boots, we each lit a cigarette and pondered the moment. Aban coughed loudly.

"Shit. I hate these things. Never smoked before this… but you've got to have a hobby, got to have something to look forward to, haven't you."

Menachem and I just nodded, blowing smoke into the clean spring morning air that filled our room. All was quiet on the stairs. From below we heard chairs scraping on flagstones and the sound of boxes being dragged across the floor.

"Could be the Yanks, I suppose," said Menachem after a moment or two of quiet puffing. "Hope not, though. That's all the poor bastards need, especially now they've got oil. If only they'd let us help. We could really make a difference. It's not about Jihad or Crusade any more. The world's gone global." Menachem laughed quietly. "No one wants the fucking Yanks involved, no sir, we don't."

I thought about this for a moment or two. "It's not about Jihad, you're right, not for us, but what about The Man? He's a one-man army, hell-bent on resurrecting King Richard's march on Jerusalem. For people like him it's absolutely about Jihad."

Aban mixed metaphors superbly in summing all of this up. "There's always one fuck-up in the pack of cards."

On balance we agreed that someone was hitting the western militias hard. The who and the why of it was unimportant. What mattered was what it all meant for us. We turned our speculation to the identity of our new guards.

"So, you think this new lot have been fighting at the front?" I asked.

"Probably. Seems the most likely explanation," replied Aban. "They looked pretty shell-shocked when they climbed out of the truck. Pretty whacked. My guess is they've been sent here for some

light guard duty, for a bit of r'n'r. Hopefully they'll be grateful, you know, a bit less of the old zealous shit regarding us."

Menachem shook his head slowly as he stubbed-out his cigarette on the bare floorboards. "I don't know. Depends on where they've been. Depends on what they've been through. I hope they appreciate the quiet life, but what if they're fucked-up? What if they see us as easy meat, as a way of taking revenge for all that shit?"

Life is never simple. You start a discussion in an optimistic frame of mind, open to possibilities, and then someone shows you a glass half empty. We spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon listening to our stomachs rumble as we contemplated the ineffable down-sides of our situation. Nothing new there, then.

We heard the longed for rattle of keys sometime in the late afternoon. Experience teaches you to adjust your behaviour according to the parameters in play at any given moment. Rules might be rules, but their interpretation varies. Like my friends, I for once paid attention to both the rules and to the change in parameters by which we could expect to live. We all sat quietly on our mattresses, with our heads bowed. As ever when looking at the floor, I could make out black boots and combat fatigues.

An odd accent. American. "It's okay, gentlemen. Relax."

We slowly raised our heads and looked at our new guide through the labyrinthine ways of captivity. The man with the American accent stood tall and shockingly blond, muscled and ripe, late thirties or early forties, sporting a ragged bandage around his head that made his hair stand out from his scalp. He smiled at us, hands on hips, relaxed and confident. Next to him, with his arm in a sling, thinner than I remembered and looking dog tired was The Kid, the young man who befriended me down in the hole.

"My God…," I whispered, " you. You're back… you're…"

The Kid skittled over to where I sat and knelt down beside me. He took my hand in his good one. "Marwan. Thank Christ. It's so good to see you safe." He grinned broadly as he shook my hand.

Aban and Menachem stared first at the American and then at me and The Kid. It was a surreal moment, a reunion of the weirdest and yet most wonderful kind. Although I held fond memories of

The Kid from the hole, they were relative to my general situation. He was still an alien, he still carried a gun, and yet I felt now a surge of brotherly love for him as he knelt by my side, shaking my hand for all that he was worth. The American let us be for a moment, giving The Kid and I a chance to reacquaint ourselves.

"Okay, Sergeant, back on track, please."

The Kid gathered himself up, winked at me and then returned to his station beside his commanding officer. We three hostages sat mute and expectant.

"I'll be as brief as I can, gentlemen. The facts are these. Sergeant Mitchell here will see to your daily needs. Me and the rest of the walking wounded will be around if needed, but our job is primarily to keep you safe. Things have changed out there, guys. Ain't going into details right now, but you've become important commodities. So, no funny business. Do what we ask and you'll find us… accommodating."

He paused, as if searching for words. As soon as he started to speak again we understood why. "Sorry… yeah, well, you know how it is, I guess… sorry about Kachigian. Should never have happened that way. If it's any consolation the crew who were here with you, your favourite men and all, well, they've finally had their dream come true. They're off to fight a Holy War. On their way to the front lines right now. As I say, do right by us and we'll do right by you. Mitchell here will sort out some food for you and take you for your comfort breaks. Give him a list of things that might make life a little more bearable up here and we'll see what we can do. No shit, though. Be realistic, gentlemen."

Still we sat there, dumbfounded by this sudden shift in attitude, as though we were blades of grass beaten down by a raging storm front that only now, after days of howling wind and torrential rain, begins to lift, leaving the world battered but refreshed.

"That's it. I'll give you more information as soon as I can."

Our new American friend turned and left the room, while another guard, hobbling but armed with a light machine gun, stepped into the doorway.

Okay, I thought, so we're all friends now, except you've got all the guns and we're still prisoners. I looked at Menachem and Aban.

We each shrugged our shoulders, but smiled broadly. The world felt lighter and brighter.

The Kid beckoned to Menachem. “Right, let’s be having you. Shit, shower and shave time.”

He held out his good hand in invitation, an invitation that Menachem took with the greatest of heart.

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While we always wish to believe that things change, the truth is that world always remains essentially the same. If the soil around us felt refreshed after the storm, we three blades of grass still sat rooted in the dirt of our captivity. We washed as usual and then ate bread and jam. We drank tea as usual, and then we waited, just as we waited each and every day. Fifteen minutes. Outside our window, which we pushed wide open to let the fresh spring air wash away the inevitable stink of enclosed body odour, we listened to the sounds of the countryside, to the diminishing fervour of the of the day, and we began to speculate once more. So much of our lives seemed to be spent like this, in endless repetitions. It was, and is, the nature of incarceration.

The key and the lock. The Kid entered the room with another guard, who took orders from the boy without hesitation or grudge. It seemed that this young man, younger than I, but bolstered by his wound and by his familiarity with the American captain, now held some position of authority. The two of them cleared away the trays, and the second guard disappeared out onto the landing, leaving the three of us alone with The Kid.

Questions. We fired-off salvo after salvo.

Menachem: "What's happening out there? Who's fighting who? Who's winning? What about us, what does it mean?"

Aban: "And what about the other hostages? Are we going home? Can we send a message to our families? Can we have a radio?"

Marwan: "Is it the Yanks? Why did they shoot Beniamin? What's happened to you?" And strangely… "Where's Smiler? Is he with you?"

The Kid fended off our questions politely but firmly. He squatted down by the door, holding his good hand up and we slowly fell silent. "Okay, okay," he said. "Let's take it one at a time. I'll start with the basics."

He looked tired now, as he sat in front of us, small and fragile and human. His wounded arm hung loosely in a sling and now that I could really look at him he definitely seemed to be much thinner than before. His thick, dark hair was longer and more ragged now,

and had, I thought, odd flecks of grey to the temples. He closed his eyes for a moment before speaking, as if drawing strength from the darkness.

"Look, guys, I don't know anything about Beniamin. I'm sorry. It was wrong. The guy that shot him is a lunatic. Anyway, they've been sent to fight now, so they'll get their Holy War. We need every man we can get, if I'm honest. It's not much consolation, I know, but it's the best you're going to get. The way things are going, they'll probably get what they deserve.

We're here for a bit r'n'r, light duties. And yes, Marwan, Smiler is still around. He's here. Took a piece of shrapnel in his foot, but that's about all that's changed. He's still the same, so… well… you know."

I groaned out loud at the mention of the man's name, and felt a phantom twinge from my ribs. I dreaded the thought of another reunion. We had just got shot of Robbie.

"What's your name?" I asked. "I've always called you The Kid, but that's no good, not any more. Mitchell isn't it? What about a first name?"

The Kid smiled at me. "Only fair, I guess. James. James Mitchell. I prefer Jamie."

"All well and good," interjected Aban, sitting forward and fixing the boy with one of his hard-as-nails stares. "But what the bloody hell is going on?"

Jamie returned Aban's stare, unflinching, and spoke slowly and deliberately. "It's about a year now since the camps flared up around London. It was all okay at first. The militias and the religious groups did well. We secured parts of the south coast, the south west, Nottingham and a few other cities in the north and Midlands. We took the fight right into the heart of London. I guess you guys know about some of that. The government looked about ready to fall around September, but they managed to hold on. Bit of a purge. A coup, I suppose. They're headed up by a General now, MacDonald. Decided enough was enough. Invited the bloody French in."

Jamie paused for a moment. The French were the rock upon which the Muslim surge-tide broke upon here in the West. For four

hundred years the French held their borders secure, and in so doing had developed a formidable fighting capability.

"Hard bastards, the French," said Aban, ruefully. "Locked me up once for asking a perfectly innocent question."

Jamie nodded his agreement. "Yeah, hard bastards. They don't like the Yanks interfering in what they think of as their own back yard. We think MacDonald is a plant. They wanted an excuse to exercise a little influence over here, especially with the oil, and now they're in. Once they arrived mob-handed, with their tanks and big guns and their bloody planes, we had no chance. We've fought on as best we can, but divided you fall. Lost the coastal ports in November. Camps cleared and London secured by Christmas. Everything north to a line running from Lincoln to Chester is government. Out here we've formed an alliance: all the groups and militia, but we're losing. It's only a matter of time. We can't fight planes and tanks. Bugger-all support from the Yanks now. There's French regiments on the outskirts of Bristol, and government forces all the way down to Lyme. Bath is still holding, but it's a pocket, a bulge in a failing line. We're going to have to withdraw further west. If we don't and the French take Bristol, then we get cut off. That'll be that."

Jamie sagged visibly as he described the general situation. The Crusade, this latest explosion of civil unrest, was coming to an end. After years of political upheaval and mismanagement, it was the French and not the Americans who seemed to be holding sway. That was a new and dangerous chapter in this sorry little country's already tumultuous horror story. A Catholic invasion across a land of dissenters.

Menachem was the next to speak, filling the silence that followed Jamie's brief strategic summary. "So…so, what happens to us? What does it mean?"

Jamie laughed, a shallow, feeble little laugh, and he looked at us each in turn. "The Yanks are pulling out, at least for now. Our advisors are going home. The captain here is off across the water as soon as we can arrange safe transport. Seems the Yanks are going to try some jaw-jaw instead of war-war. What that means is that you lot have suddenly become very precious. We're trying to negotiate a cease-fire, trying to buy some time to re-group, maybe

even start peace talks. You guys are the sweetener. We're offering hostages in exchange for a break in hostilities."

Absolute silence. None of us could quite believe what we were hearing. The sudden possibility of returning home, of walking free in our native lands, was almost too much to bear. We looked at each other, open mouthed, unable to speak a word.

Jamie stood up. "That's enough news for now, judging by the look on your faces. I'll sort out the usual supplies for you. I have a pretty good idea about the things you'll like, isn't that true, Marwan?"

I nodded and mumbled, on autopilot while fireworks exploded in my head. I might actually get out of this alive. We might all get out in one piece. We might all get away from this God-forsaken, basket-case of a country with our lives intact. "Yeah, yeah… sure," I said.

Jamie turned to leave the room, but stopped and added one more piece of news. "Nearly forgot. One of you asked about the other hostages. We've got six of you, three here and another three down in Plymouth, the Syrian, I think, and a couple of lecturers, one Saudi, one Turkish. The other one, the TV guy, he's already gone home, part of the negotiations. Don't know about anyone else."

Jamie left us alone then, locking the door behind him. We sat for a moment longer, simply staring out at the bare walls, each one of us filling to the brim with sheer, unadulterated joy. It felt like rain falling on an already saturated landscape. The rivers in our souls swelled and rose, bursting their banks, and so, we floated up and out, dancing around the room, arm in arm, screaming and whooping and laughing at the very tops of our voices. Aban, in particular, boomed out his thanks and joy at the release of his colleague. Together we thundered round and round across the bare floorboards, singing until we grew hoarse; "We're going home in the morning… we're going home in the morning…"

Outside in the farmyard I caught sight of Jamie, our new friend, leaning against one of the rusted hulks – an old baling machine – puffing on a cigarette. He looked up at our window at the same moment that I looked down into the farmyard. Next to him stood another one of our guards, one of our supposed protectors, also on a

smoke break. They both waved as they saw me look out into the farmyard mid-dance.

And, of course, we all lived happily together ever after… at least until that evening. Long after lights out, as we lay there, smoking into the small hours, talking about all of the things that we were going to do, visits to Tehran mosques, beers in Ashrafieh, family dinners in Nazareth, and a pilgrimage to pay our respects to Beniamin Kachigian's family, we heard the unmistakeable turn of the key in the door lock.

We fell silent, waiting for the dull electric light to come on and break the soft shadow of our quiet musings. The door opened but there was no light from the hall. All was dark. By the light of the moon we three watched a thick-set ghost of man enter the room, rifle in hand. He limped slightly.

"Hello, Marwan."

I recognised the voice immediately. Smiler. I shivered, and felt the old anger rise up once again. Not now, I thought, not now you bastard, Not now. We are so close. Not now.

As he hobbled towards me I thought I saw him raise the rifle so that the butt was pointing directly at me, in Smiler's by now traditional greeting. I moved quickly, rolling off the mattress so that he would have to shift his aim. In the split second that it took for him to adjust his hobbling gait I was up on my feet, piling my shoulder into Smiler's chest, knocking him backwards and down onto the floor. The usually supine and cowering Marwan of old, the frightened worm-boy, turned. It did not matter to me that the man was injured and tired and slow. Why would it? It did not matter to me that he cried out, protesting his innocence, yelling for help and begging me to stop. He said again and again that he only wanted to talk. My anger boiled up and over. This was for Beniamin. This was for Menachem and Aban. This was for every slight, every bruise, every cracked rib, and for every day of my life that these bastards had taken from me.

I knocked the gun away from him, sending it skittering across the floor towards the open door, and sitting astride Smiler's barrel chest I rained blow after blow upon his head and shoulders. Mine was a blind rage. My eyes filled with tears and I sobbed as I

pummelled the man, drawing gouts of blood from his nose, splitting an eyelid and crushing his lips against his teeth. I grazed my knuckles raw as I hit and hit, feeling soft flesh tear and swell under the onslaught of bone and cartilage.

Smiler lay there beneath me, helpless and whimpering. The creature that I saw through my tears was, after the initial rage began to abate, a mirror reflection of my own body. I saw there, in that moment, as Menachem and Aban tried to grab hold of my flailing arms, a world in reverse, where I was the sadist and Smiler the innocent. I kept shouting out, even as Menachem and Aban dragged me off Smiler's broken body.

"Beniamin… Beniamin. You shit. You fucked-up shit. Remember Beniamin…"

Boot steps. Jamie, the American and two other guards stormed into the room. With the Smiler prostrate on the floor nearly the entire company now stood in our cell. Menachem and Aban shoved me onto my mattress and virtually had to sit on me as I continued to writhe and spit and shout obscenities at the shattered face that lay on the floor in the middle of our room.

"Ugh! Get off me… get off… you killed him. What for? You sick mother-fuckers. What for?"

It was primeval stuff, ended by a single blow from Jamie, the punch delivered with the complicity of my room mates. Tonight was different. Where before we would all have been systematically beaten, now there was just the one punch. None of us were touched again. Jamie simply did what he had to do to break the spell, to end the rabid, raging fit. As that rage flipped and started to subside I heard the American captain giving orders.

To the guards, pointing at Smiler, "Get him out of here."

To Jamie, pointing at me, "Calm that mad fuck down, will you."

To the guards and Smiler, "And don't any of you think about revenge. Not one of you. These guys are our tickets home."

The guards dragged Smiler out of the room, all the while listening to him cry and blubber, "I just… wanted to… wanted to talk."

The American captain muttered something under his breath and then said, "Yeah, sure you did. You always do your best talking with a loaded rifle."

He turned to look at me one last time. “Do that again, boy, and I’ll personally see to it we ship you home in a body bag.”

He walked out of the room, still muttering. Jamie looked at me and shook his head. He said nothing during the entire sorry episode. He just shook his head and left the room, locking us in again. I expected Menachem and Aban to be furious. I had just jeopardised all of our futures in the most cack-handed and brutal way possible. Instead they sat and talked with me, soothing and calming, and finally agreeing with me that the bastard deserved it.

“I’ve wanted to do that to one of them for so long,” Aban said, almost admiringly.

I don’t know whether Smiler stayed with our company of guards or not. We never saw him on duty again.

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There is always a mismatch between expectation and reality. The natural human state is one where, when offered hope, we exaggerate the positive assessment of our situation. Following on from our brief discussion with the American we all felt a sense of hope building now that our new guards seemed distinctly more relaxed. The tempering facts of reality were that the days still drifted on through the growing fecundity of bright May. We remained locked down and were still together to celebrate Menachem's and then soon after Aban's first anniversary in captivity. Jamie brought us newspapers once or twice every week, although any mention of hostages was still carefully cut out. He did allow us some news about the civil war, letting us read snippets and talking with us about it all, but only in the most general terms.

We learned that Bath had been evacuated. Battle lines shifted all the time but seemed to be based on a defensive line that ran along Devon's borders with Dorset and Somerset. The militias had enough strength left to push government forces back from Lyme towards Dorchester, but faced with the French forces in the north, they could push no further. Supplies ran short and the French fighter-bomber squadron based at the old Air Force station at Brize Norton played havoc with convoys and artillery positions. It really was only a matter of time.

We did glean some interesting intelligence about our own position. The farm where we waited with increasing frustration for liberation lay between Honiton and Exeter, not far from the centre of the militia defensive lines. All seemed quiet in our sector then, and we learned from Jamie that negotiations for a cease-fire looked hopeful. The French High Command, which had previously baulked at anything other than total surrender, seemed a little more flexible now that they were shipping home body bags. Bristol was theirs, too, and they knew that the rebel threat was largely spent. The one question remaining for them was how to win the peace.

We devoured news, always hoping to see or hear something to our own particular advantage. As a group, both hostage and captor, we celebrated the state visit of Marshall Bernadotte to London. Bernadotte was French Head of State, and I took great delight in

using some of the dubiously useful knowledge that I had unwittingly absorbed at University. I explained to the others how he shared a name with one of Napoleon's great generals from those campaigns that finally put an end to Muslim expansion in the Mediterranean. Napoleon and Bernadotte briefly re-took Rome and Naples in the early nineteenth century, and through that they signed the Peace Accord at Marseilles that settled the borders between the civilised East and the military barbarism of the West for over a century. I loved the stimulus of news and fact and conjecture, but in a far more constructive way than in the past. My prosaic collection of European and English historical knowledge finally served some purpose.

Beyond the bare facts of Napoleon and the relative peace that existed between Christian Europe and the Muslim powers to the South and East, we talked and argued constantly. My initial view was that the weakness in England lay in the Hanoverian alliance with the Ottomans during The Great War. I was adamant that while it was true that the country's history had been blighted by unrest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was only then, when the empire fell and the new Turkey rose from its ashes that the real decline had set in.

Aban was not a student of history and his formative education in Persia was oriented towards the East, but he and Menachem had the advantage of years of experience reporting from hot spots all over the world. They surprised me with their analysis of historical inevitability and brutality.

Menachem made his point succinctly. "You must, Marwan, look beyond the bare facts. After the failure of the Crusades, northern Europe spent the best part of three hundred years fighting for survival. Guns and swords and the mentality of war are all they know. Ever since the first Civil War here, when they chopped off their king's head, they've been fighting amongst themselves as well as against us. That's why the best of them shipped out to the States and pretty promptly put two fingers up to the mother-country. These poor bastards have spent so much time arguing over who's top dog, over who's got the best God, that they never stood a chance. After the war, when we really got going with oil and industrialisation, we left them so far behind. Now they've got all of

their old and petty jealousies, they've got a resurgent America knocking on their door, France is flexing its muscles in their direction, and we're suddenly flocking in to grab their resources. And all the time that's going on, no one is doing anything for the poor man out here in the sticks. Farm prices are shit. There's no industry. The cars are mostly imports. What hope have they got when their own governments cream the top off every deal and live in luxury houses surrounded by walls and armed guards?"

I tried to argue the faith. "But we can actually make a difference. You know how the Yanks go at it. Big corporations, banks, everything based on profit and leverage, well, we're not like that. The underlying philosophy of Islam says that you provide for everyone, and our banks don't charge interest, so we can help if only they'd let us…"

"Marwan, you just don't get it," replied Menachem, warming to his subject. "Who did you say your father worked for?"

"Laodicean Banking," I replied, wondering how Menachem was going to bring my father into the equation.

"Right," he said. "It's like this, Marwan. Everyone's gone global. It's always about profit now, about shareholders and investors. Your father's bank is traditional, yes?

I nodded.

"They don't charge interest, just fees and the usual arrangements. But, Marwan, but… when they want to do stuff around the world they use other people who do all the things that they can't or shouldn't. I'll give you an example. In LBC's case they use Haifa Capital Partners, a good Jewish financial house, who they just happen to have a controlling interest in through proxies and all that. No qualms about doing business anywhere, good old LBC, just so long as it's not obvious. And that, my friend, is why these people don't have any hope. They're shit scared of the glass towers and the masters of the universe who sit in them. They can't compete except at the business end of a gun barrel."

Aban listened quietly and nodded his agreement with Menachem's analysis. "It's true," he said. No matter how you cut it, no matter how pure the philosophy, basic human instinct will always come out. Empires rise and fall. Ours will be no different. For thousands of years people in the Euphrates valley worshipped

animals and they knew they were right. Where are we now that is so different?"

I laughed. We were heading into the metaphysical. "It's never that simple," I replied, still chuckling. "It can't be. All of our history revolves around God in one way or another."

Menachem drew his knees up to his chin and smiled. "No, Aban has a point. You travel the world, Marwan, reporting on this and that. It's always the same, no matter what the philosophy. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and when shit happens it largely happens to the poor, to the ones who couldn't do anything to avoid it.

"It's the same with God. I'm a Jew. Brought up in Jehovah's shadow, a good little boy in Jerusalem. Attentive and… but these days I can't make anything of it. I don't believe in the words, not in the Testament, not in the Torah. They've cracked the atom. We've got that super-collider outside Tehran, nuclear this and that. Some people still believe in the words, literally, while others, maybe like me, laugh at them and say look at the science. None of it matters."

I felt as though I should be offended, but as ever with such debates, especially with good friends like Menachem and Aban, I could not help myself. I had to respond, had to keep the conversation alive and healthy.

"Are you seriously saying that God is irrelevant?" I asked. "Do you really think that everything we've worked for all these years, all these wars, all this thought, the beauty of it, is based on a myth?"

Menachem uncurled his hands from his knees, sat back and stared at the ceiling, as if searching for some sign. Aban sat quietly and raised one eyebrow towards me, as if to say, 'Just listen'.

Menachem raised a hand to the ceiling of heaven. "No, that's not what I'm saying. Look, it's not about what we've worked for. That's just human nature, human progress in an imperfect world. All of those books were written way back when we didn't understand anything. What gets me is this divide – you're either with God or Science. I don't see any need for it. Our astronomers look back in time across the universe, they see explosions and matter and stardust. It all goes back to one point; creation. There is no difference between a man who believes it a cosmic event or an

act of a wilful Creator. It's all one and the same thing. Religion is just one way of expressing the unknowable. So is science, maybe with a bit more mathematics thrown in."

I could feel my head starting to spin. I could see the point being made, but nonetheless the simplicity of it seemed alien and counter-intuitive to me. It may also have been the case that I felt particularly bloody-minded that night.

"I won't let you boil it all down to one and the same thing," I said, defensively. "I remember reading something at Uni, something about complexity. It went something like this: that the universe, however it started, was a simple expression, an almost infinitely small moment. Since then every second, every movement, every action and reaction, has made the universe more and more complex. There are rules, yes, but always tending towards more and more intricate patterns and relationships. In this theory, they say, we are part of that complexity and only when we reach the ultimate state of it can we ever reveal God. It sort of appeals to me, you know, calls my sensibilities to order. There is a point to it. It has purpose."

Menachem looked at me and sat forward. We were both now hunched forward, staring at each other intently. "Lovely," he said. "Now take that theory, take every religion in the world, take the pure science, everything, and add them all together. There is no answer because we don't actually know what questions to ask. That's at the root of all this shit we're in, Marwan. Everyone's searching for a purpose. These Christian soldiers are as poor as Hell. They need a reason, and people like us and the Americans think we can give them that reason. We think they want to be like us. But the point is, we don't know any more than they do. It's all conjecture and convenience. Seems to me it's only when you boil it all down to being one and the same thing that you see how absurd it all is."

"Yeah. Okay. I need to think about that," I said quietly, reaching for another cigarette. I looked at Aban. "What about you?" I asked. "Anything to add?"

Aban shook his head. "I'm not a philosopher. I prefer to think in terms of today, tomorrow. How can I survive this? And, yes, gentlemen, I do pray when I close my eyes."

The conversation lagged then as we all smoked in the dark. I felt duly instructed. I let my thoughts wander back over Menachem's arguments, and in doing this I saw my father standing on the doorstep of our house, dressed for work, briefcase in hand. It seemed odd to think of my father as a master of the universe, but strangely comforting as well. Once again I was reminded that as wonderful and as complex as the universe might be, there was far more to my father than normally met my eye.

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May the twentieth. Just after dinner, as we sat and smoked and talked about our hopes for home and the outside world, Jamie arrived and stood in the doorway to our cell. He seemed a little unsure of himself, flexing his improving left arm nervously. Our conversation ebbed away and we all looked at him expectantly. He smiled, a thin and narrow smile, as though he were fighting some demon within himself and only just winning.

"Could I speak with you, please, Marwan?" he asked hesitantly.

"Of course," I replied, catching the sense of frailty in his voice as if it hung on the dust motes in the air between us. It was clear that there was a problem. I decided to be bold. A problem shared is a problem halved.

"Not here though. Can you come with me?"

"Sure," I said, firing a questioning glance at my comrades as I stood and walked over to the young man. Menachem raised an eyebrow and silently wished me good luck through his ever-expressive eyes.

Jamie and I walked down the hallway, and then down the stairs, the silence between us pregnant and uncomfortable. At the bottom of the stairs we passed an open door revealing a kitchen, and I exchanged a questioning glance with the American captain, who sat at a battered pine table drinking a cup of coffee. He too looked anxious. Jamie led me along a short corridor and into what might once have been a sitting room. As with our cell, great patches of plaster hung from the walls revealing thick stones behind. Jamie asked me to sit on a threadbare, sagging armchair. Once I was seated he picked up a newspaper from an overturned packing crate in the middle of the room.

It was a broadsheet, folded into quarters, and as he passed it to me Jamie said only this, "I'm so sorry…"

I knew it was bad news. I felt as though I was looking out at the world through alien eyes, and that another presence suddenly inhabited this room. Although I could not see this creature, I could feel its stinking breath on my neck. I grabbed the paper from Jamie, feeling the adrenalin surge that comes with deeply knotted dread. On the offered page, ringed in red ink, there was a section of an

article published three days previously. The marked section contained the form and shape of a letter, reproduced as written. It read:

Jnah
17th May

Dear Sirs,

We write this letter in the hope that you will have compassion for our dear and beloved son and brother, Marwan Tayeh, taken hostage nearly twelve months ago in London. We do not know where our beloved son is, nor even whether he is truly still alive, but we pray to our shared Lord, peace be upon Him, that Marwan is well and bearing his captivity with grace and dignity.

We beg you to treat him well and with love at this time. We ask you to help him through this terrible period in all our lives. We plead with you for his safe return. It is with the utmost sadness that we, his mother and brothers send these requests.

Dear, dear Marwan. This is so difficult to write. All we want to do is hold you. All we want to do is see you once again here at home, where we can give you our love and our hope and our strength. Be strong, dear Marwan, be as strong as you can.

Your father…

I knew the rest without reading it. I wanted to scream. The knot of fear rising in my stomach suddenly swelled up and filled my throat. The feeling of impotence in the face of unruly fate spread like a steel band across my chest. My heart raced. My eyes filled with silent tears that I tried to wipe away with a trembling hand. Through the mists of flooding grief I read on. I had to see the words. I had to hear them in my head.

…has been very ill these last few months. Sadly, he passed away on May12th after a short but brave fight against cancer.

His last words were for you, dear Marwan. He loved you so much. He sits now in the Heavens and watches over you. Be strong, Marwan, and have faith. He loves you so very much.

And from those who hold you hostage we ask one last thing. Marwan is young. He has so much to offer the world. In this time of trouble, please, please, please, send him home to us unharmed. Send him home to us.

We love you, Marwan. Be strong.

Yasamin Tayeh
Da'ud Tayeh
Salman Tayeh

To have every foundation in life ripped away in such a flat, two-dimensional way is an abomination. I sat there in a threadbare armchair in the arse-end of nowhere with some kid standing over me, hovering on wings of terrible sympathy, while my Father, the greatest hero in all the world, lay dead and cold and ashen. I waved Jamie away, fighting back the urge to leap up and throttle the first person I could grab hold of. Jamie seemed reluctant to go for a moment, but then, as the muffled sobbing that I had so far managed to hold in my throat finally broke free to pour out upon the cold flag stone floor, I heard the door to the sitting room snick shut.

For a moment in that threadbare, antique room I existed outside of emotion. It was as if my body crumpled with the pain of loss and grief for my dead father, but I, Marwan, floated above the scene, watching, cold and rational, and dreadfully calm. You live with terror but you survive. In a way you become inured to everything around you, to anything new that this damnable world can throw at you, but then the elastic tether snaps back and you rejoin your chemical body. In that brief moment of reunion I felt the truth of loss, and with it the endless depths of solitude that would now always be with me.

The mind races. Your head fills with incredible and impossible thoughts. I felt an all consuming rage at the bastards who held me here when my father needed me. I flared through feelings of bitterness and futility. What was the point of it all? And then, flaming like a match head, I wanted to yell and scream at my father for being so fucking selfish. Why couldn't he bloody well wait?

As these contradictions, as these impossible waves of emotion crashed over me like raging surf on that rocky shore where the

rivers of my life merge with the sea, I sensed a coming void. I reached out for it. I welcomed this silent drift into cold vacuum, frozen and listless. After the initial surge tide of emotion had taken me from shore and tumbled me down to the base of the wave front, the drowning breath was so simple and welcome. I was in shock. I closed my eyes and let the air drain from my lungs, accepting the starvation of the vacuum.

Even then, in the numb and cold waters of oblivion, the body makes one last, desperate attempt to live. The crying came in waves, huge boiling curls interspersed by that silent, unseeing stillness, when the mind and the body fight back against incomprehension and oblivion. I would never see my father again. I might visit a memorial. I might look at a photograph. I might sit in his study and smell the stain of his cheroots, but I would never again see him warm and animated, would never again hear his voice speaking words just for me.

I tried to picture him sitting at the dinner table, with the blue vein on his hand twitching, but the image was blurred and diffused. We had been apart so long. The sharpness of memory fades. Realisation. The forgetting of detail already begun. I cried and I cried, but always I veered back through the endless circle of rage and bitterness to dumb confusion.

I do not recollect how long they left me there in the armchair. I do not think that time is real in these situations. Time is irrelevant in the vacuum. The laws of relativity, of physics and universal motion are suspended. It was not until I reached into my trouser pocket for my cigarettes that I found any means of grabbing hold of the real world, of the temporal. I wanted a smoke. Beyond all things, I wanted a smoke, and I had left the packet on my mattress.

How could something so utterly infantile, something so mundane and banal, break the spell of bewilderment? I needed a smoke and so I passed through the vacuum and out again into the shabby dereliction of my life in a dilapidated farmhouse surrounded by fools, idiots and madmen. I stood up, wiping away at the tears in my eyes, feeling my cheeks tighten under the tracks of water already spent. My nose was full of sticky, emotive mucous. I opened the door to the hallway and croaked.

"Jamie…"

He was right there, sitting at the foot of the stairs. Our understanding was complete. He already had a cigarette in his hand, which he lit and put to my lips. Jamie held me in the shadows of the hallway. We said nothing. There was nothing to say. As I leaned against him I heard hushed words being spoken in the kitchen. Then everything fell silent. Jamie held me tight, with my head buried sideways against his chest, the cigarette hanging from my lips, glowing in the dark, dripping ash onto the flagstones.

I cried no more. Jamie held me and I cried no more. The love within me died.

A little later, when the warmth of a human body stills the aching heart and the mind catches hold of the coat-tails of the mundane, I asked for and was given a clean blanket. I asked for and was allowed to sleep in that same living room. I read and re-read the letter. Jamie brought my cigarettes down from the room upstairs. I asked him to tell the boys for me. I wanted some space, and although I longed for Menachem and Aban, I also knew that I could not face them, not today. They were too close, too much like family to me now. I needed time in my own company. I hoped that Menachem and Aban would forgive me this last vestige of the selfish.

The next morning, feeling like a wreck, I followed Jamie upstairs, washed, changed into new clothes and then returned to the sitting room for my breakfast. I hardly touched the bread, but the hot tea was welcome and warming. I spent an hour or so trying to gather my thoughts, a task made virtually impossible as one after another the guards popped their heads round the door to offer condolences, all that is except for Smiler. The morning passed in this surreal dance, the slow paced waltz between one man's desire for quiet introspection and the forced and careful sincerity of the living world when faced with someone else's experience of death.

By mid-morning, with the sun reaching its zenith and the day warming towards June and the full English summer, I braved the steps up to our cell, let Jamie open the door, and entered the room, feeling sheepish and awkward.

You can tell instantly when people you know well are at a loss for what to say or do, even those with whom you have shared the

most intimate moments. Menachem, Aban and I spent some time skirting the obvious conversation. They offered the usual rag-bag collection of thoughts and cares at such a time as this, and we drifted through awkward moments, with eyes cast down, feeling our way through the frustration of it all like mountain hikers suddenly afflicted with snow-blindness.

"Oh, fuck this," Menachem suddenly blurted out.

He stormed over to me, physically lifted me up and swamped me in the biggest bear-hug you can possibly imagine. Aban too broke the shackles of his own reticence, and the three of us locked together, shedding shared tears. The emotions that I felt then were different. We did not weep in unison or any sense of synchronicity. This was release and affirmation. This was true friendship. These were the tears of the living, of love and companionship.

As ever in our captivity we employed our usual therapy. We talked. I talked. In the telling of my story, of my father's story, from beginning to end, full of tangents and digressions, I began the real process of grieving. In the naming of Najm el-Din Tayeh's parts I discovered a greater sense of his love, and came to see that mine was not the sharpest grief. My mother and brothers suffered more. I knew where I was. I knew who I was. I could tell this story. They could do none of these things. They were the ones in true darkness, not me. They had lost the great patriarch, as I had, but unlike me, who saw and felt and smelled and tasted this captivity, they had nothing that they could employ to give my current existence any shape or form.

It is the strangest thing. My captivity was a nightmare episode, a thing of brutal connivance and sharp pain, and yet through it I came to know love, true love, for so many people. I loved my father now that he was gone. I loved Menachem and Aban as true, true friends. I loved my mother and my step-brothers now that we shared this loss. How strange it is to find love in such a place.

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Two days was all that we had. Two days in which to tell again the stories that confirmed our existence together. On the morning of May 22nd we breakfasted as usual. Then, as the sky grew dim and a late spring shower splattered against the windows, the door to our room opened and in walked the American captain and Jamie Mitchell, both of them grinning from ear to ear.

"Good news," said the American. "Got an agreement with the government boys."

He nodded to Jamie, who promptly fetched in two sets of new clothes: new slacks and shirts, still in their wrappers, two jackets, clean socks, shorts, and brand new shoes. One of the other guards brought in a chair and all three of us were made to sit and have our heads and beards shaved. Crew cuts. Nothing remained of the wild and shaggy inhabitants of Woebegone Farm. Everything was made spick and span and tidy. There was only one problem. We all knew that there were only two sets of new clothes.

"Okay guys, it's like this. You two get changed." The American pointed to Menachem and Aban. "Sizes should be about right."

Menachem looked annoyed and immediately asked, "What about Marwan? Isn't he coming?"

The American spoke slowly and surely. "Sure, but not right away. Look, we have to tread carefully through all this. We're giving up three hostages as a goodwill gesture. The price of the cease-fire. Then, when we've all been good boys for a month, we'll give up the others in return for the start of peace talks. As far as today's concerned two of you get to go home from here, one from the other group, the Turk.

Menachem refused to get changed. "No way! We're not leaving without Marwan."

The American shook his head. "You really don't get it, do you. There's no choice. Orders. Either you get changed and come quietly or we'll do it for you. Up to you."

Both Menachem and Aban still refused to change into their new clothes. I could see that this might all get out of hand, and on a day like today, after all of the days spent locked away in this hell, I could not let that happen. I loved them for their loyalty, and I was

going to miss their company so much, but I would not let them endanger their lives or this chance for freedom because of me.

"Go on," I said, taking them both by the hand. "It'll be fine. It's only another month. You've done your year, so let me finish mine. Anyway, I'm sick of you, both of you, know what I mean. And I'll get your rations. So go on, piss off, now, before I change my mind."

They stood quite still, heads bowed. Aban brushed my cheek with the back of his hand. "We'll have a cold beer waiting for you in Beirut. Absolute promise."

The two of them donned their new clothes in a flurry of discarded rags and fluttering banter, fidgeting with unnatural shirt collars and tight waist buttons. They both mock-complained about colour schemes, and especially the shoes, not having worn anything so rigid and fitted for months. Then, looking brand spanking new with their shaven faces and heads, and wearing real, outside-world clobber, they twirled so that I could get the full effect.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said the American, laughing now, infected by the optimism hanging like a summer shower in the air. "Very nice. Now, quick goodbyes, guys, we've got a deadline to meet."

We said very little. What was there to say that could be held or shaped by words? Our eyes said enough. After we embraced and made those impossible promises, as the door closed and I heard Menachem and Aban stomp down the hallway in their heavy, ill-fitting shoes, I felt strangely serene. I tried to imagine the solitude, to touch the quietness of the coming days, and I remembered then that the world spins no matter what we do to try and slow it down. That Jamie would try to fill the void I took as a given. He would do his best to help me get through the days until my own release. I was going to miss my cell-mates, for sure, but at the same time, after being cooped-up with them all these months, I was sort of looking forward to the peace. I wanted some time to get my head around the new shape of the world, especially now that my father was watching over me from Heaven. I could almost feel his touch. The boys' release was a sign.

In those first moments after Menachem and Aban left me alone in the room at the farm, I thought all this and found a peace of sorts. My great friend Menachem was leaving me, but I knew for

sure then that we would meet again. I knew too that Aban, while never being as close to me as Menachem, would remain a friend to the end of our days. I wondered how it would be in the future. I could almost taste the beer promised me in Beirut, and looking over the rim of my imaginary glass I tried to see the look in Menachem's eyes, that look that held within it the secrets of our friendship, of our deeper relationship here at the edge of the world. I felt as though a passage in my life lay now behind a closed door. I doubted that either one of us would ever seek to open that door again, preferring to let the secrets wither and die away on the dried out vines that hung there in the dark past. It felt good.

I heard the sound of an engine starting up, and wandered over to the bedroom window, where I saw a car parked in the farmyard. Doors opened. I watched as Menachem and Aban were escorted to the car and invited to sit in the back seat. Lucky bastards, I thought, remembering the way that we had so recently been treated. They waved to me just before they climbed in. I waved back. Even the guards seemed relaxed now, and they too waved my fellow hostages off as the car pulled out of the farmyard. I listened to the sound of the engine as it dwindled to nothing and the normal, slightly soggy, avian background twitter resumed.

I was alone again, but strangely happy. My friends' release was clear proof that there was an alternative outcome. Where so much of our experience was based in nothing but the moment, there was now a possibility of a future. So much of my recent life consisted of hours wondering if there could ever be anything other than bare floorboards, and hurried showers, bread and jam, and random violence. I watched the world get on with the minutiae of scuttling life outside my window, feeling an odd but warm sense of joy and sorrow. My head began to fill with all those questions that hitherto I had either been too afraid to ask, or had simply not had the time to think of.

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Over the course of the next month, through all of June, my world evolved yet again. In return for my promise not to try to escape, Jamie relaxed all of the normal captive rules. There was nowhere to go that was safer than the farm. Out there amongst the wilds, I would be a stranger, a fish out of water, and liable to be gunned down by the increasingly erratic bands of militia soldiers waiting for the ends of their days. I was suited only to the close confines of the farmyard, and feeling generally at one with this new world I was happy to oblige my captors by complying with their requests. I thought no more about escape. Why bother? I would be going home soon anyway.

Jamie moved the battered old armchair from the sitting room upstairs into my cell, and the guards found me a camp bed. They let me wander freely around the yard under a bright summer sky, so long as one of the guards could keep a respectful watch. Invariably we walked together and shared a convivial cigarette. I was allowed to use the kitchen to make tea and coffee. Of an evening they even let me join them for an hour or so each night to watch television, although still never the news bulletins.

Those last few weeks almost felt like a holiday. With the coming of the cease-fire, with the front lines nervous but quiet, the mood at the farm changed. Where before I played games with Aban and Menachem, now I played draughts with my guards. Someone even managed to rustle up a tattered but playable American version of Monopoly. The sharp and violent undertow of the last few months dissipated and revealed a calm sea of shared laughter and hopes. We talked about our homes and shared our experiences in life, and despite the obvious differences we came to realise that in our most basic wants and needs we all shared a common purpose.

It must seem to the reader that this sudden relaxation in my life was something of an anti-climax after the claustrophobia of the preceding months. Never forget, though, that such things will always be relative. At no time did any of my guards put away their weapons. When I walked in the yard there was always a gun sight on me. Should I stray a little towards the fields an armed man would always appear to block my path. Our conversation might be

light-hearted and convivial, but the gesture always meant the same thing. Stay put. Be good. Otherwise we will shoot you, no matter how friendly our smiles right now. To describe this month as a holiday is merely a way of trying to convey the relative peace that we enjoyed, all the while aware that a French and English army stood just a few miles away in a heightened state of readiness should the cease-fire break.

One of the key aspects of change in June was the evening sojourns that I spent in the farm house kitchen. I wallowed in the luxury of colour television and aimless, meandering game-shows and American films. We brewed tea and coffee. We shared meals. We talked endlessly. Such is the routine of life. It never changes, except perhaps for a location and a face. I would be lying if I said that I did not get frustrated by it, by these passing days that I would never get back, but I had learned from Menachem: accept it as the best that can be done and the time will pass.

Some time around the middle of the month the American said his good-byes, and sped off towards Plymouth and a waiting boat. As part of the cease-fire deal the American advisors to the militias were given two weeks to pull out. That night Jamie called me down to the kitchen and let me watch a news bulletin on CWN. I sat there open-mouthed and with tears flooding from my eyes as I watched Menachem Dov climb out of an official black limousine to stand free, wearing black shades, smiling and waving amid crowds of ecstatic fellow Nazarenes.

Seeing Menachem on the television was proof positive that my time here in England was but one long sleep in a much longer life. I felt wonderfully at peace now. I had a few vital freedoms. I could walk and talk and feel the sun on my face pretty much at will. I felt human. I could visit the toilet without having a guard watch over me. These were small things, but they were essential freedoms. This was a time of quiet contemplation. I could think without fear gnawing at the edges of my reason. I spent a lot of time sitting in my tatty armchair, picking at the frayed piping on the arms, thinking about my family and my friends. I imagined conversations with them, conjuring up open armed greetings and candle-lit dinners. I imagined that moment when Menachem, Aban and I might meet in a bar somewhere and feel the brilliant chill of cold

beer on our throats. I worried about the adjustment from captive to free man. Most of all I thought about the beer, though. I could almost taste that delicious, luxurious, and oh so decadently cold liquid dripping into my blood stream in noisy, vibrant Ashrafieh.

My time was coming. June was nearly spent. I wanted to go home. I imagined the excitement in Jnah. Surely the embassy here would be moving heaven and earth to get me home? They must know what the deal was. Those suited diplomats and functionaries must know by now that I wanted to go home to my family, that time was ticking away. Imagining those things made me impatient for the day of my release, but at the same time I found that old acceptance of things as they are. I would wait. I would enjoy the relative freedom of the farm. I would think and I would plan. Having a plan is such a simple thing, but it felt like a luxury. I felt as though I was emerging from a long, living labour and was about to be born again.

Jamie and I even found a little time and privacy to talk about the days down in the rabbit hole, to talk about Smiler and the days when Jamie comforted me in his own way. It was a bright and dusty English summer day, with just a hint of high wispy cloud in the sky. Around us, in the thickly-set hedgerows fringed with pink Campion, birds rustled and sang their trilling but sparse afternoon songs. Sitting at the edge of the farmyard, Jamie perched on a wooden post and rail fence with me squinting up at him from an overturned, rusting oil barrel, I asked him how he felt about that time and what he had seen since.

Jamie looked at me for a long moment before replying. "I know what you're driving at, Marwan, but it could never be real. I think I said at the time, they train us a little. You know, about what to expect. You were in solitary. You were lost and alone and pretty freaked. When I look at you now I see a totally different man.

"Truth is I felt sorry for you, that's all. It says in the Bible that anything else is wrong and I believe it, Marwan, I really do. You've got have faith in something, and I've heard arguments against it all, about how if He was a loving God there wouldn't be all this shit, and about how He must be a terrible God or no God at all…"

Jamie paused for a moment and stared over my ahead across the farmyard. I sat in silence, wondering about Gods and men and just letting the warmth of the sun fill my bones.

After a moment or two Jamie picked up on his theme again. "You fixate on something, you know, when you're abandoned like that. I don't think it's any different for us. We're not locked up like you were, but were imprisoned just the same. Only for me it's a different sort of love. I've thought about it since then, sometimes, when… another world, Marwan… maybe… another time and another place."

I sat there under that brilliant sun and wondered whether to say anything about my life these recent months, about Menachem and Aban and the things that you do to survive. I decided against it. What could it possibly mean to Jamie? I decided to change the subject.

"You never have said anything about what happened to you after I was moved," I said.

"No. You're right." Another pause. Birdsong and rustling and the lowing of cattle in the distance. A door slammed back at the farmhouse and one of the guards asked if we wanted tea. He had just brewed up. Jamie nodded, grateful for the distraction.

"Time to get back," he said, jumping down from the fence, shouldering his rifle, and waiting for me to stand and walk with him. As we walked Jamie talked quietly about his time at the front. "Not much to say, really. Pretty usual shit. After you left we packed up and joined some fighters just outside Heathrow. Our job was to keep the motorway open. Piece of cake. Quiet as anything until the coup. As soon as the dust settled and the French landed at Heathrow all hell let loose. They secured the perimeters, flew in plane after plane of men and equipment, and when they were ready, out they came. By the end of the month we were falling back, always falling back."

We paused in our stroll across the farmyard. Jamie turned to face me and put his hand on my shoulder. "You were best away from us, Marwan. Every time we stopped, every time we thought we could hold on, they hit us hard, getting round us, artillery, light tanks, bombing. We'd make a stand somewhere, dig in, get mortared to bits and then everyone starts firing blindly into the dust

and darkness. I'll tell you something. Most fighters never hit anything. They just fire off clips and run backwards. Over the heads. It takes something special to aim at another man and pull the trigger. It's unreal. You have to have faith when you know that the bullets you're sending off are going to rip holes in another human being. I don't have any feelings any more, Marwan, not a shred. Can't say how many I've killed or wounded. I just know I've done it. I know I've been sick with it, and then you get numb. It's them or you and you get the lust. Can't describe it any other way. You either fire over their heads and shit yourself and run, or you get a real taste for it. Professional, they say… I don't want to go back to it. Not again. But if I have to I'll do it… if I had to, Marwan, I'd put a bullet in your head. That's how I feel about everything, about back in the hole and now and tomorrow. Don't mistake me for anyone else."

With that Jamie turned away from me and held out his hand. "Shall we?" he asked. "Tea?"

Reality in war is a dog that bites harder than it barks. The weight of my days in captivity fell squarely across my shoulders as we trooped back to the farmhouse. It was simply a relief to get out of the sun and into the shadows, a relief to sit down in front of the television and let those banal images wash through me. I felt tired then, so very tired. I really wanted to go home now.

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Three o'clock in the morning. Late June. England. I awoke with a start in the darkness. I could hear shouting down in the farmyard and the rumble of diesel engines. Oh no, I thought, not again. Not now. I tried to grab hold of the hard edges of reality through the soft, enveloping fugue of receding sleep. The voices below sounded urgent and definite. Doors slammed. My survival depended on my being alert and primed. I could not rest in that half-dream state of waking, a peace that I had almost luxuriated in these last few days.

Footsteps on the stairs. Voices in the outer hallway. I sat up, rubbed at my eyes and scrabbled for my candle and matches. The match head flared, momentarily blinding me to the night. I heard the door swing open. Two, maybe three stamping pairs of boots. Electric light from the hall.

"On your feet, Marwan. Come on." That same sense of urgency. And the accent. American. I opened my eyes wide in one final attempt to clear the fuzziness in my head. Jamie moved towards me and offered me his hand.

"Up we get, Marwan. Got to get a move on. Come on."

I took Jamie's hand and rose as quickly as I could, feeling that little moment of black dizziness swallow me up. I saw a dense field of stars before my eyes, but then, as the blood in my veins began to quicken, as my heart lurched into gear, I shook off my sleepy head. I pulled on my trousers as quickly as I could and picked up my battered old trainers.

"What… what's the matter?" I asked as Jamie and the American lead me down the stairs and into the kitchen.

One of the other guards, a man who I did not recognise, a man in muddy, bloody fatigues, was already brewing-up. Jamie made me sit down at the table. He and the American captain sat opposite me. We drank hot, sweet, milky tea in silence for a minute or two, sipping noisily at the steaming brew, scalding our lips to make sure that we were all fully awake.

The American spoke clearly and deliberately, but his eyes looked ragged and worn. "Nothing ever works in this damned country. You think you've got a handle on things and then some

dumb-ass changes the rules. It's all gone to hell. No ships. No passage home. All gone to hell, Marwan, and we're burning up right now."

I really did not understand. I was on a sort of furlough, a relaxed country break before going home. I was going home. Shit, I thought, is he trying to tell me that I'm…

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I asked. I dare not mention home, as if saying the word would tempt fate once too often.

"Yeah, yeah. I should start at the beginning. Okay, you know I left the farm a few days ago. Cease-fire. Yanks going home. Everyone sitting at the conference table. Except that some idiot decided to nuke the table. We're not sure which group, probably Trinity, but it doesn't matter. They put a bomb under the table. Blew away generals and militia, the whole fandango.

You get the rest, I guess. All bets off. No planes flying out of the south-west airports. Our transport's blockaded in Plymouth. French and government armies shooting everything they see. Fucking SNAFU.

Bottom line, Marwan, is this. Our lines are smashed. Collapsing everywhere. We're in a hole here, a bulge. It's only a matter of time."

I looked at the American and then at Jamie. Thoughts raced through my head. They both looked so tired now, so thin and hollow. "But, surely that's okay for me," I said, trying to piece together the implications of this sudden volte-face. "I mean, one way or another, if everything collapses and the government come here, that's got to be good for me… hasn't it?"

Jamie sat in silence, cradling his mug of tea in both hands. He stared at the grain in the old pine tabletop.

"Possibly," continued the American captain. "Possibly… if they don't gun you down first, you know, heat of the moment, we all look alike, ask questions later. We can't put up much of a fight, can't force them to negotiate. There's me and Jamie, Cookie over there, and what, three other guys outside?"

Jamie continued to stare at the tabletop. "Two. Smiler's buggered-off. Can't guarantee the rest will stay too long either. Probably best to say the four of us. Just us."

"Yeah. Well, it's all academic. Front-line is a maybe five miles away tonight. We might hold for a day or two, but that's it. Mostly what we've got is a murdering government army surrounding murdering bands of militia, every one of them hell bent on getting out or getting even.

Thing is, there's no retreat. It was a hell of a job getting back here from Plymouth. Once we heard about the bomb, once Cookie and me saw the planes coming in over the harbour, we knew, didn't we Cookie?"

Cookie took a long drag on a cigarette and spoke in a hard, almost comic-book New York accent. "Sure. Total fuck-up."

The captain took a long drag on a cigarette. "Yeah. Total. One hell of a job getting back here. Roads clogged up with people. No one knows what the fuck is going on. Then the attack 'copters come in. Just a mess. Complete and total. And then we hear the French are putting a bounty on American heads. Pretty hairy at times. Cookie's a mean son-of-a-bitch, though.

Bottom line, Marwan. Cookie and I go back a way. US Marines, then civilian security advisors. Grenada, Philippines and now here. Thing is we don't aim to get wasted in this God-awful country. Thing is, Marwan, you're our ticket home."

The American captain drained his mug, banged it down on the table and stared at me. I understood clearly now. The game was up. It was every man for himself. Dog eat dog. I wanted to scream at them all, to shout and bawl at them. It was so unfair. But I knew instinctively that life was always going to be unfair. I could almost smell the sharp tang of my father's cheroots. I breathed in deeply and took strength from his presence. I fumbled for my cigarettes, and offered them round to the American, to Jamie and to my new friend, Cookie.

"I get it," I said as I dragged on my cigarette. The smoke burned the back of my throat. I coughed. "Sorry… I get it, I really do. Everyone out there is trying to kill me. Even the government. There's only you guys see any value in me being alive. To the rest I'm just collateral waiting to be damaged."

"That's about right, kid." The American replied. "You might get lucky, but between here and the diplomats there's miles of trigger-happy fuckwits just waiting for an excuse. Our guys will shoot you

for being a foreigner, for being a heretic. You'll be a symbol of what's caused all this, easy meat to take the edge off their conscience. Army boys'll just say you got caught in a cross-fire as they tried heroically to save you. If anyone ever finds your body, that is.

Anyway, that's all academic. I'm not prepared to go down with the ship. So here's the thing, Marwan, here's the deal."

There is always a deal. Smiler and Robbie made deals with my bones. Jamie made a deal with his consideration and his compassion. We all make deals. I was prepared now. I was a grown up. I suddenly realised that these men, my captors, my executioners, needed me. It was my time now. I leaned forward, fixing the American's stare with my own, intense, brown-eyed gaze.

"Sure. I know the deal. You get me safely through the lines. I go home. I put a word in for the three of you."

"Not quite, Marwan. It's a shooting war. Cookie and me, we don't need a word. There's a lot of serious shit in our heads, stuff the French want. We're not military any more, remember. Our paymasters are oil men. Power and politics. Money talks. We'll be fine. Jamie's the one who needs a good word. Not us. We just need you to get us through official channels once we break the lines. That's what you are, boy, our shield. A human fucking shield. Nice days are over, Marwan. Time to get out and you're our way… either that or you're dead."

The look in his eyes told me all I needed to know. No more Mister Nice-Guy. If it was a question of him or me it would be me that bought it. I was only of use to him so long as I could be his passport out of this mess. I thought of rats and sinking ships. I looked at Jamie then for reassurance, but I saw in his eyes the cold steel of a cornered beast, feral and determined. He said he would kill me if he had to. I had never quite believed him until now.

"Yeah, yeah… I understand," I hissed, grinding out my cigarette on the tabletop. "You think you'll be okay? Why does it make any difference what you know. There's a bounty. As for me, I always hoped but, you know, deep down we all know how thin it is, our survival. Fuck you. Fuck the lot of you."

If I had been able to run then I would have. I would have run anywhere, even with a bullet in my back. Everything was different. The holiday was over. It was sink or swim time for all of us.

The cold steel in Jamie's eyes faltered for a second and he looked at me with just a hint if sadness. He tried to put a gloss on things. "It's a question of seniority, Marwan. The Captain and Cookie, they're old hands. Worked for TexOil all over the world. They know a lot of people, a lot of stuff. Chances are the Brit government or the French can find a use for them. Not for me, though. I'm just a local boy. On the payroll, sure, but just a foot soldier. I need you to help me, Marwan, just like I helped you."

The American nodded. "He's right. Thing is, none of that matters, not in the next twenty-four hours. We've got to get going, got to have a plan. It's pretty basic stuff. We've got to get you out of here. We've all got to get out of here. We've been pretty decent to you, all things considered. So, it's up to you. It's like this, boy. We drive north a way. There's an American unit up there. Special forces. We join up with them if we can and get out. Failing that we use you to ease the path with the French. We're not going down for Kachigian. We're not going to face charges for war crimes. We either work together to get you and ourselves out of this shit, or…"

"Or what?" I shouted. "Or what? You'll shoot me?"

"Yes, Marwan. We'll shoot you." Jamie stood up from the table. "Either that or we'll just leave you here on your own and tell the local boys there's a fucking Arab down at the farm. You take your chances. We've done our best for you. Weird shit, I know, but we have." Jamie paused and sighed. "We've been through a lot together. One last time, Marwan, one last time?"

I rested my aching head in my hands. One last time. "Okay," I mumbled. "Okay, one last time." What else could I say?

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By first light we were ready. The American gave orders to the two guards who were not to form part of our little group to take one of the cars and to head west. We watched their tail lights disappear down the farm lane just as the first purples of dawn broke the night's hold on the world. The farmyard took on an eerie silence as we stood and watched the world unravel. Then Jamie snapped into gear.

"Okay, Marwan, get changed into new clothes. I've laid them out in your room. Just the clothes. Leave everything else. We've got to travel light."

The simple act of having something to do was a relief. Not that they left me alone to dress this morning. Cookie followed me up the stairs and watched as I dressed. I could feel the knots of tension twisting in my stomach. The basic act of climbing the stairs, throwing off my hostage uniform and donning jeans, boots, a clean shirt, and having a quick wash, should have convinced me that the world was as normal as it could ever be here in this heathen land, but Cookie's impatience showed me that there is no such things as normal. By the time that I got back down stairs, no more than ten minutes later, that old friend, that sudden shift in reality, had taken hold of my world by the scruff of the neck once more.

"Okay, Marwan. This is how it is," said the American, beckoning me over to a red Toyota Landcruiser. He had laid out a map on the bonnet. "We're going to head north. Taunton and if we're lucky we'll find our guys, otherwise the French. We can't risk the Brits. The French have a strategic head on their shoulders."

I looked at the map, trying to get my bearings. The farm was ringed in red pen. I traced the roads from Honiton to Taunton. It seemed such a short distance. Insignificant when viewed on a map, but full of monsters when viewed from the kaleidoscope patterns of my imagination.

"We're all in civvies now. You and Jamie take the front seats. Cookie and I'll ride shotgun in the back. Any roadblocks or check-points you let Jamie do the talking. We've got passes from the militia command, but I have no idea whether they'll do us any

good. Everyone's gone crazy out there. There's no real structure any more, no authority."

The American looked at me for a long moment and then added, "Any shit and we're right there, right behind you, and you know we'll do it."

He handed me a folded piece of paper. I pointed to the name printed on the front.

"Yeah, you're Jean Madec. A Free Breton. Engineer. It's the best we could do. Got to have an explanation for your skin colouring. The Free Bretons have supported the militias here in the south-west for a while now."

"Okay," I said, "but I don't speak any French."

"Neither do the Brits, not the foot soldiers. If you have to say something, speak English with an accent, your own. Hopefully no one's going to be in the mood to dig too deeply. Ideally we'll by-pass any check-points, anyway, try to stay out of trouble."

I nodded slowly, desperately trying to make sense of this crazy, screwed-up world. I can do this, I thought, I can do this for my mother. I can do this for my father, for my brothers. I can do this. These four words became an internalised mantra, a way of convincing myself that I really was going home. And if I got the chance, if I got any chance at all, I had already decided that I too would do it. I would run. I would kill them if I got the chance. Even Jamie.

"Once we get through the worst of it, once we get to our guys or get near the French lines, then we busk it. You can be Marwan, then. Just have to see how it goes."

The American folded up the map and stowed it in the passenger door.

"One more thing. You'll need this."

He must have seen the look of horror on my face as he handed me a heavy, black handgun. I recoiled from it. Mad thoughts flashed across my brain. I could just shoot them all and take my chances. It would serve them right. But despite my sudden conviction that I could be like them I found that I could not touch the thing. I thought of Beniamin behind the bus. How could they give me such a thing? How could they trust me? How could I ever use such a barbaric tool? Even then, amid all of these questions, I

knew full well that if it was a question of going home or staying here, I would try to use the thing.

"I know. Weird shit. But if you're going to look like the real thing the militia guys will expect to see you armed. We'll ditch the weapons before we get to the French. Just for protection. And… yeah… we trust you, Marwan. We trust you with an unloaded gun."

He laughed. The ever watchful, the ever taciturn Cookie laughed out loud too. "Yeah!"

Jamie came out of the farmhouse with a kit-bag and threw it into the rear of the vehicle. "Okay, we're loaded. Papers, anything useful I could find, it's all in there. We've got a full tank of red, so time to go, I guess."

"Time to go. You ready, Marwan?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I replied, feeling the knots in my stomach tighten almost beyond tolerance. At the same time I could feel the adrenalin pumping through my body. At last. I was finally going to do something instead of just sitting there, waiting for other people to decide my fate. I tucked the handgun into the waistband of my jeans just like they do in the films.

We started out around six-thirty. Four men in a mud splattered four-by-four, all of us alone with our thoughts. We tracked the main A road, the 39, using back lanes as much as possible, and saw nothing for the first few miles. It was as though Mother Earth had finally decided to turn off all human life. We guessed that most of the civilians had already moved out, refugees streaming in whichever direction lay the most safety. Civil wars make all sides the enemy if you have no connections.

Jamie got me to follow the roads on the map. We took turns and twists, making the nineteen miles between our start point and our destination stretch out into a warren of switch-backs and by-ways. A journey of less than an hour in times of peace spanned almost all of the morning. At every junction we waited and watched. We checked the map and wherever possible took the remotest lanes. By degrees we moved close by or through the hamlets of Coombe Raleigh, Wick, Beacon and eventually emerged on the road to Luppitt.

It was almost a joy to sit in the front seat of the Landcruiser, watching the countryside drift by on a summer morning. It was so different to the confused and claustrophobic journeys arranged for hostages in months gone by, buried in the bowels of vans and trucks, blindfolded and taped to the point of asphyxiation. To see sheep and cattle moving with their own, free rhythms in the fields was a delight. The relative calm of the place surprised me. In the middle of a conflict, the landscape was so green, so beautifully peaceful.

On the road into Luppitt we encountered our first human beings. A flat-bed truck came towards us along the lane, moving slowly and deliberately in the middle of the road. Mounted on the back we could see a heavy machine gun, but the occupants of the cab, two of them, seemed to have no gun crew on board. As we drew closer to the oncoming vehicle, Jamie slowed down, pulled over to the side of the lane and wound down his window.

"Everyone ready?" he asked quietly. I could sense movement in the back of the Landcruiser. Our American friends made themselves discreetly ready with their weapons, windows down, safety-catches off.

The truck slowed down and stopped beside us. The two men in the cab checked us over and then the driver wound down his door window.

"Where you off to lads? Nothing but trouble up there."

Jamie slowly reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his papers. "We're looking for a couple of Yanks," he said calmly. "Followed their trail up from Exeter. Got to get them out before the Frogs catch 'em."

The driver reached over and checked the papers. "Militia, eh?" He paused for a moment, pretending to examine the document. "So, why the mufti? Why not in uniform?"

"Just trying to blend in. You know how it is. We want to get our men and get out. Don't want to antagonise the locals."

"Is that right? Only you can't be too careful these days. Deserters everywhere."

The truck's passenger door opened, and the second man in the truck started to climb out into the road. Something in the way that he moved seemed wrong, seemed stiff, as though he were trying to

cloak the movement of something heavy, as though he was trying just that little bit too hard to be casual. Jamie smiled at the driver. I watched as he slowly raised his left hand, the one hidden by the car door. Without a word being said both he and our two American passengers moved with deadly efficiency. There were three loud cracks, explosions that bounced around the cabin of our vehicle, deafening me.

In those first few seconds, with the sound of shots ringing in my ears, I had enough sense to duck down and throw open the passenger door. Just in time. Although my travelling companions had been first to fire they had missed their full complement of targets. The air filled with the unmistakeable stench of metallic death. Hot oil and cordite. The rat-a-tat-tat of an automatic weapon. The Landcruiser rocked from side to side as metal screamed and bit into seat frames and viscera.

I hurled myself to the ground, head first, scraping my chin and my palms on the dirt at the side of the road. I screwed my eyes shut immediately the moment that I sensed these cold-blooded, killing movements, and waited for the inevitable shattering of my own bone and blood vessels. In the smoke-filled space above me, billowing out from Landcruiser's interior, I heard two more loud cracks, and then the world turned silent. I waited for the inevitable crunch of boot rubber. It was only a matter of time before one or other of these militia-men checked out the quivering body of the hostage sprawled out in the dry and dusty grass at the side of the road.

I waited. I waited for a life time, letting the ringing in my ears abate, and then, just as the first twittering of territorial robins broke out again in the hedgerows, I heard a groan from the inside of the car. Impossible, I thought. They cannot all be hit. It cannot be as simple as this. Tempting the fates I twisted round, still hugging the ground beside the Landcruiser, and looked for signs of boots and legs. In the shadows between the two vehicles I could make what looked like the driver of the flat-bed hanging limp in his seat belt. Beyond him, by the far front wheel I could see another body. We had got them. So, I asked myself, why isn't anyone moving in our vehicle?

The obvious conclusion dawned on me. It was as simple as this. I was a free man. I could make my escape. Except that it is never as simple as that. Although I wanted nothing more than to crawl away from this scene of hot-metal death, like a snake, never looking back, never blinking, I had to see. I had to look at the bodies. I had to be sure. Slowly I gathered my wits together, rose up onto my haunches and steeled myself.

I wish I could say I was scared or even unwilling to look, but I was not. As I rose and turned to face the open passenger door of the Landcruiser, my heart began to beat even faster. I wanted to see mangled bodies. It was the same feeling, only magnified, that I had felt earlier in the day when telling myself that I would do it if I had to. Now someone else had done it. Some unknown soul had freed me from my bonds.

I looked across at where Jamie sat in the front driver's seat. He was rigidly upright, pressed back into the seat, with his legs pushed straight out in front of him, as if in spasm. His handgun lay on the passenger seat, still smoking. He looked pale but whole, as if perhaps he had seen a ghost, but then, as I looked more closely I saw a ragged hole in his shirt down by his belly. Blood seeped through the charred edges of the material, and the seat beyond him was ploughed through where the bullet had passed through Jamie's abdomen and into the upholstery where I had been sitting just a moment before.

I could feel my gorge rising as the stench of hot metal and wire and blood and singed flesh assaulted me. I stood up fully, trying to swallow great gulps of air in a vain attempt to beat back the nausea. As I stood there I looked in through a shattered back window. The American lay sideways across Cookie's lap, with half of his head missing, displaying ripped up grey matter amid the blood. He was clearly dead. Cookie, meanwhile, emitted those low groans that had woken me from my terrified stupor in the dirt. Behind the closed door I could see no wounds, but judging by the spray of bullet holes in the far side of the car I guessed that he had been hit multiple times.

That was too much. I bent double and emptied my guts on the side of the car. Tears began to flow. The world ticked into coolness as the birds resumed their singing and the flies started to buzz

around the gaping wounds of my friends and enemies alike. I sat down and buried my head in my lap, cradling myself in my arms, lost and dazed, until after some minutes had passed I felt a hand on my shoulder. I felt sunlight, and caught a vague sense of cheroot smoke on the wind. I looked up slowly from my trance there in the dirt, but I saw no one. The hand on my shoulder had lifted, and yet I could still feel its warmth. I do not believe in ghosts, but perhaps the rational part of my mind, that part that had sat immobile and impotent for so long, was now using an imprint of my father in order to waken me. I knew what had to be done.

I rose again, slowly but surely, wiping my face clean with the back of hand. I looked again at Jamie and at Cookie. Picking up the gun from the front passenger seat I walked round the car and checked out the two militia-men in the flat-bed truck. Both were dead. Head shots. Instant. I felt absolutely cold, almost frozen. I flicked back through memories and recalled Jamie's description about life at the front. I guessed that this must be the feeling that he described. I left the dead militia-men where they were and walked back to the offside rear of the Landcruiser. Working on auto-pilot, in a numb state, efficient and cold-blooded, I pulled open the rear passenger door and dragged the two Americans out of the car.

Cookie lay there and groaned once more. I could see two entry points in the side of his chest. His comrade had borne the full brunt of the automatic weapons fire and was stone cold dead from the moment the other guys had opened up. Without a moment of remorse, feeling nothing now but a feeling that the job had to be done, I chambered a round in Jamie's gun, pointed it at Cookie's head and squeezed the trigger. There would be no going home for the Yanks. I found it amusing to think that. So many people had told me over the last year that it was my entire fault. I did not have to come here. Same goes for you two, I thought.

When I turned my attention back to the front of the car I found Jamie still sitting bolt upright, but now he was clasping a hand over his wound, his head laying against the headrest, watching me.

"You'll have… to… to… drive," he whispered.

With Jamie bandaged up in one of the clean shirts taken from a rucksack in the back of the Landcruiser, we managed to manoeuvre

him very gingerly onto the back seat, where he lay down and drifted in and out of consciousness. I slammed the door, climbed into the blood spattered front seat and turned the ignition key. She started first time and I pulled the auto box into Drive and hit the floor, feeling the lurch of automatic overdrive. In my head, in the dumb space where Marwan Tayeh used to exist, I could still hear the sharp, angular tones of our dead American Captain yelling, "Go… go!"

We raced through the narrow one-horse lane that was Luppitt, and headed out for the clean clear countryside once more. Everyone was silent. The engine growled reassuringly as we hit 50 miles per hour, but as we put metres between us and the killing zone, I started to feel tired. The adrenaline rush was failing. Every so often, as he drifted in and out of this world, Jamie moaned a little. It was, I realised, the last chance saloon. Did I want him dead too? Was it already too late? Where in the name of Hell was I going? I decided to ease up and get back on plan.

We slowed down and I dug out the map that Jamie had been using to navigate. It too was stained now, but I steadied my hands, took some deep breaths and looked for a quiet road to the north It was nearly nine o'clock and the day was warming. Brilliantly enamelled green-backed flies buzzed in the hedgerows.

I nodded, trying to focus on the blurring lines on the map. It occurred to me then that I had never asked the American man his name. As I stared at the lines and names and the contours on the map all of the symbols seemed to converge and spin around my finger. I started to hear voices in my head and for a moment I really did think that the Captain was with us again. Staring dumbly at the map I found myself in conversation with him inside my own head.

"I've never actually seen anyone get shot," my mental avatar said. "We heard the bullet that took Beniamin, but none of us ever saw anything. I feel sick. Right down to my boots."

"Sure. Gets pretty much everyone that way. Thing is, it's us or them. We're too close to home to screw it up, Marwan. Too close to home. It's just what you've got to do."

"I know that. Doesn't make it any easier." I replied. I wanted to ask whether having half your head missing hurt much, but the conversation continued as if everything was just dandy. "And you

know what? I'm sat in this car, trying to get home, talking about killing, and I don't even know your name. You're just the American. That doesn't seem right, either."

The American ghost in my head smiled thinly. "I don't have a name. Not here. You don't want to know stuff like that."

"I know Jamie's name. I know Cookie's. Why are you different?" I argued.

The American just kept on smiling. "Just am, Marwan. Ain't that right, boys?" The phantom shapes of mangled Jamie and Cookie agreed. The American sat back in the rear seat. "And you're still on your way home, Marwan. That's the important thing, the thing to keep hold of. Those guys would've done us for deserters right there if we'd given them the chance."

Jamie groaned loudly as we crested a hump in the road, drawing me back to the mundane task of finding a way home. The phantoms in my head faded away. I checked and double-checked, looking for the most obscure back-lanes, plotting a course via Smeatharpe, and Stapely, then up around Blagdon Hill to Pitminster.

With every mile that we covered heading north, the landscape grew ever more quiet and barren. Even the birds seemed reluctant to sing as we crawled watchfully towards our destination. We saw no more evidence of fighters on the back lanes. It seemed as though the forces of chaos had drifted away like smoke on the breeze. Once or twice, as we made our way towards the government lines, I thought I saw a curtain twitch in one or two houses that sat alongside the road, but no one made themselves available as targets. The world hunkered down and waited for another violent storm to pass.

It took us another hour to reach the outskirts of Blagdon Hill, moving up from the south via Churchstanton, until we reached a farm set just back from a lane that turned through a couple of switch-backs before running up to the village. I pulled the Landcruiser into a yard at the front of the farm.

To the unconscious Jamie I turned and said softly, "We'll park up at the farm. We've got to be close now. I'll have to go on foot now." I reached backwards and brushed the hair out of Jamie's eyes. "I'll be back, though. I'm not leaving you here, not like this."

I climbed out of the vehicle and stretched. The tensions of the last few hours and our slow, pumped crawl towards safety was giving me cramps in my calves. I took the handgun out of my trouser waist band and threw it into the back of the truck. It was a relief to lose the weight pressing down in the small of my back. I never wanted to see or hear or to smell another piece of heavy-metal death ever again.

I tried to piece together the next steps. The American had pencilled a line on the map where he thought the front-line should be. French troops, hopefully. What would I need? Then I remembered that Jamie had packed a bag full of papers and useful collateral back at the farm. I rummaged around in the boot of the Landcruiser and hefted the kit bag onto my shoulder. I checked one more time on Jamie. He was losing a lot of blood. I had to hurry.

I set off towards Blagdon Hill, walking along the edge of the lane. The lane switched to the right through about a hundred metres of trees. With the day heading towards high noon, combined with the tension and the nerves and the fatigue that I now felt creeping through my bones, I soon started to sweat. Flies buzzed my around my head, attracted by my distress, but despite the discomfort and the unease that dogged each step, I felt glad to be alive. Bees waddled through the air heavy with summer pollen. I caught the odd melodious note of a hedgerow bird. I felt strangely safe here in this foreign land, even though I was the thin and meagre filling sandwiched between these diverse men of war. I had a purpose again: to be free and to save Jamie.

Once I breached the cover of the trees, I could see that the lane continued for a few hundred metres across open countryside before branching left and up towards the village of Blagdon Hill. Set apart from the centre of the village, I could see a white painted house, and there, flying a French Tricolour, I saw an armoured personnel carrier parked up behind a roll of barbed wire. The front-line. A temporary halt in the inevitable march of the government forces.

I doubled back to the cover of the trees and crouched down at the side of the lane and lit a cigarette. “Last smoke for a while boy,” I said to myself, and instantly went into another head-spin. There was no one else to talk to. I was alone again, alone in a cell

the size of England. I was beyond madness, beyond caring about such things. I continued the conversation.

"Won't they see the smoke?" I asked.

"Maybe. If they're watching. But it's a clear day and we're still a way off…"

I sat in quiet contemplation for a moment or two. I wanted to jump up and shout, I wanted to run to freedom, but Jamie and I had a deal. I decided to wait this one moment longer while I smoked a last cigarette like a condemned man.

"Okay. This is it. Get the white tablecloth out of the bag. Tie it to a stick, anything you can find. Then we walk with your hands on your head. Lap of the Gods time." I muttered to the Somerset fauna and no one in particular.

I stood up and stubbed out my cigarette. For the last time I saw the American in my head. He walked up to me and shook me by the hand. He said, "You're a good guy, Marwan. Shit happens, but you're a good guy. In a different world…"

With that I set off with my flag of surrender waving above the hedgerows, my heart full of hope and my head full of dread.

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The peace of a gentle summer day shattered. Two shots. I stopped mid-step. Frozen. Still partly in a daze I looked around instinctively to see who would fall. Another shot, but there were no wounds revealed among us, no gaping holes, no rivers of red. The French soldiers at the check-point were shooting above my head.

From behind the white house four men approached, crouching as they ran towards me, covered from behind the barbed wire by many others, too many to count from where I stood. As the French soldiers advanced they shouted at me in both languages.

"Descendez à l'étage. Get down on the floor. Get Down. Vite. Down…"

I sank down to my knees and then lay prostrate on the warm tarmacadam, with my hands on the back of my head.

"Déplacent pas… Don't move."

I lay there for long, tense minutes while the soldiers advanced slowly, expecting some sort of ambush or human bomb. The advance party remained at some distance from me, training their automatic rifles at my head and upper body. From behind them I watched a second squad advance and break up, taking positions in the fields adjacent to the lane. It felt like I was taking part in a strange, emasculated, almost choreographed form of stand-off ballet.

A third squad moved forward, led by an officer. They too stopped a little way away from me. The officer used field glasses to check out my body, trying to spot any obvious booby-trap signatures.

"Parlez-vous Francais?" he yelled at me, barely able to keep the excitement and the terror out of his voice. I remained mute.

"Alors. English then. Do not move a muscle. My men will shoot to kill."

I watched him from floor level as he checked in on his jacket-mounted radio with the flanking squads. He seemed satisfied that they had the situation in hand, at least for the moment. Again he leant-in towards his lapel. I guessed that he was reporting back to the village.

"Who are you?" he asked once he had finished with his radio transmission.

I raised my head slightly to answer the French Officer.

"Déplacent pas… I said, don't move."

I froze and then lowered my head slowly to the floor before calling back. "Lebanese. I am one of the hostages for you. Marwan Tayeh. I'm safe and well. But I have an injured friend, back there at the farmhouse. He helped me escape. Please, he's been shot. Please…"

The officer made a circling motion with his hand and the advance party moved in closer to me. "Anything goes wrong. If you move the wrong way… anything… we will shoot," he shouted.

I waited. I had become good at waiting for men with guns. It was almost second nature now. With extreme care the French soldiers moved towards me, two of them permanently on station with their guns aimed at my prone body, while the other two frisked me for weapons. Satisfied that I had nothing on me and that I was not booby-trapped or a decoy, they spoke in French with their officer. Guns slung, the advance squad each took me by the hand and hauled me upright. Hands gripped me under the armpits and I felt again the sting of hard, clawed fingers biting into my thin, under-nourished body.

"Alors. You come with us."

They marched me back to the white house at gun-point, the officer meanwhile calling his flanking squads back to their main post at the house. Once in full sight of their position I saw that the armoured carrier was one of two, with some thirty men in position near and around the house. A military Jeep was already on its way from the village, perhaps four hundred metres away. They held me at gun-point against the side wall, forbidding me to speak, but letting me smoke.

Soon after the local commander arrived and conferred with the check-point officer. The commander looked me up and down and then turned to his driver, who handed him a brown clipboard. He studied a sheet of paper for a few moments. Then he turned towards me and looked me over again.

"That was a risky thing to do, Monsieur, walking into my guns. We do not know if you carry bombs. My men would have been well within their rights to fire first. Mais, we are here now. It is as it is."

He consulted the clipboard. "You claim to be Marwan Tayeh, yes?"

I felt a strange conflict rising within me, with one part of my soul desperate to step forward and embrace my saviour, but an equal and opposite force urged me to hide, to melt into the wall. To say anything would irrevocably alter the circumstances of my life and I felt as though I were attached to my hostage state by an umbilical chord. I thought about Jamie lying close to death on the back seat of a shot-up Landcruiser. It was no place for one of the good guys to die. He was counting on me, just like I had once counted on him. I owed him a debt, an act of faith.

Jamie Mitchell, this strange boy, a boy who I could never have imagined in a thousand years of trying, who I would never have chosen freely as a friend, was in my hands now. I trembled with fear and anticipation. I took a half step forward, head bowed.

"I… I am Marwan Tayeh," I said nervously.

The commander came closer and raised my head. He held the clipboard up next to my cheek and twisted my head to right and left. He sucked air in through his teeth.

"Possibly… You look a little like him."

He showed me a picture, a picture from home, with me grinning from ear to ear, a picture taken with my step-brothers the day before I left for London. I looked full and fat and glowing with young health. My hair was short and dark and my clothes clean and well fitted. It was the last picture taken by my father, the last known image of Marwan the boy, the keepsake held fast against my mother's breast this last long year.

"Thinner, bien sûr, but the eyes… yes I think it might be true." He turned to his men and barked, "Alors, take him to The Lamb. Clean him up."

"Wait," I shouted. I grabbed the French officer's arm. "Please wait. I left a friend back at the farm," I blurted out.

The French commander brushed my hand off his jacket sleeve and stepped back. He looked at me, and seeing in my eyes the

desperation and the fever of truth he nodded. “Alors. Patrouille. Bas a la ferme. Voyons.”

As anonymous hands once again led me to another unknown destination I felt that passive wave of helplessness wash through me. Was I really so conditioned by my captivity that I would blindly follow any hand stronger than mine? I determined that now, in this hour of liberation, I could not simply follow orders any more I stood my ground, shucking-off the hand that would take me to freedom.

“But what about my friend?” I asked, trying to control my voice, to keep it calm and strong. “I won’t leave him. He is my friend.” I pleaded. “He has taken great risks to help me.”

The commander looked suddenly tired and irritated. “Always here someone argues. Yes, yes, we will look after him if he is still alive, which I doubt. Neither of you are going anywhere just yet, not until we have a little chat. The intelligence boys are on their way. You get a chance to speak, so long as you have something worth saying. Right now your presence here means my men are not watching the roads, we are exposed down here, so… move.”

Expediency backed by the heavy treads of boots and the sliding bolts of automatic weapons dictated that there would be no further argument. As ever, I was manhandled into the back of the Jeep The commander issued a couple of new orders to the check-point squad, then climbed into the front of the vehicle and we sped back up the lane to the village, leaving my companion, Jamie Mitchell, stranded, wounded in the back of a destroyed car in the middle of the Somerset countryside.

Over the growl of the engine the commander twisted round in his seat to face me in the rear. “So, Monsieur Tayeh, welcome back. You will be glad you chose the French to surrender to. Much better for your friend, I think.” He smiled, a hard, diamond smile. “A lot has changed here. Maybe we finally get this messy little island sorted out, non?”

For the first time in a year I felt a real, full-body desire to sleep. In captivity your sleep is always shallow. You learn to keep some small part of you awake at all times, sensitive to the creak of a floorboard or the groan of a door hinge. Your life might depend upon that split second between dozing and waking. Here in the

back of the Jeep, running up a short hill towards The Lamb and Flag, the local command centre, I realised that I was truly and utterly and bone-deep exhausted. I wanted to sleep for a month, for a year. I wanted to shut this brave new world away for another day. I longed for a quiet space, and despite the night terrors of my previous solitary captivity, I suddenly very much wanted to be alone.

Walking in to The Lamb was like walking into a fantasy world. Despite the trappings of military command, the armed soldiers, the bustle and the sundry equipment of modern warfare, I was allowed to sit quietly on a softly upholstered settle to the right of the main bar. The low light offered by 17th century windows created a sense of calm, and the men around me bristled with efficiency and purpose. The commander offered me a Gauloise cigarette and a coffee. I drank my first free drink slowly, watching the world shift again. Sometimes, I thought, there is just too much reality.

"Monsieur. Please follow me."

I looked up from my floorboard reverie into the eyes of a young private. He stood in shirtsleeves, one arm outstretched. This time there would be no hands grabbing at my skin and bone. This time I received a polite invitation. We went upstairs and the soldier showed me to a bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. A set of military fatigues and a clean green camouflage shirt lay on the bed.

"Please, Monsieur, shower and change. Be ready in thirty minutes."

He left me alone. That utterly compelling urge to lie down and to sleep hit me again, but sadly I turned away from the bed, undressed in the bathroom and let cascades of hot, steaming water sluice over my body. I still had a job to do. My friend needed me. I realised then as I stood under the shower just how much I had come to need him too. It hit me. I was going home. I would see mother. I would fall into her arms, her lost child, and the tears flowed down my cheeks, to mingle with the dirt and the hot jets of soapy water on the floor of the shower cubicle. I stood there a full fifteen minutes with my hands splayed out against the tiles, letting water wash away the salt tracks of the tears that streamed down my face.

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The French commander and I sat at the back of the bar at a wooden table. I had eaten. I drank another coffee, all the while imagining the taste of beer. There was something in the atmosphere in the place, centuries of steeping aroma. Sadly the luxury of a cold beer would have to wait.

"So, again. You will give me details of who you are. So we can check."

I told and re-told my story. Date of birth. Mother's name. Father's name. Professions. University. Brothers and wives and children. ArabAid. Dates and times. Places and faces.

"Enough. These will be checked. I have a colleague here. Intelligence. He is busy at the moment but he will sort this out for you."

Busy at the moment. My blood ran cold. "Busy?" I asked. "You mean with my friend?"

"Oui. You are a hostage, an unfortunate victim. But you are safe now. You can relax. He is a different thing. Tell me about him, Monsieur. Your friend…"

I wanted a beer. Of all things, right then and there I wanted a beer. "Sure, sure I'll tell you," I said, "but first, in return, I'd love a beer."

The commander raised an eyebrow. "This English ale? That is what you want?"

I smiled weakly and nodded.

"Béotien! Mais… why not?"

A pint of flat brown ale duly arrived and I took a long, deep drink. It tasted foreign and muddy and absolutely wonderful.

"My friend has done a lot for me," I said, wiping droplets of beer from my chin. "Back there at the farm, before that even, he took care of me. He helped me, all of us. His name is Jamie, the young English boy. He hated the violence. He was kind to me in the hole, he showed… compassion… understanding of what it was like to be so alone. At the end, when the war was lost, sure, he saw me as an opportunity, I suppose, but it was a fair trade. He never harmed any of us. He was there when it mattered.

There were some others with us. Americans. Got shot up by militia on the way here. Dead. I don't… didn't… even know their names, not really. They just seemed to be… fair. I don't know. Something about them was odd, though. They're not… I'm sorry… it's all a bit… you know… they weren't soldiers, or so they said. Something to do with Tex…"

"Oui, TexOil. Mercenaries. Corporate soldiers, call them what you will. There is paperwork in the bag you brought with you. Interesting for my friend in intelligence. It seems your dead Americans, they try to make situations where TexOil benefits. It's always about oil, about power, about money. Sometimes about God. Why do you think we are here? Do you think we do this fighting because our hearts are good and we feel sorry for the English?"

I looked at him like a child. My once clear sense of outrage, fostered in the political chatter of university, was dull and slow now. I was so tired, too tired to argue any more I could still hear the crack of thunder ringing in my head when I put Cookie out of his misery.

"It is true. We don't care for the English so much. But we are fighters. We stand on the borders of the Christian world. Now the English have oil in the North Sea, lots of oil. The Americans want it. You and your people want a barrel or two. We want it. We are closest. We have the reason. It is all the same, the world over. You will go home. You have an education, your family has money. You will do fine, away from the front-line To stand firm on our front-line we need power and money. English oil is one way."

The old arguments began to filter back into my conscious thinking. "But surely that's the old way," I responded. "I mean, this is a new world. A global world. We work with the world now. We don't fight, not like we used to. Look at how China and India and Japan grow. They're not Muslim, well mostly, but we get along. Look at the Council of Nations in Riyadh. They're forces for good. Surely we should all be working together, sharing the wealth. We can help here."

"But you do not. You send a little aid, you teach a little Arabic. Your companies build rigs and refineries and the money pours out of Europe. Look at these people. They have nothing. The cars are

foreign. Most of the population live on the land. They are agricultural poor. Away from the cities there are no hospitals. Schools, if they exist, have no resources. They are dispossessed in their own lands by their own people. And then they see you come over here with your aid and your money and your good intentions. They do not trust anyone's good intentions, Monsieur. They have been let down too often.

"And then the Americans come. Our cousins, yes, and they send preachers and money. They build schools and hospitals. They sink wells and dam rivers and do all the things the government does not. They ask for a little something in return. Except that little something turns into big things and when the government turns its back on them, they give these people guns. No wonder they fight. They have no choice.

"So, we want oil. In return we will give them order, like in France. For oil we will build schools. We are Europeans, like them. Better we stand together. You know as well as I, if it comes to it you will fight us again, just like The Great War. We must be ready."

I wanted to get the conversation back on track. The tenor of the French commander's argument was dispiriting and worrying. I could not work out how this man's world-view would play out in terms of my friend's future.

"So what does that mean for Jamie?" I asked

"Not my problem. My colleagues will sort that out. So be it. I have… enjoyed our talk, but I have work to do. I have sent some books and some newspapers up to your room. There is also a working television. Please stay there until the morning. If you want coffee or tea there is a kettle. Au-revoir, Monsieur."

The commander pushed back his chair, stood, straightened his jacket and turned about crisply. Alone again, I thought. Alone again in the middle of the French Foreign Legion. How fucking bizarre…

Full and beery, tasting alcohol for the first time in so long, I trudged back up to my room in the Lamb and Flag, closed the curtains and finally lay down on the bed.

But I did not sleep. Every cell in my body ached for rest but no matter the device, no matter the state of the resurrected hostage games, I could not close down the day. My thoughts rattled around in my head. Vivid images of Menachem and Aban and Beniamin morphed into leering images of Smiler and Robbie. I saw dark places, beyond shadow, where my father lay. My eyelids became a screen on which played the history of Marwan Tayeh and all those souls that I had tethered to me over the years. I could not help wondering what was happening to Jamie. I drifted close to sleep a couple of times while I imagined my homecoming, thoughts of my mother giving me solace, but each time I threatened to sleep a new image burst through the haze and I jerked awake. I gave up the ghost of sleep around one o'clock in the morning and against orders I wandered down to the sleeping bar, except that it was alive and bustling. The machines never sleep. War is constant.

I asked if I could sit quietly at the back of the bar and the duty officer shrugged. Someone, an ordinary soldier, brought me a coffee and a fresh packet of Gauloise. I smoked in the shadows, watching as these strange, infidel warriors packed up equipment and prepared for an early start southwards, deep into the heart of the south-west dissident factions.

About an hour after coming down, while drinking my second strong black coffee, a man in civilian clothes came over and sat at the table opposite me. He extended his hand and we shook.

"Good evening, Marwan. I am Chef d'Escadrons Perrault. Maurice. Military Intelligence. I was going to wait until the morning, but seeing as you are awake, perhaps we can chat now?"

"Yes, of course," I replied, glad of the contact. Anything was better than the silent and solitary musings of an insomniac ex-con.

"Bon. So, first, and just to put your mind at ease, we have sent the details you supplied to your embassy in London. On paper, you are indeed who you say you are. We will hand you over to one of your Attachés in the morning. They are sending him down to Taunton, where we will meet him. I believe that one of your brothers is flying out to complete formal identification.

"Your adventure is over, Monsieur. Almost. I was planning to de-brief you tomorrow before we meet your man from the

embassy, but we can just as well do it now. Do you have any questions?"

"You want me to tell you everything now? Here?"

"Oui. The diplomatic niceties are such that once we hand you over we cannot speak with you again, and it would not do for the liberating French army to deny you your freedom for even a day after such a captivity."

We spent the next two hours going over my story, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and, towards the end, sharing what was left of a bottle of brandy. The de-brief came to a necessary and timely end after my second glass. Denied alcohol for a year, and as generally unfit and malnourished as I was, the drink went straight to my head and I started to lose the threads of thought. Maurice Perrault, my gentleman interrogator, seemed satisfied with the basic details, majoring on the later stages of my captivity, in particular my time on the farm. He wanted to know every detail about the American Captain. Given the alcohol in my veins and the unending but distant fatigue in my soul, I found the session almost therapeutic, at least until the world began to swim in front of my eyes.

In those last moments I asked a question of my own in a slightly slurred voice. "Can I see my friend? Can I say goodbye?"

Maurice tapped the table with his fingers for a second or two before replying. "Non. I'm sorry, but it is not possible. He has gone."

"What do you… what do you mean? Gone?" I said, the hurt evident in my brandy-lubricated voice. "He wouldn't… he wouldn't just go. Not without saying something…"

"He is wounded. It is war. We have no choice. Monsieur. This is a field army on campaign. Even our own soldiers first go to an English hospital. Your friend, this Mitchell, he is very bad. We took him by air-ambulance up to Bristol. His only chance. But he did wake a little and he said to tell you he is happy you are safe. However such changes come about, he has been an honourable man. But war is war. The Americans are gone. Dead. It is simple. The young man, Jamie Mitchell, he is with the English. It is the rules."

I felt the heat of the brandy sting my eyes. It was an outrage. How could they do this? "What do you mean, with the English? You mean you've handed him over to the government? Bastard… They'll…"

Maurice leaned forward across the table and took one of my agitating hands in his. "Calm down. It is alright. He will spend a little time in a prisoner camp, but he too has value. He knows much about the hostages and he has behaved well. We have an agreement with the government. Prisoners will not be mistreated. This is not a world of Gulags, not like the old days. We don't want to create martyrs. But this is war and we must obey the rules."

"When… when did he go?" I asked, still not believing what I was hearing. Not even a chance to say goodbye. It felt worse than when Aban and Menachem left. That was abrupt. This was inhuman.

"This afternoon, while you were upstairs. As soon as our patrol found him… in that state, we did what we could, had a little chat, corroborated a few things and then he was in the air. As I say, his only chance. This unit is moving out. We must deal with everyone quickly and get them away from the fighting."

I slumped back in my chair, totally deflated. I could feel the grief welling-up. But then, I thought, what should I expect? Had I really thought that we would all meet up for a beer in London one night and joke about the good old days? The reality of my situation was quite different to anything that I had imagined in those quiet days at the farm.

"I just want to go home," I said softly. "Please, just let me go home now. I'm so tired…"

Maurice poured out one last stiff brandy and made me drink it down. Then he helped me upstairs and made sure that I lay on the bed. Even then, in the misty clutches of cheap brandy I drifted for a while, watching images of Jamie and Menachem and my father swim in and out of focus. I loved them all. I was going home. I felt the Mediterranean breeze on my cheek and heard the excited laughter at dusk on Monot Street. As the lights burned in the cafés of my mind finally I felt the welcome embrace of dull, dark emptiness come down and smother me.

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The details of the next few days are simply a repetition of my time at The Lamb. I moved through the hours on a wave of incomprehension, as though I were floating alongside my body, watching its feeble attempts to adjust to this abnormal state of affairs called freedom. I stayed at the Lebanese embassy in London for nearly a week, ostensibly to gather my strength so as to make my re-emergence into the world that little bit easier.

I went through a series of debriefings, military and civil. The embassy staff provided everything that I might need, arranging for a barber to visit and make some sense of my jaggedly crew-cut locks. I shaved every day. They bought me new clothes, a whole wardrobe full of clean, crisp shirts and slacks, all fitted and sized. It made little difference to my appearance. The months of basic malnourishment meant that clothes hung off me as if I were made of bean poles. What made it all so strange and wonderful was the simple fact that I could choose. I had control of my life to a degree, and in those simple choices, whether to shave or not, what colour shirt to put on, I found myself waging a constant battle. My natural inclination now was to wear the same clothes every day for a week. The choice of colours and styles being a staggering reminder of my humanity, but also somewhat troubling.

I first became aware of the difference in my physicality when Da'ud, my step-brother walked into my suite two days after my delivery. The look of horror on his face when he first saw his kid brother really did take my breath away. He cried. I tried to summon the emotion required, but even with Da'ud, I watched my body perform while the real Marwan floated off to one side of the touching reunion, feeling numb and drained. It was not that I did not love Da'ud. I love him dearly and always have done, but my days of tears and bewildered fumbling were behind me. This dishevelled wreck has put a bullet in a man's head. It was war. Now, here in the safety of the embassy, I had no words left for peace, at least, not words that I could yet speak out loud.

During that first day with Da'ud I spoke with my mother. She sounded old and frail, although Da'ud persuaded me that it was the emotion of the moment. She, they, had been through so much this

last year with the death of my father and my inhumane absence. Even in that conversation, I felt disembodied, as though the telephone line was a connection to a dream of what ought to be. Later that night Da'ud finally found the words to describe the doppelganger that he saw in place of his younger sibling.

"It makes me angry," he said. "Angry and ashamed. We couldn't do anything. Nothing but keep you in our hearts. Yasamin badgered the press. She sent photographs and letters, but for so long all we ever heard was silence. They were dealing with it. That's what the government said.

"And now look at you. We love you, you silly boy, we love you so much, but it's hard to take. Being impotent like that and then this. Have you looked in the mirror? My God, what did they do to you? You're so thin. When I saw you I thought you would fall over in the breeze. And your hair. You've got more grey in your temples than me, and I'm so much older."

There's nothing much you can do or say to such comments. We talked about this and that, inevitably about my father and the old world, and Da'ud was patient, letting the conversation drift along, never probing or asking direct questions. He was happy to let me judge the pace of revelation. We talked little of my hostage days that week. I felt exhausted by it all, especially with the round of debriefings and the press conference called on the Thursday, the third day after my release.

I tried to ask questions too. What became of Jamie? What happened about the dead Americans? How were Aban, Menachem and the other hostages? Where were they? The embassy staff told me that Aban and Menachem were safe and at home. They knew little else. Everyone seemed to have dropped out of sight. They promised to make enquiries, but I heard nothing more about the Americans. Jamie was alive, but very ill with his wounds, and they told me that he would be well treated. I had to believe in it. I was not strong enough to cope with other possibilities.

Sleep was still a stranger to me. In the embassy I enjoyed luxurious surroundings, food and drink on tap, a quiet garden to walk in, and I even tried out the services of a psychiatrist, but it was all one blur of time, a blank canvas. I was like a child in a toy shop, given unlimited riches and frozen to the spot by the sheer

enormity of choice. I could not concentrate on any one thing. I flicked through the television channels. I picked up books and put them down again. My only real solace were those solitary moments, usually in the Embassy grounds, when I could walk and smoke and blot-out the inner workings of my mind with birdsong.

Having been through so much, with so many experiences and hurts locked away inside me, the one thing that troubled me most during those quiet walks in the Embassy gardens was the thought of what I would become. I worried about what people would expect to see. Could I pretend as I had once done? For days I pondered the changes that must come in my life and slowly, slowly I drew the conclusion that these others would see nothing. Not until I might be healed enough to show them this gaunt face. Until then Marwan Tayeh must remain under wraps.

One of the simple joys that I discovered in those last few days in England was the company of my brother Da'ud. Being that much older then me, we had struggled to find a common path through life before I left for England. It was never a question of love. Over the years the boys found it in their hearts to accept my mother and me into their lives. They were nearly twenty years old when my father married for the second time when he was fifty, and so they were by then often absent from home. Our relationship was more like that of an uncle and a nephew. I believe that, once they got over the inevitable shock of a new and permanent relationship for my otherwise steady and outwardly staid father, they understood that his happiness was their happiness too. But we had never been close in the way that true-blood brothers sometimes are. I grew up loving their visits and their indulgence, but I was always closer to their own children, especially in a generational sense. Our likes and dislikes differed with time and fad and cultural change.

At the Embassy and on the plane home we found a different source of companionship. The child and the man were now equals. My experience, so different from Da'ud's, opened up a new naturalism between us. We found by slow degrees that we could share the darker details of a life, and although I kept much to myself then we have continued to unravel the weave of my captivity in the days since my return to Beirut. I think that men

rarely ever open-up to their emotions fully, and almost never do so in public. The one key thing of importance is that we could sit together in comfortable silence now. It is a gift unknown to my mother, and in her own way I love her for that too.

I first started to believe truly in my freedom on the flight home. As we flew across Europe and finally over the Eastern Mediterranean, I watched the landscape change colour from the greens of the north to the rocky sands and browns of the south. These are my colours, these are the hues of my childhood, and Da'ud and I shared a flight of quiet reminiscence about our father. He knew so much of the days before my mother and I came along. For the first time we talked about loss, about how I felt at the farm when I read the paper given to me by Jamie. Da'ud talked about losing his mother to cancer when he was five years old, and about the dark hole at the centre of his life, a place of shadow that existed still for him in spite of the crowding of the world by responsibility and family. My brothers were and are, as I have said before, serious men. That conversation helped me, and I hope that my contributions helped Da'ud. Since then we have become closer, friends even, which is not always easy with family.

Just before touch down at Beirut International Airport one of the government agents assigned to see me home safely came and sat with us.

"Okay, Marwan. Ready for home?"

"Of course I am. What sort of question is that?" I replied, laughing.

"I don't mean home, not in that sense. I mean the airport. The crowds. The press."

"Oh no, no, I don't want to see the press," I said, shocked at the thought of it. It occurred to me that I was being stupid. I had been a hostage in a foreign land, a hostage in a place where other men were shot. Of course the press would be there.

"They want a moment. We won't be doing any speaking, nothing like that, but they'll want a few snaps at the top of the stairs. Can you do that?"

"Do I have a choice?" I asked, looking at Da'ud for reassurance.

"No, not really. We'll spend a minute, maybe two on the steps and then go straight down. There's a car waiting to take you to a safe house."

I felt a rising sense of panic. A safe house? Why wasn't I going home to my mother? Why did I need a safe house? The government man must have seen the look of terror on my face. So did Da'ud, and he patted me on the shoulder and smiled.

"It's going to be okay," he said.

"Yes, Marwan, it's going to be okay. Hasn't anyone spoken to you about this? Damn. Look, we've learnt from the other hostages that everyone needs a little time to adjust. I mean, you have had a couple of psych sessions. I assume they've explained some of this?"

I nodded. "Yes, a bit. About the stages of recovery, the emotions and the loss, about how everyone is different, although most go through similar stages. It's best to talk, they said, but only when you're ready."

"Quite. We've found that most of the returning hostages need a few quiet weeks away from everything, even familiar family locations. Not on your own, of course. Your mother will be there and your brothers and friends can visit, but it's a place where you can choose how much time you give them. Our doctors and support staff will be there for you as well."

Such had been the daze of these last few days that I realised now, minutes from touch down, just how little thought I had given to my return. The thought of the press call on the aircraft steps horrified me. I immediately saw the necessity of another bout of solitary confinement. A world so familiar, so large, and so demanding, would surely be the last straw for me after all these months of captive solitude and narrow horizons. I was already shaking at the prospect of a camera flashbulb going off in my face.

Once the plane had taxied to its stand, we waited for a few minutes while the necessary cars and security personnel arrived from the landward side. I dare not look out of the window, but Da'ud looked for me and grimaced. There were hundreds of people crammed in behind security barriers and hanging from any available vantage point on the main terminal building. Airport security simply could not cope with this outpouring of collective

relief and gladness. A son of the soil was home from the wars. I thought of the real soldiers out there, Muslim and Christian and Jew, and I felt incredibly small and insignificant. I felt ashamed that it was me they wanted to welcome home.

I had an insane urge to fly back to London and fetch Jamie Mitchell. I wanted to put him on the steps at Beirut airport instead of me. He was the hero. He was the soldier. I was just a bystander, a boy turned prematurely grey, who had had things happen to him. I counted little in the way of courage from my days in captivity. Even that last dash to freedom was opportunistic. I was no hero, no tunnel rat with a story of derring-do to tell. They should applaud Jamie Mitchell, a man of conviction and compassion.

Once the doors opened and I was given the signal, Da'ud and I walked out into the bright sunlight of a Beirut morning under a brilliant blue sky. We stood at the top of the aircraft steps and I blanched at the sight of so many people packed into such a small place. The air filled with shouts and screams and calls. Cameras pointed at me from every angle. I wanted to turn and flee all the way back to London, but Da'ud was like a ramrod at my back.

I sucked in great draughts of hot air, air that tasted of concrete and aviation fuel. We stood there for a moment as my head reeled, but then survival instincts kick-in. I'm home, I thought. I'm really home. I wore large aviator sunglasses, deliberately to hide the tears that I suspected might fall. All through the flight I had assumed they would be tears of terror and loss, but now I felt the floating soul next to my body snap back into place. I really was home. Thank God, peace be upon Him, for his mercy and his education. I really was home.

That was when I started to wave back to the crowd. I started to wave emphatically, maniacally even. I jumped up and down for the cameras. I grinned fit to split my face. I could have stayed there for an hour, so full of joy and wonder was my new, home-come world, and it was only Da'ud's gentle reminder in my left ear that mother was waiting for me at the safe house that brought me back down to earth. As we sat in the limousine on the tarmac at the airport, I realised that my shirt was drenched in sweat. Oh hell, I thought, what will mother say to that?

It was in the back of that car, air-conditioned and smooth, that I spent ten minutes contemplating this history. What would I tell my mother? I was already editing highlights in my head. What should I leave out? What should I embroider? Would she guess when she saw Menachem? There were so many lies and misrepresentations running through my head as we motored across the concrete apron towards the safe house. How could I explain to her the nature of incarceration and absolute solitude and its driving effects on your need for company? How could I make it all okay and reassure her about her grandchildren? Such are the things that you worry about, all the while knowing that not one jot of it will ever make any difference after the simple fact that you are home.

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At the beginning of this memoir I said that somewhere in our histories, in the endless looking back that we all indulge in, there is often a tendency to believe that we can identify a point in our time or a past action of such simple and singular significance that it allows us to say, That's it: that's the root of it all – that is what this is.

I believed then that fundamental truths appeal because they make simple the relationship between cause and effect, action and consequence. I set out on a vague quest to find Marwan Tayeh, searching for the source of my own headwaters, seeking out the trickling springs that feed the streams and rivers that flow through my life. In the same way that we try find a firm coastal footing from which to view our historical hinterlands, I sought in the here and now, from the obscurity of distance and separation, that undeniable, indefatigable truth that makes sense of where we are and where we appear to be heading. I know now that even when we are delivered to the sea, with our sails set for the prevailing wind and we feel relieved that finally we are on course, the truth is that we are never truly master of the winds.

I spent nearly a month, the whole of July, at the safe house. My quarters were adequate, a converted administration building at Kaidat Bayrut al-jawiya, in the military area at Beirut International airport. The location was a little odd in the sense that I craved peace and quiet, and on a personal basis I was left very much to establish my own routines, but the bustle and urgency of international air traffic and military helicopter flights provided a noisy backdrop to my thinking time.

Throughout this period I spent some time each day with counsellors, and occasionally with representatives of the government security service, but for the most part I either sat quietly and read, or spent time with members of my family. Time became an almost abstract concept again, much like it had during my captivity. It always struck me as ironic that now a free man, I spent my time surrounded by men in uniform. I was in many ways a prisoner here, but with one important difference. I chose to stay. I could have asked to leave at any point but I remained on the base

for four weeks because I wanted to keep the wider world at arms length I suppose it was a transitional phase. My sense of place was so bound up in the solitude of restriction that the prospect of re-entering a free wheeling, cosmopolitan city like Beirut frightened me to death.

Salman and Da'ud visited each weekend. My mother came to stay for a few nights in the first week, and then visited me each day, telling me all the while about the plans and arrangements for my proper homecoming. We shared tears and laughter. We talked about my father, about how proud he was of me, and about the foibles and family tensions that always coloured these rememberings. Slowly, by degrees I found the strength to open up a little more each day, but there are always elements in the man that stay locked away. I buried my head in my mother's breast, smelling her sweet perfume, and for a while I was the lost boy from the stories, the prodigal returned.

Mine was a childhood full of brilliantly coloured daydreams and half-conquered trees, and although now outwardly I was a man, my greatest yearning was still for that old world of scabbed knees and grimy, lichen-stained hands. The difference between the boy who sat and dreamed in the Turkey Oak and the man returned from England was, I realised, simply this: that the world of scabbed knees and lichen-stained hands is a lost world. It was. It never will be again. I must make my world anew every day.

If I learned one thing from my time with Menachem and Aban and poor Beniamin Kachigian, it is this. Every moment is a new reality that we must shape. We cannot let others shape it for us. We can choose. We can choose our friends and our enemies. Today is ours. The freshly budded leaf at the crown of the Turkey Oak in our garden in the Beirut suburb of Jnah did indeed represent an empire of possibilities, but now I was absolutely aware of the distant gaze of the hawk. I was ignorant as a boy and listlessly aggressive in adolescence because I wanted to hide my fear. As a man I find that I am no longer afraid of the hawk as I sit in the boughs of my childhood castle. I welcome that beady eye upon my flesh. It reminds me to live while I can.

I have faith in my friends. I have love in my family. I think often about Jamie Mitchell, the Americans, Smiler and Robbie. For those

still alive I wonder where they are. Have their lives changed for the better or the worse? I have made enquiries but no one seems to know anything. I would like to think well of Smiler and Robbie. I would like to be able to say that it was not their fault, that they were victims too, but I cannot. A man has a choice. I understand that they are manipulated because they despair. I understand that their role in keeping me captive was almost inevitable, a product of ignorance and dispossession, but I cannot forgive the random nature of their violence to me and my friends. A man has a choice. They did not make that choice.

I miss Jamie greatly. His had a genuine faith, a genuine care. All I know about him is that he was handed over to the English authorities by the French. They said that he would be well treated, that his care and compassion would be rewarded. By what, I wonder? Will the potential in that young man be driven out by the vicissitudes of brutality and random cruelty? I often wonder whether he really did survive his wound, and if so how he will cope with his own captivity. Will he come through it a better man or a worse man? He is lost to me, lost in the labyrinth of war and its aftermath. I miss him and I always will. Deep within me I hope still that we will meet again one day, and I trust to faith that he will survive well.

Menachem and I meet reasonably regularly and get horribly drunk. Aban has joined us twice and it is always a delight to meet my wiry Persian friend. We talk endlessly about the old times and I indulge my old passions for speculation. Menachem has developed a liking for our house in Jnah and, I think, my mother's cooking. She has settled back into the routines of life quickly, and basks in the simple warmth that comes with our conversations in my father's study at night. Menachem too has changed. The carefree banter still remains, but our drinking is often tinged with quiet moments when we reflect on who we were and who we are now. There is a serious side to the man now, a seriousness that is never far beneath the outward smile.

As for the rest of the world, both Menachem and I, having shared the closest, most desperate times together, have built walls from behind which we lob joke grenades at the world. We understand. We will never be as close to each other or more alive

as we were during the darkest days of our foreign sojourn, and with the passing of time we add bricks to the wall that surrounds our memories.

There has only ever once been a moment of awkwardness between us. Our shared time together in the cell in Bath is locked away, is a momentary reflection in another man's eye caught in soft firelight at the end of a day. The look is ours and ours alone. It is a look that says, That was then, that was necessary: we will speak of many things shared, we will speak of our lives to come, of our wives and our children, and we will delight in them for each other, always. We will love our families like no other, because we know what it is to hang-on to life by a thread, and no one will ever understand that like we two. We will love each other as brothers and all else will be as it should be. That is the way of things. That is good.

I met up with Usman, my cavalier flat-mate in London, just the once in Tyre. It was an awkward time. I was still in the early days of re-adjustment, and there was a distance between us, a divergence. It is entirely natural. It is no one's fault. Our conversation was listless, a tale of forgotten days that neither one of us remembered well. He is a good man, but we are not brothers, not in the way that Menachem and I have become. It is a shame, but nothing more than life.

I have learned with time to accept that I cannot see my father again. I walk in our garden and am reminded of him by a particular flower or a smell or slight push from the sea breeze. I sit in the house and see pictures of him on the mantelpiece. Always I feel as though there is a hammer poised above my heart, and sometimes the loss of his presence hits me and takes the breath from my lungs. I understand now that this is natural, that this is grief and it will always be thus. Slowly I find that the memories turn to the good times, to the happy times that we spent together before my departure for London. I thank fate that I never saw him in the final throws of his cancerous decline. Mine is a recollection and a love untainted by the sallow folds of skin that dry out under the sleep of opiate confusion.

I live at home with my mother now. I have made a few changes to my father's study. I have reorganised the books, and now, on his

desk, where an old typewriter used to weigh-out words, I have a laptop computer. In spite of the obvious warnings inherent in my father's passing I have taken up smoking cheroots. The smell of the smoke in the air reminds mother and me of past times, and at the end of the day, when a little more of my story has been committed to paper and printed out, she sits with me and reads about my life in chains. I find it easier to talk about those times with her through the medium of written words. There is in spite of our unconditional love for each other a barrier that rises when we try to speak face to face.

That is why I have written this story down. It is also for Beniamin and his family. Aban, Menachem and I visited them once to pay our respects but that visit too was awkward. With every good wish, with every sorrow shared and tale told, I could see in his father's eyes that one question being asked again and again: why did you come home? I could not find it in my heart to tell him about his son's final moments. None of us could. There can never be an adequate answer to such a question. If there is an answer it is unknowable by men, a random property of the universe, an unfathomable and crushing depth in whatever religious or philosophical ocean you might choose to swim in.

I showed the manuscript for this memoir to a friend of mine, a publisher, who asked many questions and made a good deal of sense in asking for clarity, for explanation. I have considered at some length whether I should answer these questions, whether I should take up her suggestions, and in many places I have taken her advice, but fundamentally I wonder whether this is the correct place to discuss the philosophical differences between East and West? I think not, other than where it bears scrutiny as part of my story. Better minds than mine will explain to you the nature of the world, of God, peace be upon Him, and of the hostage psyche. I am content that you have made it this far, and flawed as we all are, you know a little about Marwan Tayeh, Menachem Dov, Aban Ganji and Beniamin Kachigian.

I ask only this of you. Think carefully when you next watch the news or read a paper. We sit smugly here in our world of relative safety. Ours is a culture that holds all of the cards. We wonder why

the rump states in old Europe are so barbaric and incapable of being like us. It is obvious to us that the global economy is a good thing. See how China and India strive for growth. Look at the powerhouse that Japan has been these last fifty years or so. Are we complacent in thinking that our legacy is assured? As Aban once said, empires rise and fall as surely as the tides are pulled to shore by the moon. How would we react if we faced the same degradation and dispossession as the English? Would we be any different if someone stripped away all of our finery and money and power and self-respect?

Tonight I am leaving this last section of my story on the desk in the study at our house in Jnah for my mother to read. And yes, before you ask, she has read every word of this. She knows as much as you and has never asked anything more of me than to be home and to be happy. I catch her eye sometimes and she smiles at me, drawing me into those deep, dark, brown pools, smothering me with her love and her simple, unspoken knowing. I understand, her eyes say, you do not need to speak out loud. You are home and all is well. It is enough. I feel it too. It is enough, enough to give me a purpose and the strength to be my father's son.

Tonight I am going out. Tonight I am meeting Menachem Dov in Ashrafieh and we are going to slide under a table or two. I will enjoy the hangover. It seems to me that everything in the world is fresh and full of life. I spend hours sitting on the deeply ridged boughs of my favourite tree, of my boyhood castle in the air, under a warm and mellow Mediterranean sun. Everything has changed. Everything will change again and again. I may never be Salah-ad-Din or Jason or Odysseus or Aeneas, but my story is being painted in bright colours, colours of love and faith and wonder. I am Marwan Tayeh. I stand on the threshold of a brave new world. I have taken my first glorious and immature steps out onto the shore by the ocean. I have been swept away by the winds of change, but now I am back upon that shore, weather beaten and calloused, but I am back and ready for life.

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