

A. ALWAN
The Sheikh's Detective

Translated by Timothy Reece



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The Sheikh's Detective

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Note from the translator

Alwan's unique style of communicating complex social issues, wound up in an immersing story, offered many challenges for a translator. A novel written in its original form for an Arab audience, the Sheik's Detective includes a tumultuous array of concepts, in a context largely unfamiliar to a Western audience. The reader's attention is drawn to the significance of the spider at the start of chapter 8. In just one paragraph, Alwan controversially proposes that the entire understanding of miracles, and indeed religion, is based on myth and fallacy. A reader with significant knowledge of Islam would grasp this reference with ease. However, the same may not be said for a non-Muslim background. This example alone demonstrates my belief that translation is not merely a conduit of language, but of ideas and culture - and with that becomes an art form. Ten months of work tackling that spider, and numerous other issues, has, I hope, made what is a gripping and thought provoking piece. Equally, it is a piece which is now culturally accessible to anyone willing to take the challenge of exploring the social, philosophical and religious questions. Indeed, they are questions which form part of the natural inquisitiveness inside us all. This labour of love is gratefully offered to you, and I hope sincerely that you enjoy the journey!

Tim Reece

Chapter 1

The small flock of seagulls swooped and wheeled around Prince Albert Street. Their squawking cut through the conversation between Jeffrey Aspen and Frank the waiter. What, they pondered, were the best bets for that evening's Manchester United-Liverpool match?

"If Rooney's fit and he plays, Liverpool will lose," said Frank, his voice partly drowned out by the incessant squawking of the seagulls hovering overhead. His words washed away in the wind.

"I still fancy them, with or without Rooney!" Jeffrey announced assuredly.

"No doubts who your money is on, then?" said Frank.

"I'm not one for betting," Jeffrey said, lifting the pint glass in front of him and polishing the table underneath, "I don't like luck playing a role in my life!"

"I don't blame you," Frank remarked. "In any case, betting small amounts doesn't return a great deal," he added, heading to another table to take the order of a family who had been waiting a short time.

Jeffrey continued to look on as Frank wrote the order from what appeared to be an upstanding foreign family in his little notebook. They appeared to be a well-to-do unit of a husband, his younger wife, their young boy and his older sister. As Jeffrey stared, his mind soon wandered. He reflected on those boring Sundays which begin with a pint of strong Scottish lager before he passes the time browsing the markets. This is normally followed by returning home for Sunday lunch whilst waiting for the match to start.

As Jeffrey reflected, he looked at his surroundings. The early morning shower had left a damp blanket on both the coastal roads and high streets of Brighton. Nevertheless, the morning light still cast a silvery sparkle over the houses and sea as tourists, English and foreign alike, flocked to the area. Most had arrived early to potter around the markets, and now the bars and cafés provided welcome shelter for them as they chatted idly over a drink, waiting for the sun to appear around midday. Later they would take a stroll down to the seafront promenade or sit at the water's edge on the sandy beach.

“Therefore, as usual, chance and fortune will play their most powerful role!” This is how Jeffrey put it to himself. Indeed, this is how he saw it. He remembered his father's defence of fate while his eyes aimlessly wandered over those idling in front of the clothing stores on the opposite pavement. They seemed unperturbed by the sudden fog which descended upon them. They were simply happy to be in Brighton, the quiet southern town with its well-mannered civilised inhabitants, so different from those in other towns in the UK. It is such apathy which encourages these inhabitants of Brighton

to accept life as it is, in all its boredom and inaction. They don't take comfort in knowing about the strangers, nor their origins. They are simply 'here', and that is enough. As for fortune, especially in the case of football results, most would agree, its purpose is to charge week-ends with excitement from beginning to end. Jeffrey's mind wandered further from the scene in front of him as he began to reflect on the past.

"Did you say luck?" Jeffrey's father asked, with an exaggerated tone of excitement as his son downed his breakfast. "Do you think the whole empire was founded with just the bayonet and gunpowder?" As he busily chewed away at a piece of his fried egg sandwich, Jeffrey's father rolled his eyes theatrically waiting for an answer.

"It was fortune which paved the way for the English bayonet in all of our battles," he said, before digressing into the long story of his ancestors. Amongst them was his father, whose picture hangs proudly in the dining room adjoining the kitchen. He was one of the many who had bravely fought the enemies of the Great Empire in the mountains and jungles.

"Liverpool, Chelsea, Manchester United, all the others; all of them play well and then sit back to watch which way the luck will turn. Whether it goes in the net or not is simply a matter of centimetres. I swear on my honour that everything follows this pattern, be it war, football, or any human endeavour."

All talk on Sundays finishes up being about football. The wife spends her afternoon in the kitchen, one hand on the work surface, the other on her hip. As she puts up with her

husband's argument silently nobody knows if she agrees with him or not. She waits for the calm that this well-known rant produces before responding with the same unchanging words, words which have little impact on him, "Bob! You're a right pain in the arse. Can you just go to the shop for some peas? Then you can talk about bloody football."

"Wearing that apron excludes her from the realm of football," Jeffrey muttered to himself as he reflected, "and from the finer details of the empire, with its steam ships and red uniforms." However, in the bars on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons, his father relives the fading imperial glory through the eyes of his ancestors, comparing the tactics of old governments in London to those of football teams.

As Jeffrey again idly wiped the already-clean table in front of him, as if this would also cleanse from his mind the wranglings over football, his thoughts returned to those of the kitchen. Sundays are cursed, he thought, because rather than serving as days of rest, they actually absorb what remains of the zest in people.

"There's no doubt the picture of my grandfather provokes such statements from my father. The military chest adorned with decorations affords him hope of the past, and yet despair in the present," muttered Jeffrey.

After a passionate disagreement involving the young boy and his sister, Frank left them, having finally taken their order. Jeffrey again shifted his gaze towards the small family creating the commotion around the table in the distance. The

attractive woman with a deep tan and striking eyes caught his attention.

“The weather is pretty bad today isn’t it, for the start of summer?” Frank said after delivering the orders. Jeffrey looked towards the sky through his blond eyelashes. “It won’t stay like this,” he answered, “the sun is already beginning to appear.”

The small amount of sunshine had warmed the air enough to dry out the lightly dampened roads. However, the blustery conditions remained with the occasional strong gust of wind as birds used their wings as sails to balance their flight. The young boy and his sister were pointing toward the cacophonous seagulls as they circled, while their parents were more concerned with getting their breakfast, uninterested in the entertainment their children had found to help them forget about food.

The blustery winds kept pushing the birds inland, towards the sandy beach and the streets as they hovered above the terraces of the buildings. The seagulls were flying into the wind, occasionally dive-bombing the streets below as if plunging into the sea in search of fish. The birds would then steeple skyward again using their huge white wings to catch the wind.

Many tourists are startled by the seagulls’ sudden movements, whereas the inhabitants of Brighton barely notice these aerial attacks. They know it is just hunger. The raging sea itself triggers strong gusts of wind which obscure the seagulls’ vision, preventing them from spotting the fish just under the water’s surface.

As Jeffrey sat there, he was delighted to see his colleague Bryan ambling along the street. Finally he would be free of his dependence on the tables and chairs of the Black Tiger Bar and Restaurant for diversion, and he could get his rota for the coming month.

Bryan passed by the building of the Religious Society of Friends, outside of which a waiting crowd seemed to be attracting attention. Bryan was rotund and known to be driven by money. In fact, Jeffrey would often think of him as resembling a football chairman, disinterested in the means, yet utterly preoccupied by the end – to become wealthy. Bryan's head stuck out above the crowd of men and women waiting outside the entrance. As always, it was a head filled with money worries.

“Jeff!” Bryan said before sitting down. “There are no changes to the rota except they are adding three working hours between the sorting stage and distribution.” When Jeffrey asked why, Bryan replied, “They want to avoid strike action at any costs.”

“I won't be taking sides in the dispute,” Jeffrey responded in an apathetic tone. “I don't need additional hours.”

“That's not the case for me” announced Bryan, exhausted by worry over the whole situation. “It's worth the six pounds an hour to me,” he went on. “Anyway, I'm desperate for the money!”

Jeffrey was unmoved by Bryan's words. However, he did notice the serious expression falling over his colleague's face.

“No one will blame you if you have to work extra hours a few days a week,” Jeffrey said as he gazed into Bryan’s distant eyes.

“I am really desperate for that money, Jeff,” exclaimed Bryan, like a man equally desperate for a response.

Jeffrey didn’t understand his concerned colleague, or the true extent of his money issues, or for that matter quite why it was making him feel this way. Jeffrey didn’t say anything, sensing that this was not a subject that concerned him. He remembered how Bryan had scolded himself a few days earlier after making a mistake at work. He believed the cause of this outburst was a dispute between Bryan and his wife, Clara. Was the reason for the disagreement money? Jeffrey thought again that this was not his business in any case. Nevertheless, Bryan proceeded to elaborate without prompting, “I need you to sort me out with two hours work a day for the rest of the year, Jeff,” he pleaded. “Can you help me?”

“How can I sort you out with that?” asked Jeffrey, bemused.

“You can do it easily,” answered Bryan, “until the end of the year, and get my payment for the two hours you cover me for.”

Jeffrey’s eyes gazed upon the suppliant expression which accompanied Bryan’s proposal. Then, without altering his posture, Bryan said clearly, “I mean, the clocking-in card.”

“Oh no,” recoiled Jeffrey. “Don’t ask this of me!”

“Nobody will notice among the hundreds of workers, mate. I’ve got a second job but what I need is a small period in the morning. Two hours, no more, until the end of the year. This will allow me to do the two jobs and I will pay you!”

Jeffrey began to get irritated. “I’m not getting into this,” he grimaced.

Jeffrey turned his face to the sea so as to distance himself from the desperate suggestions of his colleague. He caught sight of Frank who had been standing next to the foreign family, waving his hands while answering their questions and explaining things to them. With the choppy sea in the background and only his top half visible to Jeffrey, Frank looked as though he was swimming.

In order to get his colleague’s attention back, Bryan attempted to paint a picture which would hit close to Jeffrey’s heart.

“I want to live like others live. My salary barely covers food for me and my wife, let alone clothes! One job means I work to live, only – it’s not fair, and it’s not fair for you either!”

“Well, I’m satisfied,” said Jeffrey, smiling as he unfairly mocked the sorrowful subject.

“I know. I know that you are satisfied with this limited way of life, as I was. But that is because we are sluggish and apathetic – we lack ambition.” Jeffrey’s sarcastic smile compelled Bryan to plumb new depths on this issue, apparently

to drag his reluctant colleague to a new outlook on life, one which he had never experienced before, let alone thought of.

“Everyone who comes to this rotting pit,” Bryan continued, “with its piles of envelopes and woven fabric bags, all of them lack ambition. You know this is true, Jeffrey, but you prefer to mock those who strive for something different. You don’t seem to care that when we die, the burial will be paid for by the state and will see us buried in unmarked graves.”

Jeffrey Aspen did indeed lack ambition. His wife had left him two years earlier because he was content with his meagre portion of life. He was without great amusement or enjoyment, without drive or the desire for grandeur. He didn’t like to be friends with those who enjoyed their hedonistic delights. As his wife said before leaving him, Jeffrey was a sheep who never embraced the thrills of life. Now he smiled, with this in mind as he belittled every one of Bryan’s words. He then said, mixing coldness and compassion, “Honestly, your constant negative outlook has stopped your life from the start. I thought you were in great debt and couldn’t pay it off!”

Bryan squirmed, struck by the hopelessness stemming from his colleague’s lack of ideas.

“Oh, Jeff,” he said. “All I want is to be able to buy a four-wheel drive and maybe a small yacht – perhaps sail across the channel during the summer. Do you not think I have a right to such things? Shouldn’t I be entitled to the same enjoyments as others?”

Jeffrey didn't know if justice required that everyone's pleasures be equal. Nor did he know why Bryan, who lived in the town centre, would want a four-wheel-drive vehicle. For heaven's sake, they are designed for muddy farms or deserts! What astonished him most about this request was that his acquaintance with Bryan had not yet reached the level of friendship, and his only knowledge of Clara stemmed solely from once seeing the two of them together in one of the markets. Therefore the audacity of his colleague's performance made Jeffrey feel uneasy as if he was used to being mixed up in things like this. Then he felt partly to blame himself for not having paid attention to what was going on around him, and so missing the opportunity to avoid such a situation in the first place.

A gloomy and downtrodden Bryan left, and as Jeffrey too prepared to leave, Frank the waiter approached his table having confirmed the orders of all of the customers whose seats were set on the pavement.

"Do you think you could help that old Arab guy, the sheik sitting with his family over there on the last table?" Frank said.

"Is he a sheik?" Jeffrey asked as he glanced at the table in question.

"Ah, many sheiks from Africa come here after they've got changed out of their traditional Arab dress," explained Frank. "Anyway, he's asking after someone called Julian Smith. Do you know him?"

“I don’t know anyone of that name,” Jeffrey answered, trying to remember. “If he had an address then he wouldn’t need anyone’s help!”

“It seems he doesn’t know the address.”

“Well how am I to know myself then?” Jeffrey asked.

“Since you work for the Post Office, I thought it would be easy to get hold of an address or something which could help him – that’s all I had in mind.”

“It’s Smith, for crying out loud. How will I be able to find a Smith?” Jeffrey laughed ruefully, putting an end to the discussion of such a search, by either the sheik himself or by a postman.

Frank smiled. He knew that there were over two hundred thousand Smiths in England, many of whom resided in Brighton. He decided to leave the issue with Jeffrey.

Jeffrey got ready to go. He felt that the sheik’s case was not really worth thinking about. As he was leaving, a large flock of seagulls swooped towards the ground, scaring the young boy and his sister away from their seats. The woman on the table jerked her head away and hid behind the palms of her hands. A number of pedestrians were also alarmed at the noise the seagulls made as their wings flapped around the tiles of the pavement. They reacted with shrieks of their own as well as laughter as they ran away from the commotion.

The aerial bombardment had targeted a morsel of old meat which had rolled off the top of a rubbish bin onto the ground.

Chapter 2

Jeffrey left through the back door of the sorting and distribution department of the Post Office building on Ship Street. He climbed the small number of steps with energy, excited at having finished his six-hour shift.

Jeffrey smiled as he was greeted by those who were still on strike in the glorious sunshine near the entrance. He continued smiling while he encountered the whistles and cries of shame to which anyone crossing the picket line was subject. He cut across the road into the shade to avoid the sun and with it the crowds of tourists busily shopping. There he felt fully satisfied to escape the boredom attached to the last couple of hours of his daily work. Today his head was filled with ideas and questions about how to find the so-called “Julian Smith” without having been left an address.

The sun is truly summertime’s blessing, coveted by those on holiday, who wallow and sunbathe with their bodies exposed in the warmth and light it brings. However, Jeffrey was simply concerned with getting to his appointment and to resolving the issue which was burning inside of him.

Yesterday, he had joined the sheik at his table and listened to his story of how he came to be in Brighton. He had not come as a tourist. In fact, he had come to search for his son with whom he had lost contact between the ports around Europe. First he wanted to find Julian Smith, the English detective who had been searching for the sheik's lost son. He had taken payment for the search but then he himself disappeared, with only a few loose threads of information it hardly helped to find out where he had settled; at least this is what he claimed anyway. Despite this he clung to the loose threads in hope.

Jeffrey knew that ninety percent of those called Smith actually bore other names they had got rid of, to seek better status or sometimes to perpetrate fraud. They all follow this step, relocating from areas where their faces and past lives were familiar. This name, which in bygone times was the name given to blacksmiths in the towns and villages across England, is now used to escape mistakes of the past or to cover up new ones. With this in mind, he had asked a large number of the postmen that morning if they knew a "Julian Smith". All of them replied that they did not.

As Jeffrey passed the glass façade of Jackwell's women's clothes shop on Prince Albert Street he was dazzled momentarily by the intense reflection of the sun. When his vision returned a moment later he saw the shadowy figure of the sales girl spreading a white evening dress in front of customers.

Perhaps Julian Smith is actually a bit of a dark horse he thought as he passed by the entrance to the Religious Society of Friends, in front of which stood a group to whom he paid little attention. It seemed as though everyone had turned out to enjoy the sun.

As Jeffrey reflected further on the sheik's quest, he mused on other details of Julian Smith and the missing son. Julian had refused to give his home address and he only used emails for correspondence. In addition to this he would only take payment via an account with Barclays bank. "I should investigate this tomorrow," he muttered.

The foreign man wasn't in fact a sheik. He was a businessman who sent his son to study at the Naval Academy in Flensburg, Germany. However, the son left his studies and began to move between the different port towns around Europe. When his father learned of him having absconded he cut off his financial support, which led him to take on trivial jobs to earn money. Now he lamented the way he had acted as it had led him to lose contact completely. "That's what I would have done when it comes to education," said Jeffrey to himself.

"Hello, Frank," he said from the other side of the road. However, as Prince Albert Street was crowded with pedestrians on both pavements, the waiter didn't hear him. The movement and chattering had increased to a loud, muffled rumble as Frank cleared one of the recently vacated tables.

The seagulls made for the water, and flew a fair distance into the placid sea from where they snatched their food between large clawed-and-webbed feet and preying beaks.

The bins where the smell of fish and hot sauce from the night before remained, soaked up by the heat of the sunlight, were no longer the object of the birds' attacks.

He didn't repeat his greeting to Frank but instead continued in his stride. As he mounted the pavement on Black Lion Street, he shaded his eyes as he caught a glimpse of the sea and the sun's dazzling reflection upon it.

"You never help anyone!" had been the last words of his colleague as he departed. Had this desperate man compelled Jeffrey to go and sit at the sheik's table to offer him some advice?

Jeffrey Aspen's day-to-day life was epitomised by lethargy. It wasn't a youthful life and he didn't like relationships. He was sceptical of everything. Some people thought of him as a man in his thirties who lacked a goal in life. "What goal is it that merits all this fuss?" he asked himself pensively.

He also discovered, all too late however, that sex didn't require marriage, nor is one tied to that woman for life. Because of this, and his hatred of conflict, he didn't even try and convince his wife to change her mind after she had left him.

In Black Lion Street a queue of cars waited in line at the entrance for the cheap car park. For everything cheap, a queue; be it car parks, food, or clothing stores. Everywhere in Britain was ablaze with sales, and the people would throw themselves into the fire blindly without counting the cost. Bryan had said, "You don't want to help anyone. Throw me a

rope Jeff! I'm as low as I can go here and all I want is to buy a four-wheel-drive with a good engine!"

What a pipe dream!

A couple of hundred metres into the sea, he saw the bridge leading to Brighton Pier jammed with people crossing as they headed for the cafés, restaurants and children's play areas. The silvery crests of the waves glistened brightly before disappearing into the shadow cast by the high columns.

Yesterday the sheik had said to him, "The desert taught us to be frugal, and then oil encouraged us to spend without thought. I would reward you well if you helped me." However, Jeffrey said he would not ask for anything. He didn't explain the reason as he himself didn't know why he wanted to help for free. When the meeting was finished he feared that the sheik would doubt his intentions. He thought that sheik may suspect some kind of hidden agenda – perhaps he wanted to get close to the sheik's wife, who spoke very little during the meeting and referred to the missing son as "our boy".

Perhaps he thought that Jeffrey wanted to steal from him, just like Julian Smith, who remained the main subject about which the two were concerned. However, he didn't think any of these things, "I only want to help" he said, perhaps an unintended response as a result of the words of his colleague Bryan. Or maybe he was occupying his life with a case which would have no damaging effect on him personally.

As always he would eat a breakfast of fried eggs and drink a cup of tea before heading off to work; after work he would have a can of beer in the house. This routine would not

be greatly disrupted if he spent an hour each day searching for Smith's address or in trying to find the son whose father suspected he had arrived in the Brighton area. It was a question of asking in the bars and restaurants, and around people's houses by way of finding him.

He felt that his joints were rested and relaxed enough after last night in bed with Linda and therefore he would ignore his reluctance, both physical and mental, to bother doing anything in order to get close to the sheik's wife

At the end of Black Lion Road he crossed over to the other side and continued, shading his eyes with his hand to protect them from the glow of the sun. As he turned towards Kings Road, he found himself surrounded by a mass of tourists grouped in front of the huge Park Lane Hotel with their bags between their legs on the pavement. They were chattering to each other, soaking up the light and warmth before going inside to be assigned their rooms.

Again he shielded his eyes and crossed the road to the opposite side which ran alongside the sea. There he could see the pebbled beach and the holidaymakers who were lying in their bathing suits exposing their pale skin to the sun. Their children played at the water's edge, waiting for the small waves and then running away screaming in a fun-filled game.

The sun had dropped a little to the east in the afternoon and the light wind suggested the start of summer. The weatherman had described it as a glorious day, prompting thousands of people to head for Brighton to enjoy the sun and the sea.

Jeffrey climbed the steps to the entrance of the bridge which led to cafés and restaurants on the Brighton Pier and to the amusements, which were heaving with children and adults alike.

He walked through the middle of the crowd, “We won’t need candles” said the head of the group at the Religious Society of Friends, “we’ll rely on the stars and electric lights.” He pressed a button beside him and a bright light flooded their faces with the power of a thousand watts. “Candles are a primitive idea of the past.” Jeffrey felt in fact that he belonged to the universe, with its truths which comfort the mind. It is a small part of you that life is alight within, and it is then extinguished as the universal law dictates. It is a continuous cycle of being set ablaze and then extinguished throughout eternity.

The sheik was enjoying the rays of sunlight which fell on him through the window, lighting up one side of his face whilst leaving the other side in deep darkness. It painted him in strong lines and highlighted the brownness of his skin and his neatly styled curly hair. Around and above him were old musical instruments – horns, drums, violins and a huge cello – all of which were an inherent part of the history of the room within The Victorian Bar which at that time had only attracted a small number of customers.

“Good afternoon,” Jeffrey said.

The sheik returned his greeting and then moved over to offer a space on the leather sofa. The Englishman however chose the chair to the left instead. It was only then that he

noticed the wife standing in the opposite corner in the dark with their son and daughter who were occupied with the fruit machines whose lights flashed and flickered away. She was wearing a fine pair of trousers that tightened around her small buttocks, which shook beautifully as she moved.

“I hope you like the place!” said Jeffrey after settling into his seat.

“It’s nice and quiet,” said the sheik, waving his hand at the waitress who was wondering around the room.

“When it’s sunny, any place is nice,” said Jeffery. “That is until the wind starts, of course.”

“What are you drinking?” asked the sheik as the waitress came over.

“Coffee with milk,” said Jeffrey, directing his words at the young girl.

The sheik placed an envelope on the table and slid it over to Jeffrey in one swift movement without looking at him.

“I hope that these documents and photos might help you find the detective, or the son of course,” he said in a despairing tone.

To search for the rebellious son in the capitals and coastal towns of Europe, where millions of bars, cafés and restaurants are scattered, would be useless. That is of course assuming that he hadn’t found any other way to earn a living. These were Jeffrey’s thoughts as he flicked through the photos in his hands. They portrayed a boy with handsome features who bore a slight resemblance to his father but who was more

tanned than him. One photograph he had sent home during his studies was of him in naval uniform. His face was no different to the thousands of other Middle Eastern or African people who pass through or settle in Britain.

Night shifts could be tiring, and the youthful spark had all but vanished from his face. He would keep one of the pictures, because the luck that controls football might just send the lost son his way one day.

He then checked the documentation of the bank transfers to the so-called Julian Smith, and then the payments that he had received via the internet.

For the sheik, Smith will be a ray of hope thought Jeffrey. But hope can be a deceptive thing. As Benjamin Franklin warned, "He that lives on hope alone will die fasting."

Thus armed he took one look at the address and he knew the area and the street that Smith had settled in and received payments to. He hadn't previously delivered letters in that area of Brighton but he knew its layout like the back of his hand.

"What's your son's name, if you don't mind me asking?" asked Jeffrey as he studied the paperwork.

"Nasser," said the sheik. "His full name is Nasser Ibrahim," he continued, as he wrote the name down on a small piece of paper and handed it to the Englishman.

Jeffrey replaced the bank papers and noticed four fifty pound notes. Without looking at the sheik, he took one of the photos of the son and put all of the papers along with the

money into the envelope before pushing it to the opposite end of the table next to the sheik.

“I’ll only take this picture along with one bank statement” said Jeffrey, “I won’t need the other papers because I know where Smith lives.”

“Great, but...” The sheik took the bank notes from the envelope and placed them in front of the Englishman. “This is for travelling expenses!”

“A postman only uses his legs!” said Jeffrey, smiling, and he once again slid the money back to the other side of the table.

Though Jeffrey had been waiting for this awkward conversation, he had expected it to happen later, not at this particular moment.

“Better we’re clear from the start,” said Ibrahim. “You must take this payment. Otherwise I won’t accept your help.”

Jeffrey assured him that he was serious and would offer every effort to find the son and the detective. Because the search would not be too difficult, he would not ask for any money.

“We won’t need more than a few days to get a result,” Jeffrey declared assuredly.

“I’m afraid the issue is not as simple as you see it,” the father responded calmly, with equal assurance – an assurance built on two years searching with no result to speak of.

Jeffrey understood that the sheik was making sense. Hence he reaffirmed that he would concentrate all the time necessary, both day and night, in the search once his work at the post office had finished.

“Why are you helping us for nothing?”

The question which had filled Jeffrey with a mixture of dejection and anxiety had finally been asked by the sheik.

Why was he helping them for nothing? The issue wasn't easy. As Mr. Ibrahim knew in light of bitter experience; it would demand more than just taking a look around the bars and cafés that evening and the evening after.

Jeffrey understood that it would not suffice to simply paint a picture of himself as a volunteer. And he had to decide there and then to offer a convincing answer to the question, or avoid the issue completely.

“I wanted to help for the sake of helping,” said Jeffrey as he proceeded to explain his situation. That the sheik did not seem to understand what he was saying in his answer confused him. Rather, the sheik found his answer strange, far from the logic and the life that he knew. What does it mean when a man helps for the sake of helping? The sheik looked into the Englishman's eyes as he spoke, somehow looking for another explanation. Jeffrey blushed as the blood boiled in his face under the pressure.

Ibrahim wasn't a sceptical man. When it came to dealing with a person, whether for big or small matters, he was happy to do so based on his own intuition. His experience in

business had taught him that he must take people at face value and ignore any possible ulterior motives.

In the search for his son Nasser, he had given a number of presents to a number of Arabs whom he met in the towns around Europe who had expressed a desire to help him. This is because a little bit of money makes the recipient dream of getting more and it is upon this basis agreements are reached. Any scams or failures are simply flotsam which is swept away with achievement of the overall goal. He then asked himself, “Why would the Englishman refuse a reward?”

“I’m telling you in all honesty,” said Jeffrey, “as I know that you’re expecting a lengthy search for your son. I have found a project which I can get my teeth into; one which will keep me occupied in my spare time.” Then he added, “I would suggest that this would be reason enough for you to let me help, and after that a dinner would suffice if you’re satisfied.”

Again this wasn’t a convincing enough answer and in fact proved more perplexing instead.

The sheik knew some of the ways of Westerners from his trips around Europe, as well as his business dealings with them in his country. All set themselves goals and missions from which they were destined to profit. The English detective, Smith, was clear about the amount of money he wanted and the dates of payment. But he also knew that a number of organisations enter underdeveloped countries ostensibly to treat the sick or help the poor in the name of humanity, which in reality covers up the political activities within. So why was this Englishman launching himself into a case and taking nothing for it? “Am I

sat with a great deceiver intending to impose himself on me?" he asked himself.

He continued to turn the small teaspoon silently, thinking, seemingly indifferent to the Englishman's silence. He was looking for a word which would put an end to the conversation which no longer interested him.

The wife looked on. She quickly and rather indifferently saw the guest offering sympathy. When Jeffrey said, "I know that all of this may seem strange, but in fact it is actually very normal for me. I mean to help for the sake of helping. I'm not saying that I've helped a lot of people in the past, in fact it's the opposite. I don't care about the problems of others and I don't think of them as my problems, or even have an interest in them. But for me, my ethics and morals are much different to those of others. Yesterday I was thinking – 'what is the point of ethics if one doesn't ease the pain and suffering of others?'"

"This is a Christian view of things," announced Ibrahim as he moved his position slightly.

"There's no connection to Christianity or any other religion for that matter," responded Jeffrey quickly, before adding, "What I want to say is that I am aware that all creatures are engaged in a cruel yet futile fight for survival which inevitably ends in extinction."

"Including humans?" asked the sheik with interest.

"Especially humans! I hope the word 'extinction' doesn't bother you. I only wanted to explain my reasons."

“Never mind,” said the sheik. “Death has many names.”

Despite its steady decline, the sun still cast its rays from tens of millions of miles away and kept the seas and towns warm. Behind them, the little girl and her brother played with toys, not making enough noise to bother anyone.

“Now I accept your help,” proclaimed Ibrahim, puffing out his chest. “I will give him an opportunity which won’t cost me anything,” said the sheik to himself. If Jeffrey was lazy he could look for someone else. He recognised that he was not fully aware of every Western habit. Nor did he know their ideas regarding such things as existence, creation or humanity, partly because everyone has their own perspectives. It was important that he was a local in a town in which the number of foreigners was increasing, as he had himself seen the day before hundreds of Africans and Arabs.

Chapter 3

“He who has an address gives himself away.”

Jeffrey grabbed the red bag which was packed with letters and slung it on his shoulder. Before leaving, he nodded to his line manager.

“However, announcing one’s presence is also done by way of small signals,” he added, still preoccupied with the idea of the role addresses played in the lives of human beings. Instead of heading for the southern area of the town to deliver the letters, Jeffrey headed for Goldstone Street in the West. He knocked on the door of number 210 softly at first and then louder when he could not hear movement inside.

The door creaked open slowly and an obese woman appeared.

“Sorry to have disturbed you,” said Jeffrey with a degree of urgency as the woman stood silently waiting to hear what the new postman wanted.

“I was wondering if I could speak to Mr. Smith if possible?”

“There is nothing stopping you,” the woman rejoined, “except that there are no tenants living here under that name”

Jeffrey glanced at the piece of paper in his hand before saying, “Julian Smith, madam.”

The woman simply shook her head, confirming what she had said previously.

“He is supposed to live here, number 210!” Jeffrey said.

“You’ve come to the correct number, there’s no doubt of that” she said before falling silent once more.

“The address which I have is written on a letter from his bank. Isn’t that strange?”

“What does he look like, this Smith?” asked the woman, who seemed to like being in control and who was growing impatient.

“It’s most likely that he is middle-aged,” offered Jeffrey

“There was once a tenant named Smith, but he went by a different first name. But as far as I can remember he left two years ago.”

“Did he leave his new address with you?”

“They don’t usually leave their new addresses. Occasionally they come back to pick up any post and then I never see them again”

“I understand, said Jeffrey. “Can you remember any of his features to describe him please?” Jeffrey wanted to get an idea of his look.

“Well as you said, he’s middle-aged”

“Very much obliged madam,” He said, waving before turning to leave. The woman, however, stopped him with a question.

“I take it that there is no post today, then?”

“I’m so sorry madam, but I deliver in a different area,” Jeffrey informed her before continuing on his way.

In Gable Street he placed a small bundle of advertisements and letters into the letterbox of number 1.

“It’s not guaranteed that the addresses will lead to anything!” he grumbled to himself.

At number 3 he pressed the button to the right of the door and the bell rang inside. A young man appeared with a happy expression when he realised it was the postman.

“Sign here, please,” urged Jeffrey, as he extended a receipt for the packages and the recorded letters. The youth scribbled his name down on the paperwork and Jeffrey gave him the letters.

“Thank you,” he and Jeffrey said simultaneously, and Jeffrey crossed the street to do the even numbers.

“Well, Mr. Smith: every address has a different name,” he mused, as he stuffed two letters for Mrs. Griffin into the letter box of number 2. In actual fact one’s address was not permanent as it gets deleted after death. Then as time goes by, one’s grave would too be deleted.

He thought of the sheik's pain over his missing son, thinking that time would heal the hurt by itself. However, rather than rely on the normal passage of time to which we as humans are accustomed, the sheik was working towards ending the pain himself. Time doesn't stop at hours or days, or even years for that matter. Indeed it only took a second for the boy to go missing and this is very different to the timing burdening one's mind – that which passes sluggishly. And so he simply *had* to find Julian Smith – perhaps he knew something of the whereabouts of the missing boy.

“Hello, Mr. Postman!” called out an elderly man. Jeffrey stopped in the middle of the street, listening to the resident of number 25 who had opened his door as he passed by.

“Are you sure that there is no post for me today?” asked the old man.

“If there had been mail for you then I wouldn't have missed you out,” said Jeffrey.

“I'm waiting on a response from the council,” grumbled the old man in an obstinate tone.

“This is typical of the council,” Jeffrey replied sympathetically, “They don't bother addressing your needs unless there is an election on.” “Perhaps tomorrow,” he added, putting some letters through number 27's box.

Jeffrey took another batch of letters out of the red bag and laid them out in order over his forearm. “There are some addresses which wait hopelessly for an answer,” he told

himself, “and others which nobody remembers at all. Mrs. Brown at number 35 takes her letters and pushes the junk mail back towards me saying that it’s just rubbish. This is in spite of the fact that the rubbish is just going to remain strewn on her doorstep.”

“The most miserable of all addresses,” he contemplated, as he pushed a letter through to number 29, “are those who wait a long time for something to arrive, day after day.”

He remembered that the bank statement which the sheik had given to him had an old date. If not a deliberate change of address, perhaps due to personal reasons, this would no longer be Smith’s address.

Jeffrey didn’t know much about the lives of detectives or the circles which they frequented. According to films and novels, detectives usually live in ordinary houses and rent a tiny office where customers meet them. Nonetheless, fiction endows them with extraordinary capabilities, adorning them with legendary status. Mr. Smith, however, had just put an advert on the internet. The telephone number which the sheik had been using to contact him had stopped working some six months previous. Therefore, Jeffrey would be faced with a search in more than one place.

Every day, names and numbers passed Jeffrey’s view. This ritual made him familiar with the residents; the colours and designs of their houses and their doors; those who sent letters and even a little information about their lives. The streets in which Jeffrey delivered post were in a working class

residential area of medium-sized, terraced houses. This was the typical layout of the old-style coal-heated houses. There was not a Smith among them.

He smiled when he thought of this. As he stuffed a small bundle of letters and advertisements into the door of number 68, Mr. and Mrs. Taylor's, he directed his smile inward as he remembered the response from his father the night before, "Detectives?" his father had said, scrunching his eyebrows, "You should be searching for them in the richer neighbourhoods." He continued, "Those greedy dogs have developed lots of services for their livelihoods including private detective work." Pausing to think for a moment, he reflected, "It's because of their beautiful wives. In my day, there was no need for private detectives!" he said, turning his gaze towards his scornful wife.

Before placing the bundle of letters through the letterbox of number 109, the door opened and there stood Mrs. Haywood with a beckoning smile; her heaving breasts clearly visible beneath the nearly-transparent night dress. "When will you be joining me inside for a drink?" she asked, in a husky, seductive tone.

"Some other time, Mrs. Haywood," said Jeffrey, holding the letters up to her face.

"Always some other time," pronounced Mrs. Haywood, her smile still beckoning.

"Tell me an address, and I will tell you where you live," whispered Jeffrey to himself as he placed two flyers through the letterbox of number 111 before crossing the road.

On more than one occasion Mrs. Haywood had invited him inside as her bosom lay prominent under the night dress. Frequently he had glimpsed a patch of blonde pubic hair and felt her desire burning between her firm thighs. However, this type of relationship was alien to him. Indeed he was happy to savour the flesh of the one single woman that he was used to. In the back of his mind, the image of his girlfriend Linda, with her rounded bottom in his lap all night, mixed with the thought of the sheik's wife's, her beautiful form and firm buttocks bouncing in her tight trousers before him.

Gable Street ended at number 135 and Mrs. Haywood still offering her body as she smiled, ever hopeful that the postman would some day change his mind and accept the offer.

He delivered two letters to number 1 and then crossed the street as there was no post for number 3. There, his friend Chris, who worked at Barclays Bank, sprang to mind, and he felt confident that he could get the name about which he now persistently thought. He would pop into Chris' office in search of the latest information pertaining to Mr. Smith. Chris Morrel was previously a close, but now distant, friend. Jeffrey had spent two years with him in secondary school, and also hung around with him in the area where they lived. They had kept in touch over a very long time.

Mr. Crossley at number two bore a close resemblance in build, voice and features to his old friend Chris. The two had gone their separate ways some years back. He had first of all to call the number he held for him, but thought that he could have a new job now or even have left Brighton completely.

He pressed the door bell to number 7. "Please don't be giving me a bloody headache with all this ringing. Every day I tell you that there is nobody in the house," cried Mrs. Fletcher from behind the door.

Jeffrey grinned. "I know, Mrs. Fletcher," he said. "But every day I must push lightly on the bell and then leave. I'm very sorry."

This is the way the conversation would go between Mrs. Fletcher and Jeffrey almost every day. She refused to accept the recorded letters from the housing office demanding she leave following non-payment of rent. Jeffrey understood this very well and she knew it. However, the issue was still deeply sensitive, and was clearly displayed in her reaction to the bell being rung.

Jeffrey spent three hours delivering letters and then the rest of his time in the sanctity of the sorting office amongst his colleagues, working and cracking jokes. With the playful atmosphere he could escape the difficulties of his life. He empathised with the crisis befalling Mrs. Fletcher because of his knowledge of the British Empire, which his father would praise following his own father's influence. He knew that the empire was destroyed by bureaucracy as well as the arrogance that the rulers perpetually displayed over the people of their colonies. Then this bureaucracy and arrogance grew at home, and Britain suffered from such hideousness as well as corruption. And now, even young politicians seemed unperturbed by lying and deceiving.

Every time Jeffrey remembered that difficult period, he felt satisfied with himself for deciding to shun the tedious government jobs. Those jobs purloin one's life, through either madness or a slow death.

During the harsh winter storms and those long rainy days, nobody would interrupt his thoughts. His customers, with their anger, happiness or sadness never impeded the work of the postman. They were preoccupied with their own personal problems.

“Good morning,” he chimed. “Good day to work on the garden!”

“It's a beautiful day for sure, especially after the rain of the last few days,” said a smiling Mrs. Hale, responding to Jeffrey. She momentarily stopped digging her small garden which was less than a metre wide, laid beside her house next to number 3. It is the only garden on Carlton Hill Street, across which Jeffrey was zigzagging as he delivered letters.

Mrs. Hale counted herself lucky in possessing this small area of garden and so scattered seasonal seedlings which bloomed and withered within a few days.

“They haven't got time,” Jeffrey said to himself. “Each seed holds the map of its life, whether it is blue eyes in the middle of a pink face; violet eyes surrounded by a light apricot; deep azure eyes set between brown cheeks. It carries the secrets of its tenderness or brutality, its beauty or ugliness, and above all it carries its own death! Even the stars live for billions of years and eventually die. So what are you plans for the

inevitable tomorrow, and more to the point, the inevitable death?”

In the distance he could see Mrs. Petrovski waiting across the street from outside her deserted house at number 28. As he approached her, with each address he passed she seemed to become more nervous, her gaze flicking between the house and the street as if something was threatening her.

Mrs. Petrovski had been coming to this abandoned house for a couple of years now to collect her mail and go. Today she had been getting increasingly anxious as he approached. When he reached number 23 she moved to the middle of the road.

“Mr. Postman, there is someone inside my house. Please could you help me find out what is happening?” she asked pointing towards the house as Jeffrey offered her the bundle of letters which had been destined for the letterbox of number 23.

She was in her fifties yet she still had a notable amount of strength and agility and retained a certain beauty in her features. He remembered a similar time when he stopped for Mrs. Petrovski on the other side of the house, when she stood trembling with fear responding with short answers to her husband. This was as Mr. Petrovski loomed in the middle of the front door waving his powerful, hairy arms, all the while shouting threats.

“Which ‘someone’ do you mean, Mrs. Petrovski?” queried Jeffrey.

“I don’t know, it could be a thief,” the Polish woman replied before adding, “I will pay you whatever you ask for if you just go inside and sort it out – whatever it is!”

Not a great deal remained except the bare, burnt walls and the boarded-up ground floor windows following the fire which gutted the house and killed its owner some two years earlier. The windows upstairs were like black holes surrounded by charred frames. Doubts remained as to the cause of the incident. These especially concerned the role of the wife, or that of her lover. Clearing the mess left behind had been delayed until two months ago when the court eventually attributed the reasons to the negligent, alcoholic husband following the break-up with his wife. The court then awarded full inheritance to the only son of the family.

“Okay, Mrs. Petrovski, let’s have a look who’s inside,” he nodded. She went forward and turned the key, but stopped nervously.

Aside from destruction at the gloomy entrance, there was nothing of note. There were some broken doors and also boxes and cartons scattered around here and there, some empty, some filled with old dishes and books, and all but a few bulbs were gone.

“Is there anyone in here?” cried Jeffrey, directing his voice to the second floor.

No reply. The silence and dust were the only occupants. Mrs. Petrovski gingerly checked the living room in which rotting furniture lay alongside other insignificant things. She knew her way around what was once her house. She entered

the kitchen which had become nothing more than a sewage hole. She shook the tap vigorously to stop the dripping water which was overflowing from the sink onto the floor.

“Please, could we go up to the second floor?”

She went with Jeffrey but stopped behind him.

“There is nothing to be stolen here!” announced Jeffrey mockingly as he slowly climbed the stairs with her following behind.

“They’ve stolen everything.”

“Who has?” demanded Jeffrey.

“The homeless people who squat here,” she explained. “One of my relatives tried to block the back door up with wood but they come back and just forced it through. I would have thought that sleeping here would be enough for them, but it seems they must destroy things as well. I am waiting for the decision to get the house registered in my son’s name so we can sell it as quickly as possible.”

The second floor was where the fire had broken out and was a terrible mess— the skeletons of the various pieces of furniture on top of each other in the corners and the warped walls testifying to the heat of the fire. In each of the rooms there were items of clothes and hats which confirmed in Jeffrey’s mind that the place was used by tramps during the bleak winter.

“Next week, my son is coming over from America to sign the paperwork. He lives with his wife in California,” she

went on. Reassured, Mrs. Petrovski searched the bedroom and the bathroom on the top floor without stopping her chatter.

“As you can see, nobody is here!” exclaimed Jeffrey.

“Thanks a lot,” said Mrs. Petrovski. “I will pay you for helping me.”

“Why do you want to pay me? I haven’t done any work!”

“I was scared! I heard movement inside – perhaps they escaped through the back door. I will ask my relative to put an extra wooden board up”

He looked out of the window to the small and overgrown back garden.

“There is nobody in there,” insisted Jeffrey. “I’m sure you’re safe. As for me, I have to get back to my round!”

“I am so grateful for your help. How much should I pay you?” she said, as she took out a small purse from her handbag.

“You shouldn’t pay me anything,” responded Jeffrey as he went down the dark stairs cautiously.

“Please, let me pay you,” she said, walking down the stairs behind him.

“Don’t worry about it. Your people are one of the kindest of people who overcame the most oppressive of empires,” he said as he got to the bottom of the last of the stairs.

“Do you mean the Poles? You don’t know how bad they can be!” she said.

He didn’t respond to her as she continued in her attempts to pay him.

“There is nothing for you to pay me for. I leave you in peace,” said Jeffrey at the door. As he was leaving, Mrs. Petrovski bent down to pick up the pile of letters and junk mail.

“Thank you for your help, but I must pay you,” she said, despite the fact that he’d crossed the road to continue delivering.

As he pushed a bunch of letters into number 26, he said to himself, “A fear of the dead, perhaps that’s what frightens her; the ghost of her dead husband more than thieves or tramps!”

He rushed to finish off the remaining houses and again his mind turned to Julian Smith. He whispered to himself that he should be cautious when dealing with Smith’s address and then grinned. His smile soon developed into an all-out laugh as he thought that Julian Smith wasn’t the only one without an address of his own as Jeffrey himself had moved back with his father after separating from his wife!

Chapter 4

In the space of thirty minutes the spider had spun four equal parts of its fine thread between the stem of one rose and the small branches beneath it. The outer geometric shape of the web along with its borders was now clearly defined, and so the movement between the intersection points had become faster. At the same time, both surprise and worry were spinning their own black webs inside the mind of Mr. Ibrahim.

“Would you like a cup of Arabic coffee?” the young wife asked.

“Yes, please,” he replied, without averting his attention from the continuous activity in front of him.

He was sitting in the warm sun in the back garden of the villa that he had rented when he arrived in Brighton. He sat mesmerised at what this tiny creature was doing – its supreme effort in building its delicate trap. The sheik waited with considerable uncertainty for the end result, one which could change his thoughts and beliefs, and perhaps even the priorities in his life.

He eagerly observed the white shiny threads, which were thinner than those of silk stretched and spread over two feet in length. They were wide enough to catch insects either coming in or out of the mouth of a cave large enough to get a medium-sized man inside.

The spider began plotting a small polygon as a centre point at the angle between the stem and a branch, followed by the rest of the web enlarging outwards in circles. Within fifteen minutes the inner gaps of the web were complete. The threads of the net then appeared narrower, but it wasn't finished yet. It turned again and added another thinner thread which was stickier and transparent so as to trap the smaller insects as well.

The time the spider took opened Ibrahim's eyes to something much more poignant, yet at the same time blinded him as he reflected deeply. His introspection concerned the numerous thoughts, memories and pictures which together represent the most significant tools in shaping the structure of one's emotions.

"What shall we do now?" Ibrahim asked in a hushed voice as he slouched with his entire body down in the chair.

"We are going into town," said his wife, staring into the small cup filled with his still-untouched coffee.

"Pardon me?" he asked, wanting to grasp his wife's response.

"We're going to town," she repeated.

"Hmmm, yes, we'll go to town," he said, sighing in defeat.

“But you haven’t drunk your coffee. Shall I go and get you a fresh one?” asked his wife, as she looked at him probingly, trying to fathom his thoughts.

“No, there’s no need for that,” he deflected her, wresting himself away from his thinking.

He asked her to get the children ready. “Where are they anyway?” he asked.

“They’re playing in the front garden,” she answered before saying that she would call them. Once she left, he sank straight back into being consumed by angry thoughts.

“A lot of what we know comes from deceptive sources,” he muttered to himself quietly.

From the doorway, his wife called for the girl and her brother to come inside. But they continued to play, thoroughly engaged in their game. When she announced that they were going into town, they came running inside.

There wasn’t anything strange in the rose bushes to grab her attention. Also, she knew that her husband wasn’t interested in horticulture. She didn’t normally intrude into the issues over which he busied himself. However, the depth of his thought and the cooling of the coffee he held in his hands gave her the feeling that the news from the Englishman on his mobile phone about Nasser, the missing son, was not positive. Either that or perhaps he had received a call from abroad about a business problem.

Everyone was happy in this English town when they came for the first time. Within the next few days the search

would show if Nasser was there or not and they could then decide their next move.

However Ibrahim, missing the turning for route 52 for the second time, and going downhill along the parallel street taking them towards the coast, confirmed to the wife that there was something more to his contemplation in the garden.

“You’re deep in thought, or you are absent-minded today. Is something worrying you?” she finally asked. The car was equipped with satellite navigation telling them their every turn, as they travelled on the straight road from Saltdean to Brighton. This was a road they had used on more than one occasion.

“Nothing in particular,” said Ibrahim.

This was the same phrase he used when something was of serious concern; it had alarmed her today like never before. In a second she felt like she had aged ten years to equal his age. It was only right that she should share his worries. If the issue was Nasser, she had participated in raising him too and had looked after him like a real mother. It was her marriage to Ibrahim which had proven to be the bedrock of this whole issue. Her concern for his life and his future was no less than that of his father. She didn’t remove herself and her son and daughter from the troubles of travelling, of spending days on boats; she could have left him to look for Nasser alone if she wanted. She could have spent the summer holidays with friends and family instead. Rather, he used to book a three-month round-world holiday every summer during which they would ride the unrelenting winds and surging waves.

She didn't comment on his abrupt answer as he seemed very introspective today. She remained silent, but her internal emotions were betrayed by her external expression and a grimace appeared on her face.

She had expected a miserable day, with more stress on her as she would have to conceal her unhappiness from the two children.

She secretly desired to exacerbate the situation by antagonising him, and Ibrahim's continued silence would only serve to increase her feelings of resentment.

Ibrahim stopped the car near to the pavement along the shore. He put all of his loose change into the ticket machine as they intended to stay in town for the rest of the afternoon and some of that evening. He would leave his wife and the children in the arcade and wander alone along the beach.

"I'll stay with you once we've left the kids," she said firmly.

He didn't know the reason behind her abruptness. As he couldn't think of anything he may have said in the car, he asked if she was sad about something.

The question took her by surprise.

She hadn't prepared the words to explain her reasons for being sad but the feelings which were brewing inside of her were betrayed by her expression. She turned her face away from him as a last weapon of torture for him. However, the young girl intervened and saved her at the last second.

"We want to go to the cinema."

“Yeah, to see a cartoon!” the young boy added.

“I’ll take them to the cinema,” she said having been rescued by her daughter’s request. “You can go off and walk – alone with your problems,” she added, her discontent now somewhat reduced. Ambiguity would keep him occupied more so than the actual reasons behind her anger.

She took the hands of the young boy and girl and crossed the road, deliberately saying nothing as she left. This would make him think seriously about the issues behind her anger.

“We’ll meet at Victoria Bar on the coastal path,” Ibrahim shouted. The only response he got was a nod of her head as she left.

An edgy yet emotional person, his wife Noura was always treated with love and tolerance when she was angry. He only had to see her before him, with her elegant clothes, beautifully curly hair and youthful body, for happiness to grip him. At least he thought that she and their two children had formed the most important part of his life. But his thoughts were muddied, perhaps even shaken, since the spider had finished its black web before his eyes.

He meditated that his ancestors had relied on naïve reasoning to reassure themselves about life and death; so naïve that it could be explicated by the actions of a small spider.

They then resorted to violence to enforce such reasoning.

He asked himself what it was that had kept us so busy so as to not question the speed with which the spider is able to

weave its web. Was it laziness? Or was it the espousal of blind trust by our deceptive forefathers?

The image of the spider's web had been seared in his mind since the car had set off from Saltdean, right until they had arrived at Brighton. Even then, the sight lingered like a thick mist on his mind.

Death seemed scary, and the sea, this vastness of water, was not on his mind as his two feet carried him mechanically along the tarmac of the long beach toward the edge of town. The pavement was swathed in sunlight, touched by a slight wind and crowded by the steps of the others, hundreds of steps; strange ones, steady ones, convergent as well as separate, but all of which sounded joyful as they took pleasure in the beautiful weather.

He hadn't thought of death before with such persistence and discomfort. Moving fast and slow, work continued to be his primary concern since inheriting the small trading office some twenty-five years before. He was so faithful to the strength and stability with which religion drives the endeavours of the mind and soul to their destiny. However, this faith had been called to account a few weeks before when, in Algeria, the heads of twenty-eight people had been cut off, among them four children – all in the name of God!

The picture which had been lodged in both his waking and sleeping brain was a picture of his son and daughter having their necks sawn through with a blunt knife as they drowned in their own blood.

Since that day, the picture kept radiating in the recesses of his brain, “Why does belief produce such mindsets?”

Since that day he had been recalling the conversations and stories he heard from his mother and his father as well as other relatives and friends concerning God and religion at different times in his life. Then that morning, the spider, with its tiny body, had arrived and opened his eyes; eyes which had been consumed with suspicion about the superstitious basis on which their voices found a platform to speak.

Heaven, as a concept, was one of the reasons for his kind-heartedness all his life. However, the questions swirling around his mind about it recently tainted these feelings. He was wracked with doubt. More than this, he was wracked by the picture of horror concerning his young son and daughter.

“Who are these good guys who could answer all of our big questions? In which tomb does the ultimate word lie, and in which temple shall I find the definite faith?” he spoke quietly to himself.

He wondered about the mystery a great deal but he simply didn’t know where to start, and moreover didn’t know where he would finish. He wasn’t fond of searching in books for the answers. He found himself wrapped up in some sort of complex net, from which he would only ever emerge lost and annoyed with himself. The fear of death struck him again.

These feelings hadn’t afflicted him before and he hadn’t thought about death. He spent his forty-five years absorbed with his life. Moreover, it seemed to him that being filled with the joys of life, nice belongings, marriages and children had

passed his life by in a flash, and no longer featured intrinsically in his mentality.

He couldn't believe that he had lived forty-five years. If he lived for another ten years, or twenty, or perhaps even thirty years, once they had passed they would only fill a short moment.

His footsteps led him far away and a chill ran down his spine as his heart rained with fear. He thought of the strangers' steps around him as being on a path to disappearance; to death.

The dampness from the sand had soaked through his shoes and so he continued his progress on the pavement of the seafront promenade. The sea darkened with a silvery sheen and the hills behind the town sank into gloom as afternoon gave way to evening.

Chapter 5

Jeffrey sat in the visitors' room among a number of clients, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief. He was waiting for his friend Chris Morrel to come out of his office for their meeting.

The clouds had been swirling quickly around the sky since the early morning. The sun shone through the occasional gaps in the clouds, casting an orange hue on the light drizzle. When the sun disappeared, the drizzle resembled translucent glass beads which had settled on the faces of passers-by.

Yesterday, he had called Chris asking for a small favour regarding the address of one of the five million customers of the bank. That customer was Julian Smith.

Also yesterday, he had gone into one of the seaside bars often frequented by Arabs and Africans, along with Eastern Europeans and raised his voice to ask, "Is there anyone in here who knows Nasser Ibrahim?" The question captured everybody's attention and caused half of the customers to flee the place.

"Illegal immigrants," the barman said, in answer to Jeffrey's puzzled expression.

Chris approached Jeffrey and smiled seeing him get out of his seat to shake hands. They were equally delighted to see each other.

“You’ve put on a bit of weight, Chris!”

“The wife’s cooking!” he replied. “It’s the same for you, Jeff!”

“Mother’s cooking,” Jeffrey said, raising his voice as they laughed.

“We should meet for a drink,” suggested Chris.

“Sounds good to me,” answered Jeffrey.

Chris produced a paper listing addresses. “With regards to Mr. Julian Smith,” he said, pointing with his finger, “this is the latest address we have for him.”

Jeffrey read the address and said out loud, “Royale Street. It’s different to the one I have for him.”

“The address was registered three months ago – it’s probable he changes his address a lot.”

“That’s undoubtedly true!” Jeffrey agreed. “But how does the bank allow this?”

“The bank has to accept the address changes,” he noted. “Don’t forget that thousands of customers live on boats on the river, or are travellers in caravans moving from one place to another. Because the bank knows that it need only deal with their accounts on a monthly basis, it doesn’t force them to register a fixed address with every move.”

Jeffrey understood the bank rules regarding addresses then remembered to say that this Smith moved between motels. Chris's answer suggested that it shouldn't matter. He then revealed that Smith had neither deposited any money in nor withdrawn any money out from the account since registering his new address. His balance of just a few pounds hadn't changed.

Jeffrey quickly concluded that Smith must be unemployed. Then he said, "This is because the sheik stopped payments six months ago as I told you."

"This is possible," said Chris. "But he could potentially have opened accounts with four banks and be moving the money between them."

"Oh," said Jeffrey, smiling. "I bet he's no mug!"

"Definitely not," said Chris in agreement. He added that Smith received his monthly statements by recorded delivery, rather like businesses and wealthy customers to ensure the bank details don't end up in the hands of strangers.

Jeffrey tapped his temple with his forefinger a number of times, and after a short while he chuckled at the thought of the man's shrewdness. The recorded delivery letters are returned to the collection offices from incorrect addresses. Once there, he could collect them with complete security.

Jeffrey left the bank after agreeing to meet up for a chat with Chris when they got the chance.

“It is easiest to catch a fox in its hole,” he said to himself as he headed for Royale Street in the east. He thought that Smith would have changed his address in the same area, as Royale Street was near to Goldstone Street where he had asked a few days before.

“Jeffrey!” shouted his girlfriend Linda, heading towards him. The two were walking along the same deserted pavement, yet in spite of this, he hadn’t seen her until he heard her voice and she stopped right in front of his face.

“What an earth is with you?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry, I wasn't paying attention,” he confessed, kissing her on the cheek.

“What are you doing here?” she asked

“I was looking for someone’s address,” he said. “What brings you here?”

“I was visiting my aunty.”

“I didn’t know you had an aunty who lived in Brighton.”

“Jeffrey, come to mine today or tomorrow. There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Good or bad?” he asked.

“In actual fact, I don’t really know. I need your opinion on something.”

“Okay, perhaps today” he suggested.

“Well I won’t keep you,” she said. “I’ll see you later.”

The two went their separate ways. She hadn't seemed especially worried or anxious about anything, so his mind returned to thinking about the tricks which Smith used to avoid those who were after him. He ended up thinking that perhaps he wasn't actually offering any help to the sheik in searching for his son. Instead he was playing at being a sleuth, a role he wasn't very good at. He didn't know if he was employing the correct methods and that perhaps it would be better if the sheik hired another detective to search for the old one.

He then concluded that such advice would not be appropriate, at least for the time being. He had offered assistance and now had to make good on his promise, at this stage anyway.

"Smith had said that there was evidence to suggest that his son had settled in the town," he thought, "probably just to get some more money. Otherwise, why would he suddenly flee when learning of the sheik's intention to head for Brighton?"

From the sheik's end, he wasn't so gullible as to keep paying without any solid evidence. Therefore, he had promised Smith that he would pay him the outstanding amount when he got to Brighton. At this point, the two had lost contact.

Although Jeffrey did not think the sheik was naïve, at the same time he didn't consider him shrewd. However, it sparked a question in the postman's mind of just what he would do in the sheik's position. He didn't know.

"Does Julian Smith live here?" He asked the middle aged woman who had opened the door after he had pushed the door bell a number of times.

“No, we don’t have anyone by the name Smith,” said the woman.

“Are you just letting the rooms?” he asked.

“We’ve got one room in the loft available now.”

He didn’t stay any longer. He thanked her before making his way back down the stairs, wiping the drizzle off his forehead.

He returned to the post office to work the compulsory three hours following the delivery stage. There, the time of his return from delivering was recorded. After this, he headed for the office for returned mail.

“Jack, have you frequently had any mail returned in the name of Julian Smith?”

“No,” he said. “If he is single, and in work, with nobody at home, he would appear in my workflow as one of my clients!”

Jeffrey smiled and headed for the work assigned to him.

After finishing work, he went to the cheap restaurants along the sea. He had been told of a place serving North Africans dishes.

Gloom came down over the town. Heavy clouds had formed in the sky and yet the threat of rain didn’t seem to worry those out walking on the pavements in front of the cafés and restaurants. The street lights illuminated the drizzle which had begun to fall; reflected in the light it resembled burning glass.

At the door of the North African Restaurant, he took the photo of the sheik's son out and studied his features before replacing it in his red post bag and strolling inside.

He used the red bag as cover. He would not be raising his voice this time with his question. He had come to resemble someone who lived on cheap meals. The small restaurant was heaving with customers, all chatting loudly with the exception of two groups of western tourists in search of an eastern culinary adventure. The imposing sound of the drums drowned out their words. Most of those present had three distinct features: slim faces, protruding cheek bones and thin moustaches. Some faces, however, also bore some old scars.

Nowhere was there an empty table and so he was forced to ask a group of youths for permission to share their table. The three quickly consulted one another before agreeing.

"Where are you from?" asked one of the youths, who seemed quite happy to have him with them.

"I'm from around here," said Jeffrey. He thought of the post bag which he was using as cover as having little value.

"Welcome, welcome," said each of the three of them in loud voices wearing childish grins as if they had found something amusing.

"Do you like North African food?" asked one of them.

"I'd like to try it," responded Jeffrey.

"It's good," pronounced one. "Very good," said another. They spoke in broken English well enough for Jeffrey to understand.

“Have you ever tried couscous?” asked the first one.

“No, what is it?”

“It’s very, very good,” said another.

“Perhaps he wants some spicy food!” said another in Arabic, before turning to the Englishman to ask, “Do you like spicy food?”

“I prefer it to be middling – not too spicy” responded Jeffrey.

“Eat the shakhshukha!” suggested one of the guys.

“What’s that?” asked Jeffrey.

“Shakhshukha is very tasty but extremely hot!” said the first guy to his friend before suggesting to Jeffrey. “You should take the kamouniyya”

“And what exactly is the kamouniyya?” said Jeffrey inquisitively.

“Kamouniyya is meat with...” he paused to think before turning to his friend for the English word.

“Liver,” responded the friend.

“It’s made with liver,” repeated the first.

Jeffrey asked what language they were speaking and they explained that they spoke Arabic.

Jeffrey was sure that he had found the right place. The task in hand would be easy with Arabs.

“What are you guys ordering?” asked Jeffrey.

“Kebab with onions,” responded the second guy.

“Beef burger,” said the third.

“Meat with harissa paste,” the first guy turned to his friend once more and asked for the English word for harissa.

“Spicy!” the second guy said.

“Oh, I know spicy!” exclaimed Jeffrey.

Jeffrey mulled over his choice. As he did so, the first guy turned his head to the others and said sarcastically in Arabic, “I bet he orders camel loins with humus!”

The guys began to laugh. Jeffrey simply smiled, not knowing what the first guy had said or why they were laughing.

“I’ll have the kebab,” Jeffrey finally announced.

The first guy shouted over to the owner of the restaurant in a loud voice, “Al-Ayooshi, get some kebab for the foreigner quickly. God bless your parents.”

Thanks to the fast food takeaways, kebab had become a familiar word to Jeffrey, not knowing that in reality, a doner kebab is much different. Then he learned from one of the guys that the restaurant only offered one type of North African kebab, and that this included the spicy sauce.

The drums continued to beat in every song pumped out by the CD player. Jeffrey took the chance when the second guy was chatting about food to ask them their home nation. One said that he was from Algeria. His name was Sa`id and he was studying at Brighton University. The second guy Bureesh was

also from Algeria, and the third was a Libyan named Omar. The latter two worked different jobs for a living.

“My name is Jeffrey”

“Hello Mr. Jeffrey,” said Sa`id.

“Welcome,” said Omar. Bureesh didn’t care to say anything.

“Are there a lot of Arabs in Brighton?” asked Jeffrey.

“A few,” answered Sa`id.

When Bureesh asked about the Englishman’s questions, Sa`id simply said that he was asking about the Arabs in the town. Just as he was about to ask about the sheik’s son, the platters of food arrived and were placed in the middle of the table and everyone tucked in.

The aroma of spices swirled above the normal smell of the restaurant. The wet customers who were entering scanned the room for vacant places.

The three were happy at the arrival of their food and they exchanged what seemed like banter between themselves in their own language. Suddenly, Bureesh pushed over his plate to let Jeffrey taste the yellow-coloured food which was surrounded by green chillies.

He said, “It really is incredibly hot!”

“Thank you,” said Jeffrey taking a morsel of food. After tasting it he said smiling:

“Very nice, and hot!”

As they started eating their meals in small bites, Bureesh whispered to Sa'id, "Go on, ask... ask him the question."

"Mr. Jeffrey, what is your work?"

Jeffrey placed the red bag in front of them before saying, "I'm a postman".

"I'm sorry, I didn't notice that," Sa'id revealed smiling, before asking in a shy voice. "Do you know anyone who needs a cleaner?"

"I'm sorry, but no. Are you unemployed?"

"In actual fact it's Bureesh who is in need of work," he said, nodding his head in the direction of his friend.

"If I hear of anyone needing a cleaner, then I'll call you straight away," said Jeffrey.

Sa'id translated what Jeffrey had said in a few words to Bureesh, who yawned, signalling his disregard for the lack of effort made, before pulling a face and mumbling a few words.

For a while they sat chewing their food and listening to the drums. Throughout it all, Jeffrey thought of how he could help them. Jeffrey sought an opportunity to ask about the sheik's son, however, his train of thought led him to say, "Why doesn't he try and get a job at the Job Centre? The Job Centre helps everyone."

Even though Sa'id knew that it was in vain, he translated the Englishman's words.

“Tell the pig to swallow his tongue,” responded Bureesh, slumped over his food so as to mask his Arabic words from the Englishman.

Jeffrey looked on at their faces, hopelessly trying to ascertain his response. However, all three simply returned to eating their food silently with their mouths open.

“I have a question, if I may,” said Jeffrey, breaking the silence.

“Of course,” responded Sa`id.

“Do any of you know a guy called Nasser Ibrahim?”

Sa`id thought for a while quietly repeating the name but shook his head in denial.

“He’s Tunisian,” added the Englishman.

Sa`id asked the other two in Arabic, “Do you two know a Tunisian guy called Nasser Ibrahim?”

The first pouted to signal that he didn’t.

“We haven’t heard of that name,” explained Sa`id, summarising their collective answer.

“Ask him why he’s asking about this name,” Bureesh told Sa`id.

“We don’t need this crap,” snapped Sa`id to shut him up.

“I was introduced to his father a while ago and he wanted his address,” Jeffrey added quickly in order to dispel

the doubts which had descended on their faces after he had asked.

The three continued to eat their dinners, seeming not to pay attention to the Englishman's explanation. He returned to eating his fatty meat slowly.

“Ah, Bureesh, I've heard that you don't intend to pay me for the room you rented and that you lived in with me?”

All three were surprised to see a young man standing over them. Their jaws stopped chewing and they all wore the same worried look.

Jeffrey didn't understand the reason for the tension but did notice that the man looked and spoke just like them. Jeffrey paid close attention to the fact that he had his right hand in his back pocket in a threatening manner.

“That's not true, but your words don't scare me,” shot back Bureesh, trying to keep his dignity whilst at the same time his fingers were opening his own back pocket.

“When will you give me my money?” demanded the guy standing.

“When I find a job I'll give you your filthy money,” said Bureesh, without averting his gaze from the threatening man.

Jeffrey continued to look on as he chewed away at his food. At that moment, the owner of the restaurant arrived.

“Ah, Masoudi! If you have come here to strike with your knife then I'm calling the police. However, if it was for

something to eat then I will happily show you to another seat somewhere else!”

Massoudi muttered something and then tapped his pocket. “God has blessed you this time!”

The tension eased slightly as both men removed their hands from their respective pockets and the only person left sporting an angry face was the owner. Once the standing man had left, without relaxing his gaze at the man sitting down, the owner uttered a few words before getting back to his work, thoroughly intimidated.

Outside, Jeffrey felt drained from the worry about the fight. He didn't know the extent of the danger or what the dispute was over. He had merely kept his eyes trained on the guy's pocket, even though the seated one had been far away from him.

He was also unaware of whether there were actually knives, or perhaps even pistols, in their pockets. The evil hovering above their heads was unmistakable.

He thought of those people and their nature. They are a minority, on the margins of society and yet life seems to be full of them. They sleep with their hands on their back pockets, guarding their remaining days. They are dangerous people who know no way to resolve issues other than with the ‘woosh’ of a knife which glints as it sails through the air before hitting its mark. In a blink of an eye, blood spills everywhere, warm at first and then cold; one man ends up in prison, and the other in the grave. Do they not realise the gift that their God supposedly gave them? Do they not stop to think that the gift of life is for

everyone, even before they made up their Gods? They will die and rot like animals, and no God can stand behind them. For thousands of years they have been polluting religions, adding to them their own knowledge and their views of life in the name of God or Christ so He would say to them “stand up” and they would stand, and He would grant them a place in the kingdom. Thus they could start a new life in compensation for those days of evil.

When he got to the end of the beach he began walking towards the centre of town. As he walked that way he remembered his promise to Linda, and headed towards her house.

The drizzle was disappearing as darkness began to fall, but it remained visible around the tops of the street lamps. The roads, a distance from the centre of Brighton were nearly empty of passers-by and were consumed by the coldness of the night.

After dinner, Linda took a cold shower and settled down on the sofa to watch television. Her thigh lay exposed from the white cotton robe to cool off from the warmth which awaited Jeffrey’s arrival.

They rarely met during the week as Linda worked in a pharmacy and was studying to be able to earn a full salary. She was divorced and hoped that she and Jeffrey would marry someday, but not immediately. They would spend their Saturdays going out for a meal or to a night club, but their favourite day was Sunday.

“You’re late!” she exclaimed, as Jeffrey caught sight of her breasts from under her robe. She sat relaxed yet her face bore an expression of ambiguous concern.

“I went for dinner at an African restaurant on the seafront,” Jeffrey, who was used to seeing her partially nude, especially after her nightly bath, ventured in his defence.

“That’s not like you!” she shot back.

“I was trying to get some news on an Arab guy whose father I met.”

He had explained everything to her in those terms, but she was uninterested in the rest of the story. She threw her hair back over the sofa and started to gather her thoughts. Before she could however, he asked, “What was it you needed to speak to me about?”

“My aunty recommended that I sell the house and that we split the money between the three of us – me, her and Billy. It’s written in the will.”

“Where will she live?”

“She could rent a small house,” she said.

“So, what’s the problem then?”

“Jeffrey, I feel guilty taking my father’s money!”

“Why?” he pressed her.

“Well, there’s more to the story than I’ve told you,” she said, putting her hands between her knees thinking of a suitable way to explain.

Jeffrey went forward and sat on the sofa so as to be beside her in case whatever she was going to explain was upsetting for her.

“Come on. Tell me where the problem is.”

“Jeffrey, when my father was in the hospital dying, he asked to see me. But I never went, I was 17 years old.”

“There must have been something that stopped you from seeing him.”

“No, I refused to go and see him,” she said looking at the floor shamefully.

“My father was an alcoholic towards the end of his life,” she explained. “He would drink and be very cruel – we were tortured by it, me, my mother and older brother. My mother bore the brunt of most of it before she left him. One day she just said, ‘enough is enough’. Then she got a divorce and we moved to my aunty’s. He had begun to live like an animal in his drunken moments.

Jeffrey pulled her towards him hugging her with his arm so as to alleviate her grief somewhat. He said, “Don’t blame yourself for not going to see him before he died. A girl of 17 is more susceptible to damage than children.”

“It’s not that, Jeffrey! I might have gone to see him as he wished whilst he was on his death bed – he was my father no matter what. But I was on my way to the airport with my friends for my first holiday abroad. I was faced with two choices, cancel the flight, or go on the trip.

She looked at Jeffrey's confused expression with her own perturbed face before saying, "I have paid for that decision I made at seventeen, in a way, with my life! Because now, I never know what the correct decision to make is."

After a tense silence, Jeffrey couldn't find the suitable thing to say in order to console her.

"Either way, you are rightfully entitled to your share of the inheritance," insisted Jeffrey. "I can't see any justifiable reason for refusing it."

"After I let him down at the last moment? I can't see how it is fair that I enjoy his money, isn't that right?"

"I'm sure that if he knew the circumstances at the time behind your decision then he would forgive you. Is this not the way it should be with parents?"

"It's not like that," she said dismissively.

The silence was striking as heart rates increased.

Finally, gathering his thoughts, Jeffrey said, "Let's be honest Linda, I don't know if the value of the house being big or small is making you feel ashamed for your decision, but one thing is for certain – everyone's lives are torturous. It is a double torture; the battle of our bodies against both the inside and outside to stay alive, and the torment that afflicts our souls in the frustrations and despairs we get from the other people who creep, like us, upon this earth. Only death itself may be the salvation from this meaningless yet cruel battle which is forced upon us. Death signals the beginning of eternal comfort as all the pains and the scars which have afflicted us

throughout our lives are wiped away. This is what happened to your father; all of his feelings, painful and beautiful, ended at the moment of death. His sadness will never return, even if you had gone to the hospital. In other words, look at our internal structure. I mean our insides, it's just a collection of systems, complex machines. We feed it throughout the day so that millions of the cells, genes and synapses continue to work for the next. In spite of this, all it takes is some bacteria or a virus to sneak in to destroy all of this in weeks or even days! It makes me wonder just how could we distinguish between what's right and wrong in life."

Linda felt more at ease, relieved of the gloominess and remorse which had consumed her all evening. She felt that contextualising the problem had somehow freed her from what remained of the scars from the issue. It had also freed her from worrying whether or not she should surrender her share of the house to her aunty and brother Billy to split between themselves. She stood and walked to the kitchen.

"I need a glass of wine before sleeping," she said as she walked. "Do you want one?"

"Why not," said Jeffrey.

She returned with a half empty bottle of wine and two glasses which she put down on the table. She filled the glasses with wine.

"I have never heard you talk about life and death like this before," she said.

“That’s because it’s disturbing, it should only be discussed when necessary!”

As the muted television continued emitting its colourful display, the two sat in silence drinking their wine casually.

The time passed midnight and she climbed into bed, completely naked. Jeffrey soon followed in the same manner. Before turning out the light, she stared at the ceiling for a while. She then turned and wished Jeffrey good night before turning onto her right side revealing her tender back which he held close to him with his arm over her shoulder. Once again silence descended as though they were to fall asleep. However, overcome by lustfulness, his penis hardened between her thighs.

Linda felt the movement between her legs as it grew. After a few moments, she said:

“Sorry Jeffrey, but I don’t want to make love tonight!”

Nevertheless, she slipped her arm behind her and ran her hand over his hardness. The two snoozed, relaxed, as a few drops of semen were shed.

Chapter 7

Whizz whizz whizz... The old chair creaked in the conservatory overlooking the garden. The two children headed for bed. Ibrahim sat silently after dinner, swinging slowly back and forth in the old bamboo rocking chair which he pushed with his foot. He rocked in slow motion with a single push. He would push once and wait for the chair to come to rest for a few seconds of silence and calm and then push again. Nevertheless, the disturbance in Noura's head did not cease.

Noura had waited three days to confront her husband with the same question, "What's wrong with you?"

The last few days had been spent in silent fury, and although he noticed her upset expression, he hadn't paid her much attention. He had been consumed with the questions of life and death and the fate of his young son and daughter. In addition, he considered his lost son, as well as fears from the spread of religious violence to his country.

The scenes of bloodshed broadcast in European media hadn't left his thoughts and had provoked true fears in his consciousness and his feelings. He now had strong doubts

about the inconsistencies within the information, utterances and stories which had filled his memory over the years.

When his wife brought his usual Arabic coffee after dinner, he noticed the glum look on her face. He grabbed her wrists before she turned around, gently pulling her towards him and sitting her on his lap.

“This morning, I realised why you are unhappy, yet I wasn’t in a good frame of mind to talk. You know I don’t like to see you angry with me!”

He gave her a long kiss on the cheek before rocking them both on the chair. “The doubts have been digging away at me,” he resumed, “In my heart and my mind. I must think of your safety, in fact the safety of all of us.”

“What’s been on your mind?” she asked, choking back tears as she put her arm around his back in an embrace.

“I no longer believe anything,” he responded immediately.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, it’s a problem and I can’t explain it at the time being.”

“I have the right to know! Three days you’ve been sitting there, guarding your thoughts, miles away from me. It’s as if I don’t exist.”

“But you’re one of the three people who are constantly in my thoughts,” he said.

“When you say ‘protecting us,’ what do you mean?” she said, her voice laced with latent fear. “Is our being here putting us in danger?”

“Of course not, we are here in complete safety!” responded Ibrahim.

He jerked her towards him sharply and kicked the ground, causing them to rock in the chair, which again squeaked back and forth.

“Then what are you scared of?” she snapped.

Ibrahim paused to think before saying, “Noura, do you remember the images we saw on the television in Amsterdam?”

“I remember,” she answered.

“Since that evening I haven’t been able to trust or believe in anything. I mean, my thinking was shaken when I asked: is it possible that Allah has asked those people to do what they have done?”

“They are killers; Allah doesn’t intervene in whatever they do,” she replied, speaking both for herself and Allah.

Again, Ibrahim paused to think before saying, “The problem is much bigger than this Noura, and I don’t want you to worry about my questions or my thoughts, yet here I am dragging you down with me into the same trap!”

“You shouldn’t be losing confidence or doubting,” he told her. “These are dangerous words, as Allah, the Almighty,

does not accept people's wrongdoing. He punishes them afterwards.”

“How does he punish them? They are God,” said Ibrahim.

She tilted her head backwards in frustration causing the rocking chair to jerk sharply, shifting her weight towards the edge.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “I have no idea what you are saying.”

Ibrahim took a deep breath and said:

“We are creating God as we want Him to be.”

Her panicked gaze swiftly shifted back to Ibrahim in search of an explanation to alleviate her shock.

“I wish we hadn't started talking about this,” he added in frustration.

She stood up. Her anger, interspersed with fear, burned in her eyes as the rocking chair swung a few times.

“You're thinking of some strange things, and these things will not protect you as you claim they will. In fact, you'll put us all, including the children, in danger when we get back to Tunisia.”

Ibrahim didn't know what to say to her in response, especially when she left him in his seat and stormed upstairs after the final few words of anger.

He was annoyed that his findings had scared her rather than calmed her down. Without thinking, he kicked the floor with his foot and sent the rocking chair swinging back and forth; movement as monotonous and repetitive as his new thoughts and his many life junctures. He saw the tears glinting in his wife's eyes showing her fear and anger.

He knew that going upstairs to attempt to explain more of what he meant would do nothing to calm her. He admitted to himself that he had made a mistake in revealing his thoughts. He had also gone too far in ignoring his wife and children over the last few weeks. Her beliefs, he said to himself, stem from the ideologies on which she was raised and to which she is accustomed; under no circumstances could he question them. Moreover, she reassured herself about them through lying to herself and denying everything he had said.

The one sure thing in his mind was that he would not let the issue destroy his family like it had shaken his soul.

Whizz whizz whizz. The chair continued to creak as it rocked back and forth. Perhaps the most difficult thing to accept about Noura's stance was that she was thinking like a teenager, in spite of having two children and ten years of marriage, in addition to her need to be lavished with gifts.

When his first wife died, and his small son Nasser went to be cared for by his grandmother, his family persuaded him to marry the beautiful, reasonably educated twenty-year-old girl Noura. He found great delight and sensual pleasure in her stropiness, right from the first month of marriage.

She was distant from him and mysterious in the beginning yet they still shared a good sex life. She soon ignited the lustful man in him, and when Ibrahim was fed up with travelling for the businesses he inherited from his father, he would take her with him on his long trips. After a long day of business meetings and trade deals, he would close the hotel room door behind him to busy himself with her fresh tanned body under mood lighting and music that titillated the senses. Her desire to have him would bloom, and she would swallow his erect penis utterly consumed by sexual liberation. She would then turn over, take his head between her thighs and push her moist vagina to be excited further by his mouth. He wouldn't penetrate her until after hours of slow and enjoyable foreplay, or until they were bursting with desire. She would be begging him to enter her, as she could not take it any longer, then she would say, "Cum inside me!" Afterwards, they would both be consumed by relief and the serenity of pleasure.

After each of those nights he would recall the curt, monotonous enjoyment that he had with his previous wife, remembering how she would not give him any more than one of those prostitutes in Tunisia or Europe. He felt grateful for the real blessing that was Noura's body. She had taught him that marriage would only yield happiness when the bodies of both the man and the woman are able to give. If during those moments of passion she thought beautiful thoughts, he told himself that he would never lose her. He decided that he would try and satisfy her one way or another and avoid the subject of his thoughts.

His mind wandered back to thinking of the past and he imagined himself asking, “Where is your mistress?”

“She is taking a bath sir,” responds the maid.

He would hear the sound of the water pouring onto her body, take off his clothes and get in with her. She would shriek in surprise, but he would quickly place a necklace ostentatiously set with turquoise stones around her neck before pulling her body towards him in an embrace.

The chair creaked faintly as Ibrahim felt comforted by the idea of getting her a present, along with voluptuous memories from the captivating moments he had shared with her. He decided that he would take a trip into the shopping centre in Brighton in order to buy her a surprise gift – a precious present which would help her to forget her transient fears. “Are her fears really transient?” he wondered.

“Have my thoughts clashed with her emotions and the way she was brought up? The problem is that I wasn’t able to appreciate the impact of her fears simply because she lives on the periphery of my life. I realised that I had these feelings all along, just locked in my subconscious, never uttering them except for a few trite words here and there. The people who were around me in Tunisia were like me, or at least this is what I remember of them. They were never really concerned with matters of religion. Indeed, they were much more concerned with embracing life, or rather confronting it. Noura once said, ‘You taught me about life.’

“My father once told me, ‘Life is knowing how we deal with others during their anger as well as their happiness.’ But

nobody said that life does nothing except bring us closer to death. Forty-five years have gone by! It's as if I have lived life like a shooting star – far from reality, and gone in the blink of an eye.”

After having been still, once again the chair began creaking.

“During the festive holidays we boys of the same age would go after girls. We would be tempted by their looks, their enticing eyes. We would know nothing of the rest of their bodies. Short, tall, slim or fat, we didn't understand how to read their looks from just the sight of their ankles! How do men establish which woman has a good body and which one has not, which woman would be good in bed and which would not? To us, all girls were good for the future as long as they fell in front of our eyes. Fantasies are built on the attraction of the eyes that make the sleepless nights more interesting. Yet attractions can die too. The kiss of the lips dies. The warmth of the hand, its sweat that arouses feelings of lust, and causes the shuddering orgasm, dies. The excitement also dies and the vagina remains the last source of joy. Then even that gets older and too loses its excitement and dies. When did I last have sex with her? In Helsinki! If not, then it was in Amsterdam, four weeks ago, maybe even five. And how long did it last? Five minutes, maybe ten! Human beings don't really know about the life around them until they realise the truth of death – their own death that is. This is why my dark thoughts are crushing me, and why I bitterly remember what has died – love, lust, desire, attraction – all of these things have been murdered, just as those children were murdered in that Algerian village.”

With the worry and toil came the creaking of the rocking chair: *whizz whizz whizz*.

“Where will I find Nasser, to gather them all and take them to a place where there is nothing but normal death? Let things die one after another in their lives, as happened to me, except without the slaughter, without knives or axes, that is. She says that God punishes them! Who has seen God punish a sinner in a public square? How do I clear my head of these gruesome images? Why are those people cutting off my daughter’s head and getting her hair mixed in with the blood and soil whenever I blink? How do I rescue my daughter from this awful fate? She says that I don’t look after them when I think like this, but rather put them in more danger. She doesn’t understand the extent of my pain! Should she understand? Should I impose my problems on her and challenge her beliefs based on her customs and traditions? What about the children when they grow up? Do I tell them the bigger truth, or hide it from them? The problem is that I myself don’t know any other truth, the better truth. Will I actually arrive at the truth, or rather linger in nothingness? How scary nothingness is! It is like death. I was face down in the sand of a Tunisian beach when I wondered whether worms live in the sand as well as in soil. My father’s life ended with a pile of bones, as will my own – a pile of rotting bones! Noura’s neck which I adored, or her beautiful thighs between which I would kindle my lust; nothing would be left except for bones. My two lovely children too. Is this why we are born, why we grow, and indeed, why we dream?”

The chair creaked once again. *Whizz whizz whizz*.

“If God really had covered up the Prophet Mohammed and Abu Bakr who entered that cave with a wretched spider’s web,” he thought, “then how many other myths does religion demand its followers to accept?”

The noise of the chair echoed as its rocking gained speed, his anxiety and anger mounted as well. *Whizz whizz whizz.*

Chapter 8

Under a dim light a few people were sitting, staring at a corpse laid out before them covered by a thin white cloth. Under the cloth the body appeared fully dressed head-to-toe, down to the shoes.

Not much time passed before a solemn-looking man entered the room through the door at the back and stood in front of the corpse. He illuminated the room with lights both big and small that were suspended on the walls and the ceiling as well as at the edges of the room. Every corner of the room glowed brightly along with the faces of the men and women. Jeffrey appeared among them and he was second from the right of eight people. The rest of the chairs were empty, almost invisible due to the power of the light which drowned them.

The man didn't say anything until light was restored to the rest of the hall. Then he began to speak, "David Barker, deceased today. His widow agreed that we can bury him in our way. She has brought him here to talk about him and wait until nightfall. People don't like to change their ways, especially with the way they say farewell and where bodies are buried."

Jeffrey was sitting among men and women who were around his own age. The light began to shine even stronger, and some of the features of the corpse became visible from beneath the translucent white cloth in which it was wrapped. He appeared smaller under the lights of the large hall. He was in his fifties. The room which belonged to the church and the Religious Society of Friends was allocated once a month for preaching their religion. They shine their lights, night and day, and discuss their issues before taking their lamps and leaving quietly.

“It is the grace of God whichever way you look at it. His life ended, with all its good and bad, and from today, his body begins to decompose. Complete decomposition which will leave nothing behind. Five thousand years ago, or perhaps even ten thousand, lots of people died. And do we know anything whatsoever about them? They have slowly been eroded from the universe and from memory. The universe moves towards its end and memory doesn't last long. After five thousand years nobody will remember us, and there will be no trace of us to remember. So what are we except for a drop of fuel in the huge mill of time which grinds the land, the stars, the planets and galaxies along its path? The darkness then spreads and the birth of another cycle of creation begins; creation that consists of other types of creatures, or simply silence and darkness drowning in the eternity of the universe.

“Who are we to invent a creator in our life in our own stupid image? We have five earthly commandments behind which lies God, hellfire and heaven. In every small society, we then have a creator, a language and a basis for religion.

“David Barker died today, and with his demise the machine of his cursed life stopped. Consciousness died with it, just as happens to the millions of birds, cows, crocodiles, monkeys, insects and viruses. Their consciousness ends, but should we shed tears?

“Perhaps humans are characterised by perception; however the machine is the same. The heart and fragile organs are badly designed for humans and animals alike. Our pulse beats for a while and then stops and other bodily functions follow in order, before existence is expunged forever. Millions of years have passed with this cycle. Meanwhile, religions have appeared to explain, each in their own way, all of these things, and yet death has never stopped. Nobody has ever avoided it. Man is just like birds, sheep or snakes, or even the smallest of creatures which crawl in the mud. All of them are born, then die, then rot. Then every million or two million years, a species becomes weaker and with this their numbers diminish. Then extinction follows.

“Thousands of animal species have become extinct and others have appeared. Thousands of species of fish have disappeared, along with tigers, lizards and insects, all in plain sight. Humans will also become extinct in one or two thousand years. The world will continue to spin around, along with everything on it, until it is smashed by a meteorite, or pulled away from its orbit by the sun in a destructive embrace.

“Man is plagued by bad luck. He came with a large group of animals and insects but split from them and developed his own distinct mental consciousness. If dolphins or lizards

lived to the same level as humans then they too would develop a consciousness which would afford them superiority of intelligence. However, in the middle of this strange universe, there is nothing but boredom, and they remain there awaiting their nihilistic end.

“What do we do? How do we behave in the face of this?”

“We cannot do anything. We are powerless to do anything.”

“Mankind has tried everything in this mad march. Cruelty, brutality, wars and religions, are all waged in the name of peace. Cruel and brutal ideologies slaughter some, in order to maintain peace and justice for others. But things change. Ideologies change, and men are replaced by others who also wage war in the name of peace and justice.”

“Mankind will never end its brutality because it is in its genes, in its blood; a dominant part of human nature is control over the other. We cannot change the bloody nature of the human race. As long as there is blood flowing in its veins, we will never stop this mill grinding away. We ought to spend this life in tranquility, then follow our predecessors into oblivion, but without blood on our hands; without cheating, or corruption. It should be enough to know there is an end awaiting us and for us to be happy, simply because it relieves us of the conflict which is forced upon us throughout our life every step of the way. We fight so that we can live, so we can avoid dying. But we die and we vanish. So what is the point in grinding ourselves with such conflict?”

“David Barker died this morning and his life within him died too. There is no power in the world that will bring it back. So look at him – he is a tranquil corpse, completely incapable of shooing even a small fly away from his nose. He has succumbed completely: his arms, head and legs which once moved have come to rest.

“His wife said, ‘Take him and bury him as you see fit, just get him away from me.’ She was afraid that he would come back to life and kick her! She was also afraid that his tongue was still alive and cursing her!

“Look at him. Everything about him is helpless. He has gone with all his bad deeds committed before joining our group, and the few good deeds he did after. Now he has died and has taken both the good and bad with him.

“What do we do in order to stop Mr. Barker’s ghost from chasing his wife?

“Bury him in a town far away? No, of course not, as ghosts can travel over distances!

“Do we cremate him and place his ashes in a jar to give to her? But spirits can arise from ashes!

“I can’t see the point in taking any measures to stop the spirit of Mr. Barker from haunting his poor wife except for her to die. Whether it is this month, or in five years’ time, it’s the only way to stop this ghostly illusion!

“This is a fact of life, that our life is an illusion. Time puts a stop to it.

“Mr. Barker died today, and with it this passing existence, which can last no more than a single moment, has come to an end. From the opening of his eyes to the instant they close. Yet his is no different from any other existence. Does the existence of Mr. Barker differ from that of someone else? Of course not! Every existence passes in the same fashion – a struggle. It is a struggle for survival, ambition, work, dreams, pitfalls and mistakes, all of which is mixed with desire and pain, until the moment that one dies. Then one can relax, and the curse that has been forced on us ends.

“Now, let us rid ourselves of this waste that Mr. Barker has left behind, and with which he is no longer associated. We will be witnesses to our own mortality until the final terminus.”

They all rose from their seats. Some of them placed the corpse in a black plastic bag with a hole in the middle and tied it from the top. At the same time, the others turned off their lamps and put them in a box. Two of them then grasped the box and the bag and left in silence.

At the door of the church, two cars were waiting. Everyone got in them and the body was thrown into the boot of the rear vehicle along with the lamps. One car headed towards the coast, the second went towards the town centre.

The group of the ‘Happy End’ believed that the universe was randomly created. They take light as their symbol. The light created by Thomas Edison through pain and suffering had died with him. The glowing mass of the sun, burning at fifteen million degrees centigrade, appears in the day and then disappears at night. Yet, the clouds block the sun

during most days of the year whereas the Edison lamps always shine, surpassing the sun's capabilities. The Edison lamp keeps shining with little fuel or without burning anyone.

The first car slowed down at a roundabout near the town centre, before heading left onto the coastal road. A few tourists were returning to their hotels, drunk. After half a mile or so, the street was empty of passers-by, and the car picked up a little speed driving in the night without streetlamps. From time to time the lights of a speeding car appeared, approaching them then disappearing.

The streetlights returned as they passed by Saltdean. Jeffrey remembered the outline of the sheik's wife's buttocks in her tight trousers before his mind turned towards Mr. Smith. "I will get you," thought Jeffrey.

After going through Saltdean, the car turned right onto a narrow, bumpy road heading towards the coast. There, a fishing boat awaited their arrival.

The sea appeared calm and the boat swayed only slightly in the face of the small waves and the slight wind which brushed each side of the boat equally. The group climbed aboard the boat and placed the bag containing the corpse of Mr. Barker in the centre before they sped off at a speed of twenty knots. The boat left silvery ripples on the surface as bubbles raised from the engine, only to be carried by the waves before fading away.

The ship's captain said to the solemn man who had sat next to him, "Tell me when we are at the correct distance."

The man nodded his head.

“God, if only I knew of this type of burial, I would recommend it. I have spent fifty years at sea, and it never came to mind.”

“Who are we but amphibious beings who must return to the water? Fifty years aboard this ship, floating on the water. I could tell you the depth of the water at a mile out, five miles, ten miles, twenty miles, until we reach France. I know every type of every rock in every part of the sea. I know where there are a lot of catfish, where there are lots of beryl deposits, where the mackerel swim, and what bait best attracts the black bream!

“I have sailed cargo ships, ocean liners and fishing trawlers in the North Sea, and I know the depths of the ports from Denver to Portsmouth. But I’ve ended up on a vessel with a motor with but a half horsepower!

“I never went to school, but I know that people who are buried in the ground, their bodies decompose, eaten by millions of worms and then larvae, leaving just the bones after a week. In the sea, the fish are fed by it as every last bit is eaten. The bones are left to become red, blue or yellow coral, used to decorate houses and sold at a premium.

“I admit I’ve lied to everyone, and deceived some, reneged on promises to people, stolen anything that came into my hands, misled my family, and cheated my friends. In fact there is no sin on this earth that I haven’t committed, and yet in spite of this I do not regret a thing, and I haven’t found a suitable place for my grave!

“I would stay on the water until I’d grown webbed fingers! I swear I would only ever come back to land in order to sell the fish I had caught. What am I but bait? Throw the hook in my way and I’ll cling to it!

“When I die, bury me in your way. From now on, consider me a member of your group. From the water, back to the water, I will serve you well, follow your orders, carry out what you ask of me. I own nothing but this boat, and I put it under your control.

“My name is Jeremiah, what is the name of your dead?”

Chapter 9

Finished with her make-up, she placed the flimsy wicker hat on her head before checking her figure in the mirror.

She was wearing a Jersey dress which narrowed towards the top, accentuating her breasts and then pulled in tightly at the waist to show her navel. The taut muslin cloth wrapped around her to reveal the shape of her beautiful buttocks. She ran her hand over the seam of the dress and felt somewhat relieved that it showed off her subtle features. As she did so, she told herself, "If Abu Hamid met me in the street, he wouldn't recognise me!"

She shouted from the bottom of the stairs, "Are you ready yet?"

"Yes, mama," the girl replied from her bedroom:

"Yeah," the son replied as if addressing himself:

"Then say goodbye to your father and come along."

The daughter appeared at the doorway. "Dad is sleeping on the chair," she said.

"Okay then, let's go."

She left the house and when everyone was outside she closed the door before heading for the bus station as if she were Cleopatra.

Her daughter approached her, asking, “When did you buy that hat?”

“Does it look good on me?”

“Yes,” the daughter said, smiling,

“I bought it a week ago in the market. Would you like me to buy you one?”

The daughter, still smiling, responded shyly, “No!”

She was indeed Cleopatra, accompanied by her son and daughter. She wondered to herself if Queen Cleopatra wore straw hats, and whether she adorned herself with a Jersey dress which complemented every part of her body.

Her high-heel shoes tip-tapped along the tarmac of the empty street and she felt free—in both body and soul. Her husband had fallen asleep over the books he brought from Tunisia, and she had told him beforehand that they were going out into town by bus. Therefore, when he awoke, he wouldn’t be worried. She didn’t care whether they stayed in Brighton or left to go back home. She felt refreshed as she walked along and the light wind blew through the branches of dahlias, the rosemary bushes and the rose petals in the gardens on her side of the road.

They stood waiting at the bus stop. This was the first time she had taken the bus to town. There was no danger of getting lost in Saltdean as there was just one bus which the

residents would use. It starts at two stops down from their house. It would then head towards town directly and return along the same route. She noticed her daughter looking towards her make-up as if she was either impressed by it or objected to it.

She asked herself, “Do I have too much make-up on?”

They saw the bus approaching as it meandered up the narrow road, slowing down as they got ready to board.

She said, “There are three of us wanting to go to the town centre, how much is it please?”

The driver printed three tickets off for them and said, “Two fifty please.”

She chose a seat in the middle of the bus. Her son and daughter sat in front of her. When they were in their seats, the bus moved as if it had been waiting for them to settle.

The bus moved slowly and was completely empty. This was because the house that they rented was on the outskirts of Saltdean.

She mumbled to herself, “I wonder where he lives now. We had sat and cried together when they told me about the marriage. We cried until we had no tears left to cry. We decided to flee. He said that his cousin lived in Europe, I don’t remember where. I will kill whomever you marry, he said. Then we cried.”

The bus pulled up at the next stop and an elderly lady got on, sitting in the first seat. The two children were playing together in their seat as the bus began to move once again.

“We cried, not knowing what to do. I even said that I would kill whoever married me on the wedding night. If only I knew his address to write to him. He wouldn’t even recognise me now in the street. I would say to him, ‘What’s wrong with you? Don’t you remember me?’ He would be surprised at first, as I have put on some weight now, only a little. I would tell the children that this is an old neighbour. Has he got married now? He’d be married to a European with blue eyes and he would take her with him. European women wouldn’t mind. If we had married I would have been loyal to him for life.”

The bus shuddered and grumbled before stopping. A group of youngsters got on board, paid their fares and sat at the back of the bus. Behind them, a rotund man climbed aboard. He swore that he would throw them off at the town centre should they continue to fight. He sat down beside them and the bus began to move along the road, picking up speed along the way.

“My aunt used to say that marriage is unpredictable, even for the educated.”

The two children were engaged in quiet conversation before the son turned to ask:

“Mum, are we going to the cinema?”

“The cinema? Yes, I will take you to the cinema.”

She remembered days at the movie theatre. “Those dreamy days at the cinema where we would finish classes and then go and see a film and Abu Hameed would put his hand on my thigh and I would just feel incredible. They were wonderful

days. Ibrahim's hand is not like that. It doesn't give the same intensity of feeling. Perhaps that's because we get directly into it. Why is that scruffy man playing on my mind so much today? Maybe he's married to a blonde girl now." When the bus passed the aquarium, she told the two children that they were getting off.

They crossed the square in the town centre and headed towards Kings Road. From there, they crossed to the right-hand side and walked past the Thistle Hotel which stands before the line of shops, in the middle of which lies the Odeon cinema.

She asked which films were for children and then bought three tickets.

"What do you want to take inside?" she asked them.

"Popcorn," replied the young girl.

"And Cola," said her son.

The three of them entered screen number 5 and she instructed them not to leave before four o'clock.

"I will wait for you at the main entrance," she told them. After seeing that they had sat down and settled, she sneaked out. She was overwhelmed by a sense of freedom from the responsibility of the family.

The weather that day had turned out beautifully, and the sun lit up the beach. Bare bodies were scattered among the sand and the pebbles as the children played in the calm water. A café whose chairs were laid out on the concrete outside swelled with tourists who were busy with their fish and chips. She sat down at the only vacant table. She crossed her legs and

her brown beauty radiated outward as, one by one, heads previously concerned with their food lifted from their dishes to steal a glance.

“Tea please,” she said to the waiter. Then she waited.

The light breeze allowed her to keep her hat on. The sun bathed the naked areas of skin, gently tanning but without burning. The passers-by continued dragging their feet along the pavement so as to get a quick glance from the side of her uncovered thigh. Some uttered remarks approvingly. She smiled to herself and she felt happy with both the silent and audible reactions she had provoked. The naked bodies along the beach seemed to no longer interest anyone. Thighs and legs of many make it difficult for the eye to concentrate on those of a single beauty. Yet the small part of her body which is exposed, and that which remains covered, leaves a wealth of alluring flesh to be pictured in an erotic way in the minds of passing men.

The waiter brought the tea over and she thanked and paid him. She took a mint leaf from her bag that she had brought from home and placed it into the cup, before pouring the tea over it. She inhaled the aroma carried by the steam and then continued to look through the corner of her eyes at the approval of those passing by and seated alike.

“May I share your table?” asked a young man boldly.

“Yes,” she announced, smiling. She had seen him pass by a few steps before stopping and returning to her.

“My name is Patrick. Do you believe in love at first sight? I swear it’s just happened to me.”

“You don’t waste time!” she replied.

“Frankly speaking, we’ve wasted a lot of time already! What’s your name?”

“Warda,” she told him.

“A beautiful name, even though I don’t know what it means”.

“It means ‘rose’.”

“Ah, I should have guessed. You speak English perfectly. Are you from Latin America?”

“I’m from Brazil,” she answered, still smiling.

“It is said that nowhere is there such beauty as in Latin America!”

“Are you not going to order something to calm you down a bit?”

“Cappuccino” he announced, before scanning around for the waiter. Before finding him, he turned to ask, “Must we waste our time getting a cappuccino?”

“Well, if you want one then you’ll be paying!” she replied.

“How about we leave all of this commotion, what do you think?”

“Where to, then?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Finish your drink first!”

Patrick was wearing Bermuda shorts and a tight summery shirt, accentuating his broad chest. He sported blond, curly hair, beautiful skin and blue eyes. He was good-looking, confident and gregarious.

The two of them climbed the hill towards Kings Road. Their mismatched clothes caught people’s attention. He was a young man on holiday, and she was wearing a hat and dressed as if she was going to a party. When he wanted to take her by her arm, she politely declined, but in the same breath sent a signal:

“No, not here!”

“No, not here?”

She thought for a moment of another time, when she had been with an elegant man who she met in the street; tanned, with a brown, clear skin. He too had extended his hand to her in the street and she had replied, “No, not here!”

They proceeded down side-streets not frequented by tourists. She informed him that she couldn’t be delayed, and he reassured her by telling her it wouldn’t be too far from where they were. She knew that that evening he would be returning to London, and she felt comfortable with this. When they stopped in front of a mediocre hotel, there was nothing left but for the two to embrace.

It was the first time she had been with an Englishman and she felt within her the urge to be in his bare white arms, slightly reddened by the sun. She wondered if the foreskin

would cover his penis when erect. If it did she thought, “How on earth would she overcome this obstacle?” She felt numb between her legs, and then over her entire body as he took her in his arms and kissed her, raising her dress gradually.

Once they were in the hotel room, she felt free and that she could take her underwear off without feeling shy. He drew closer to her and took off his underwear too. With a long kiss, he pressed his burning body against hers and pushed his penis between her thighs. He proceeded to move his hand between her legs and stroked her gently, as his other hand squeezed her rounded buttock before gently slapping it. The two of them writhed on the bed, and he began to fondle her breasts as he kissed them softly. She seized the opportunity to slide her hand towards his testes and squeezed them lightly. She then began to stroke his erect penis. She felt that the foreskin had pulled back and he was ready to have sex with her. She moved it towards her engorged, moist vagina and she felt him slide his penis inside her as her face showed her overwhelming pleasure. She closed her eyes and cried softly with joy as he thrust his penis fervently.

He told her that she wouldn't lose her way if she followed the road all the way to the post office and then turned left onto Kings Road. She left the hotel and made her way in the direction he had told her, fully satisfied with the way things had gone. She still felt the pleasure reverberating around her body. She realised that the Englishman was no different in bed to her husband – the man's penis, once inside, was no different

except for at the very start when she gasped in pleasure as she felt the size of the head. Also, she noted that the lustfulness and yearning for sex was no different in the Englishman than that of a man from the East. She had found that the foreskin on an erect penis moves backwards and is no longer visible. Along with this, she had noted that his kiss was hot, although with a light scent of milk as he had drunk some before making love.

Once she had passed the post office, she felt that she knew the rest of the way. Moreover, she felt more emotions, not least of calmness in her body. She decided that she should arrive at the cinema fifteen minutes early in case the children left early. She dawdled in her pace and the thought of the Englishman, the hotel, the quick rendezvous as well as the beauty of the coast echoed in her mind.

She returned to thinking of her husband and her desire to seek revenge strengthened. He had neglected her for three weeks in order to denounce the prophets. She muttered, "Forgive me, God. How could he hold the Prophet accountable just because he has stumbled in his life? If God had commanded the spider to weave its web at the entrance to the cave in order to stop the non-believers from finding the Prophet inside, then should that be a reason to doubt the ability of God?" She asked forgiveness from God once more, since to doubt such things makes one a non-believer. This idea had dragged him towards thinking like the infidels!

She decided that she would leave him quietly, and when she returned to her family, tell them of the change in his life. She would distance herself from him so as not to place herself

or her family at risk. His belief that God was a man-made creation would lead them all towards perdition and she wasn't about to let that happen. Let it be his own hell for himself.

She felt warm drips from her moist underwear at the top of her thigh and she smiled to herself, thinking, "It's the Englishman!" Her imagination ran wild as she thought of his smooth hardness filling her small hand. She felt a flood of excitement flow through her trembling body before she muttered to herself, "Thank God he's going to London. He won't see me again."

She slowed her stride and stopped outside a shop window which displayed elegant dresses. She chose three colours matching her taste and then proceeded to decide between them; olive green, deep red, and beige. She was torn between the green and the beige. Eventually, she settled on beige as it accentuated her brown skin, but scowled to herself. She refused to ask her husband to buy the dress as he would think that in doing so it would end the dispute. She decided to stick to her guns and keep quiet about the new thoughts which were engulfing his mind. She called him infidel for a second time. She then decided to deal with him as such. She turned onto Prince Albert Street and looked at the time, before turning her attention to the "Religious Society of Friendship" which was at the entrance to the church. She asked herself how a religion could accept friends rather than followers who submit. Is it possible that a Muslim would merely be friends of the mosque and not its obedient child who prays at the correct times?

She was sure that Christians would submit to Islam if they knew “our religion” and read the stories of the Prophet and his followers. “They don’t fast like we do,” she thought. She recalled the days of fasting, then muttered, “What beautiful days are those during Ramadan with its sweets, pastries and all the other tasty food.” She recalled the call to prayer singing away at dawn so that people could eat their last meal.

“We would run to the houses and collect gifts,” her mind drifted back in time, “and we would sing and play as we were taken by the pleasure. There were choirs, each of which had their own songs. I was part of a choir and afterwards we would collect the money people had given to us and buy clothes, almost leaping with joy! My aunty said once, ‘You have grown up, Noura. Girls your age should fast and pray to Allah so you and your father will be blessed, and so that you will have your place in heaven.’ So I fasted the next day. I got up at dawn with everyone else and ate sweets and drank a big bottle of water. When we heard the man with the drum telling us that it was time to begin fasting, we stopped eating and went back to sleep again. But I couldn’t resist by the second day and I hid three pies amongst my books. I ate them on the way to school. But I still told the other students I was fasting.”

Chapter 10

None of three leads on Smith left Jeffrey sure that he had found his man. What to do next? He sat down in front of the large kitchen table, scanning the fake papers he had just received. He rearranged them over and over again, hoping to draw the pertinent information from them that he needed to accomplish his aim for that day.

“If he were genuine, then it wouldn’t take all this time!” opined Mrs. Aspen, as she put the usual Saturday dish of fried eggs with brown bread soldiers on the table.

“All cats are grey in the dark,” she added as she placed a cup of white coffee in front of Jeffrey before returning to her usual spot in front of the cooker.

Jeffrey was lost in his thoughts, his hand dipping a morsel of bread into the eggs before slowly placing it in his mouth as his mother stood one hand placed on the cooker and the other on her hip awaiting her son’s response.

“It’s as if you are deaf!” she said.

“Ah, perhaps he couldn’t get any at the butcher’s!” he responded, stealing himself from his focus.

“What’s this about the butcher?” she asked in astonishment, waiting for him to explain.

“The cats!” He responded carelessly, without thinking.

“Was your poor mother talking about cats?” she said sarcastically.

“So what are you talking about?” he asked, smiling as he turned his attention back to his mother.

“It falls on deaf ears!” she responded, shaking her head despairingly. “I was saying that he’s been out since this morning fetching a skinned rabbit from the butcher’s.”

“Ah, a skinned rabbit. How did I hear ‘cats’?” he said.

“Because I was talking to myself! Do you want more bread?” she asked in an angry tone.

“No thanks, but a bit more coffee, please.”

She passed him the coffee along with the milk and went back to her spot near the cooker. She always stood with her clean apron as if preparing a meal for twenty people, complaining in vain.

“You know Dad,” Jeffrey said in reply to her treatment, “he’ll wander around all the markets before he goes to the butcher’s.”

“And I stand here in front of the cooker as Lord Aspen takes a scenic tour of the parish. Hello John! How are you, Mark? How is Ashley’s work? And when he finally gets to the butcher’s, he finds that all the good rabbits have been sold to the early shoppers.”

As the name John had been mentioned, Jeffrey immediately thought of his colleague, John Heckley. Whilst taking some parcels to the post van the day before, he said to Jeffrey that if he wanted to find someone by the name of Smith, he should look at Who's Who. In there, anyone called Smith could be found, along with his address and telephone number.

Jeffrey had immediately gone to the library and found the book which contained just 120 Smiths. He was aghast and questioned what had happened to the six hundred thousand Smiths registered in the authorities' records. The book only shows those whose family names were originally Smith. Does that mean that more than half a million others are those with the fake title? After searching, he found only one family carrying the name J. Smith in the whole of Brighton. But was this Julian, or John, or Jonathan, or any other name? And how to go about asking? Would the head of the family get involved in a little scam like this?

“Wild horses will never take you anywhere!” said the mother quietly about her husband, hoping Jeffrey would catch some of what she was saying. “As long as I depend on him, I should accept where he takes me on his back. It's nearly ten, and if he makes me wait any longer, then I will have to prepare something else for dinner like onion soup – he'll be eating it until it comes out of his nose. He'll tell me another story; every day there is a story. He'll be able to tell me about everyone he met in the market, and then forget about going to the butcher. I won't be responsible if he strolls back in empty-handed. Yesterday it was the story about the evidence of an old woman,

which horrified the judge in a trial of someone called David. Before that, it was the locksmith who had found out that his shop had been burgled. Endless stories, and I just stand here in front of the cooker.”

Jeffrey got up from the table and placed his cup on the sink.

“Mother, thank you!”

“Are you staying for dinner?” she demanded.

“What are you cooking? Onions?” he teased her with a laugh.

“I swear on the Virgin Mary that if he comes back without a rabbit then his day will turn into a living hell!” she said menacingly.

“Take it easy,” Jeffrey tried to calm her. “He’ll bring what he promised. Goodbye.”

In the end, Jeffrey decided to go to the house of J. Smith to discover the truth. If he found the head of the house or any of the servants insisted on knowing the reason for him being there and for his questions, he would have to tell them that someone was using their name to con an Arab man in his search for his son. This in itself was a danger and a necessary consideration for the family as he may repeat his trick with others.

He held these thoughts firmly in his mind as he headed to the bus station. He asked someone the number of the bus that headed to the north-west. He also asked about the house which stands along at number 1; J. Smith’s mansion. He was

told to get off at the second-to-last stop and walk for five minutes, when he would see number 1.

He got off the bus at the place which was described to him. He walked for fifteen minutes along a road which appeared to have been untouched by cars, let alone by horse and carts, for a very long time. Twigs and branches drooped over, almost touching the ground. At the end of the road, he arrived at a damaged iron gate with a battered sign on it that was no longer legible. Behind the gate stood a lofty Victorian building with a huge balcony, flanked by luxurious windows which stretched three floors up.

Hesitant and a little timid, he stopped and considered turning back and ending his mission there. He said to himself, "Even if the name is Julian, it would be pointless to probe the remaining details."

His eyes searched for a bell at the side of the gate. After some time he realised that the gate was broken, and merely required a small push. However, the silence that hung over the area, and the leaves scattered over the spacious garden confirmed in his mind that the inhabitants had long since abandoned their home, perhaps to go on a long trip or for some other reason. In any case, they were not there and his mission, it seemed, had come to an end.

The butlers! There must be a butler or two to look after the mansion. His curiosity turned once again to the inside of the mansion, and away from the concerns he had in his heart.

"Questioning the butler wouldn't be difficult," he said to himself. "He will give me the answers I need."

He felt his heart pounding whilst his hand pushed the gate carefully. He thought that there may be an alarm inside, and this would be preferable as it would remove the charge of trespassing. He put the gate back to its original position and proceeded to the mansion, traipsing through the deep sea of leaves on the path. On his right, a separate building appeared and he assumed it to be the stables, or perhaps the servant quarters. The idea that a servant might appear strengthened in his mind as he headed for the mansion's main door. The unkempt grass made the mansion appear even more grandiose. In the far distance he could see behind him oak and maple trees, whilst the grand balcony supported by six columns, decorated with gothic gargoyles, stood in front of him. There were still, however, no signs of life. Nobody had stopped him in his tracks to ask him what he wanted. As he approached the main door, the mysteriousness of the surroundings was palpable. He was consumed by the situation in which he found himself.

In this outside area without any staff and with no alarm, he made his way towards the mansion in order to uncover its secrets. All his initial fears had vanished as he crossed the final space to the mansion. He stopped outside the imposing solid door and his eyes searched for a doorbell. An inner voice said "press it." He did so.

He waited a while but there was no response from either servant or occupant. He pressed the bell a second time and noted that he could not here it ring inside. His fear returned and he stepped back to look at the big mansion and its many windows. He noticed an official message beside the door. It

read that the mansion and its contents, along with a thousand acres of land, were under notice of repossession. “Well then!” said Jeffrey to himself, before he turned and headed for the two outbuildings. He hoped that there was perhaps a servant or butler there.

All of the doors were locked and adorned with detailed carvings from top to bottom. He stopped and waited, but he realised that he would have to say something or they would be suspicious. “Hello!” he shouted before continuing, “Is there anybody there?”

Suddenly, a dog began to bark, loudly and fiercely, as if it had just escaped from being kept captive. He froze in his tracks at the door before muttering to himself, “People are here,” as the dog continued to bark. He knew from the bark that it was a scrappy Chihuahua. From behind the door, a croaky voice screamed to the dog, “Shut up, you waste of space!”

The top hinge of the door moved. Through a crack, a voice came, this time more clearly.

“Don’t move, stay where you are, or I swear I’ll shoot you dead!”

After the barking and the threat, Jeffrey was not about to move. He was already frozen with fear anyway. He was caught by surprise as he didn’t know why the man was threatening him. The Chihuahua became even more vocal and began barking without pause. The gap in the door widened slightly. The dog’s head appeared and was held by the man’s hand. His second hand sported a medium-sized pistol which he pointed at Jeffrey.

“I told you, don’t move. It’s got four fucking bullets which will blow your head off. What do you want?” the voice asked before a head came towards the light. It was a young boy’s head which stood between the dog and the hand holding the pistol. He stood there half asleep as the dog barked. “Who are you?”

“My name is Jeffrey Aspen and I mean you no harm. Can you shut the dog up so we can talk in peace?”

“He will keep barking until he is bored and then he will shut up. What do you want?”

The young man spoke in a very aristocratic style, his cravat draped over a dirty shirt. He appeared to Jeffrey to be around 25 years old, holding the small dog with one hand and pointing the pistol in the other.

“I’ve come to ask about a J. Smith.” The dog stopped barking.

“J. Smith took the bus to heaven, surrounded by angels,” the posh young man said sardonically.

“Sorry about that,” said Jeffrey.

“We’ll note down your comments in the book of condolences. Does he owe you something?”

During the exchange, the man opened the door fully and lowered the pistol. He approached Jeffrey and offered his hand. Shaking it, and his head, Jeffrey answered, “No.”

“I think you’re the first visitor not asking about debts.”

Jeffrey explained, "In fact, I'm a postman. I came to enquire about the late Julian Smith."

"Well, where is your bag and letters if you are?" the man said, keeping the dog on the ground.

"I'm not on shift today. Is the first name of the late Smith, Julian?"

"Joseph, if you must know," he replied. "The honourable, and swamped with debt, Joseph Henry Smith. This pistol has no ammunition," he said, noting the look of anxiety on the postman's face. "Yesterday, I fired four bullets at a wild rabbit. They were all I had, but the rabbit escaped. The shots were in vain, and it was the last ammunition I had. Do you have any bullets? Doesn't the government arm postmen to protect themselves?" he added, still sarcastic in his tone.

"No," Jeffrey grinned, "they only do that for the police!"

"Shit!" said the man as he replaced the pistol in his pocket.

The Chihuahua had calmed down by then, and, approaching Jeffrey, it began sniffing around him. He leaned down to pat it on its small head, but it immediately began to bark again and snapped, trying to bite the extended hand. Jeffrey pulled his hand back in a flash and moved back a little.

"Don't be frightened, that's just his way of welcoming strangers! So who is this Julian?"

“He’s a detective who was paid a lot by a sheik to look for his son in Brighton,” Jeffrey explained, “Then he disappeared.”

“A story about fraud!” said the man, “If my father hadn’t died two years ago, then I would say he would probably have been involved too!”

“Sorry, I didn't mean that!” Jeffrey answered.

“You keep apologising. There is no need. Come, you are my guest for the day. I’ve never done this before,” he said, as he headed back into the hut before turning to Jeffrey and adding, “My name is James, if you’re interested in formalities.” He then turned to the dog. “Come on, Napoleon,” he commanded.

The dog followed behind him.

“But I didn’t come for this.” He stopped at the door, apologising.

James responded without turning:

“Don’t fret, there is nothing but potatoes in the pot. If I had got that rabbit yesterday, we could have had a proper meal. Close the door behind you!”

The three of them entered a long room. The back wall was empty except for some hay and a window, and the front of the room was a mess with clothes strewn over an old couch, flanked by a table and chair covered in various things. A gas canister stood on the ground near to a bed with an old mattress. James put the pistol on the table and said, “It’s practically useless,” before directing his words towards Jeffrey. “Make

yourself at home. Next time, you could bring some bullets. The rabbits are jumping about like flies and we could have a tasty meal for once.”

Jeffrey thought of the rabbit his mother was waiting for.

“If the house hadn’t been remortgaged three times, then we could have met in the guest room under the chandeliers!”

Jeffrey had acquiesced to the strange invitation because James made his points like orders, saying one thing then moving onto another. Clothes piled on the sofa left him no place to sit so he remained standing as James busily lit the gas bottle.

“We’ll have some coffee first, and if there is still gas, then we’ll cook the potatoes. Two pinches of sea salt, and some Indian pepper corns, then we can satisfy our appetite!”

“Thank you,” Jeffrey answered.

“When someone loses their legacy, his first concern becomes the rise in gas prices. Two price rises in a single month, like a skyrocket, and afterwards there’s not even enough money left over to buy bread! Obstinate governments know all about deception. High gas prices force people to go to the supermarket and buy ready-meals. That way, the state gets two different taxes. Do you understand the game?”

“Oh, yes,” said Jeffrey. “Why don’t you use the branches to light a fire?”

“The branches, the rubbish around me, in fact all of it is subject to the mortgage laws. This stable, I don’t know how it escaped their grip, so I took shelter, for the time being at least.

If they found out I was here, they'd force me to leave – the law is the law, hell!" he said cynically before adding, "I spent three years at Oxford learning that there isn't a single law in England to protect the citizens. Every law has the welfare of the state in mind before anything, and in order for you to be one of the obedient sheep in England you must keep this in mind, but ignore it!"

"I think the water's boiling," offered Jeffrey.

"You have to boil it three times. It's from the stream. If the ancients knew to boil water they would have avoided things like the bilharzia parasite, cholera and skin complaints. You're not making yourself at home! Move these clothes to the side and you'll have a place to sit." Jeffrey did what James asked and sat himself at the edge of the sofa. "In a little while, you'll have an excellent cup of coffee." As James prepared the coffee, he asked, "Have you ever lived in a stable?"

"No," said Jeffrey.

"It makes you pat things before you pick them up, like you would a horse's rump."

A relationship began to develop between them. James had found an unusual circumstance which had brought him a person to whom he could express his displeasure with things. Jeffrey meanwhile was being catered for by this amusing man who had invited him to see the life of a guy suffering with the troubled legacy left to him by a bankrupt family. Yet, his new friend still dealt with it in a high-spirited manner, all under the watchful eye of a sleepy Napoleon in the corner, who flicked his glances between the two.

The coffee was prepared in a somewhat impromptu fashion, using an old jug found somewhere in the place, a small gas canister and two aluminium cups. He poured the coffee and offered it to his guest before saying:

“So what’s this about a sheik?”

“What about it?” asked Jeffrey.

“Is he wearing the...” James signalled with his hand around his head.

“Ah, no, that picture is a stereotypical one, even for them,” said Jeffrey.

“So we’re studying a stereotyped image then?” James asked. “Are you a private detective?”

“No, I’m a postman. I’m helping him search for his son.”

“Ah, yes. I’ve lost two per cent of my memory through the chaos you see around me. That house you see there contains twenty bedrooms, yet my reverent father spent most of his time in hotels, gambling the money. Property is a hereditary thing, and I found myself without a room, or even a bed to sleep in! If the stable isn’t under the mortgage, then I’ll sell it in return for a ticket and expenses to travel to Australia.”

James stretched his legs out on the chair.

“Before she left a year ago, having foreseen the fate of the house, my mother wrote to me, ‘The stones of this house should not constitute a burden for you.’ In fact, she was right – it’s merely a stack of stones that doesn’t even offer me a place

to put my bed! I will leave this place to study natural flooding events. Take for example the natural earthquake line under the Pacific Ocean. It vibrates at a magnitude of two or three on the Richter Scale, and this causes a tsunami which hits the Philippines, or Japan, or the continental shelf off East Asia. If the earthquake was of magnitude six or seven to the South, then it would double the effect and the overflow would hit Northern Australia and Northern India. Huge waves would sweep over twenty per cent of the low lying areas of land. Then the signs of a great flood begin to emerge, in spite of estimates from geologists.

“Do you mean like the flood in the Old Testament?”

“The floods of the Old Testament were child’s play,” answered James, “water here, water there. It was humanity’s fear that earned it the label of a flood. The volatile fault line which crosses the earth horizontally has now become active. Deep within, the lava flows all year round. In fact, it can be measured from three thousand feet under the ocean as it spews hell fire from the centre of the earth. Hell on earth, not in the sky as described by foolish religions. The earth will devour itself before any other planet does.

“How scary it is to think such things!” remarked Jeffrey.

“Don’t worry,” James said soothingly, “It won’t happen in our lifetime.”

“I mean, just the thought of the fire engulfing the land. That is scary,” clarified Jeffrey.

“Well, it will happen at some point, and we must know the mechanics,” said James.

“I wish you the best of luck.”

“It won’t be easy,” James continued. “The first stage will be to study small crabs, shells and snails jumping from the sea onto the beaches. Once the study is done I will open an office and disseminate the topographical truth about the fiery Earth. I will be the source for forecasting all future seismic activity.”

“I reckon this really won’t be easy,” said Jeffrey.

“I am determined to seize the chance,” affirmed James.

Their conversation was interrupted by two knocks at the door followed a short while later by a third. Napoleon shot from his position and began barking as James, recognising the signal, went towards the door to open it. When he opened the door, a girl appeared wearing jeans and a blue blouse. Her hair was long, blonde and curly and she was carrying bags. James kissed her on the cheek and said, “You’re really late!”

“Don’t forget it’s Saturday and the buses run like snails!”

James introduced his guest, “Jeffrey, this is my girlfriend, Katherine.”

“How are you?” Jeffrey asked, rising to shake hands.

“Not bad!” she responded, before turning to James and putting the bags on the table.

“Here’s some bread and cheese.” She turned her eye to Napoleon as he nudged at her with his head. “Hello” she said before picking him up and holding him in her arms. “How are you my baby? Ha!” She took a biscuit from her handbag and he scoffed it greedily.

Jeffrey, who was still standing, felt awkward. He put his cup of coffee on the table and made his excuses, “I think I’d better be off. I wish you the best of luck for the future. Goodbye,” he said before leaving.

The midday sun was bright outside and the wind blew the leaves in small circles around Jeffrey’s feet. When he reached the main gate, he turned to look once more at the palace and, to the right, at the stable with its one big room. He closed the gate and headed off in the direction of the road strewn with trees. His thoughts turned to James, the twenty-five year old who had been left with nothing by his father but a bed, a table, and his determination to travel to Australia, irrespective of the circumstances in which he found himself.

“The educated Englishman,” he thought to himself, “can still make his way in life without any help from anyone, even if the state leaves him high and dry. He’s decided to go and eat oysters and snails that the sea has thrown up onto the coast, for perhaps a year or two, in order to realise his ambitions!”

He also pondered the Smith he was pursuing, and the chances of finding him among the two hundred and ten in Brighton, or perhaps even six hundred thousand nationwide. It seemed futile but he had to keep moving around people and

asking in the places where he suspected he might find him. If only he possessed the correct expertise he would find him quickly. But the sheik had planned on staying a long time, and so Julian Smith, or whatever his name may be, would eventually fall into his grasp.

He sat in the Black Tiger Restaurant and Café Bar, sipping lager and watching two groups on the other side of the pavement as the sun cast its brightness on the passers-by heading for the sea and the pier. They walked in a relaxed fashion dressed in loose summer clothes, foreign and English tourists alike. The healthy faces of youthful girls and boys walked alongside middle-aged couples, who in turn walked alongside the elderly and infirm being pushed in their wheelchairs by relatives or kind volunteers. There were children walking between their parents' legs, all of them filled with joy on a summery day which had finally arrived following a day of drizzle and heavy rain.

Jeffrey began to look for any reasons why Julian Smith might want to make an appearance on such a lovely day. What places does he hang out in? Does he move around surrounded by assistants and guards, or does he work alone? Then he imagined a four-star hotel, Smith checking in before heading for the bar in the comfort of anonymity and being welcomed by the waiters with the offer of a prominent place, and being brought a whiskey as another lit the cigar in his mouth. A little while later, two gentlemen enter, one of whom had only one eye. The two men sit at his table and he listens to the two of them speak as his eyes scan over the scene before him. Then one of them passes him an envelope filled with money and he

tests the weight. He turns to them and pulls out a pistol from his jacket pocket and shoots one of them as payback whilst the other runs away.

“No,” he muttered to himself, “It won’t be like the Mafia, as it is in the cinema.”

His fantasy now took him to a dimly-lit nightclub with a number of young girls and boys dancing to the loud music as others stood looking on from the bar. With difficulty he made his way between them, found a place at the bar and ordered a cognac. He asked the barman if Julian Smith was there and he pointed towards a table around which sat a number of customers. Among them was the man he had asked after, dressed in a white suit complemented by a red tie. He walked over holding his glass of brandy and stopped at the head of the table and asked, “Are you Julian Smith?” An impudent response followed, “No, I am Julia Smith!” The table erupted in laughter.

“Have you found a clue about the sheik’s detective?” asked Frank, the waiter, who saw the opportunity to speak to him as the café swelled with customers.

“Not yet!” he admitted, before being wrenched from his daydream.

“The difficulty with Julian Smith is that he probably uses the Internet,” he muttered to himself, as Frank distanced himself by tending to the busy café. “So, he would sit at a computer most of the time, usually in his house. So how is it possible to find him if he never leaves the house?”

He took a sip of his lager and sighed as he thought. “Supposing I went to three post offices in the centre, and six in the suburbs, and asked the postmen individually if Julian Smith was on their distribution lists. This would require meeting around four hundred postmen, all going out in the morning with their red post sacks and delivering throughout Brighton. It would take two or three months! I should have done this from the first day the sheik got me to search for his son, as there isn’t enough time to do it now.”

“As for Nasser, the son,” Jeffrey thought, “he too was working under a different name to avoid the police. Like a lot of immigrants, I could find him in the restaurants that I am yet to search. He took the photo out from his shirt pocket and proceeded to study it. “Nasser is not too dissimilar to James in his predicament,” reflected Jeffrey. They are both more or less the same age and in the same situation, their respective countries have each turned their back on them. Both were living on the breadline in search of a new opportunity for a life. Here, the corruption stifles Britain and poisons the way of life. Over there, innocent people are killed by extremists for the sake of a place in paradise as written in the holy texts. How has the concept of paradise, which people here no longer believe in, come to be associated with blowing oneself and others up with bombs?”

He studied the details of the picture, the tanned face of the youthful Nasser, his wispy hair which covered his forehead. He wasn’t any different from so many English youths born to Caribbean mothers. So in which restaurant or café did this

Nasser work? Or might he be in a kitchen washing dishes so as to not draw attention to himself?

Then, as he placed the photograph back in his shirt pocket, he asked himself, “Does the sheik believe in paradise, like most of his people?”

Chapter 11

If there is an animal which is smaller than a mule and larger than an ass which sports white fur, then it is a llama. The Arabian Peninsula is not known for this animal which lives in Latin America, so it wasn't heard of before the discovery of this region.

If the Prophet Mohammed had flown from Mecca to Jerusalem to pray on what would become the site of the al-Aqsa mosque, Allah must have given him a strange animal to enable him to make the journey in the blink of an eye. Since this occurred at a time when the Prophet Mohammed denied the concept of miracles, how then did he manage to marry that act with his denial?

Ibrahim was sitting at the dinner table which was filled with various religious books he had requested from his country. He had a dishevelled look with long hair and a beard. He read, discussed and reasoned to try and arrive at the truth of what makes up his religion; how it interlinked with other religions; traditions and fatwas; previous prophets and the stories in the Koran which had been produced to attract followers.

The site of al-Aqsa Mosque had been home to a Jewish temple and a Christian church and was used before that by pagan religions. Its prominence at the time led Mohammed to seek a position within Islam for it amongst the other temples. However, the great distance between Mecca and Jerusalem made him conscious that if he really went there, his opponents would exploit his absence and would usurp his position. He thought of a miracle which could negate the need to actually go, thus cementing his presence in Mecca. And so it was written that he went, prayed and returned, all in the same night.

“Why in the night, and not during the day?” his persistent questioning filled him once again with deep grief. He ran his fingers through his hair and a pensive Ibrahim stared vacantly in front of him. His wife and children had gone into town that morning to watch a film at the cinema, and the house was clean and tidy around the chaotic table which had been left as it was. Beside the mountain of literature, he sat ghostlike reading a huge tome. Occasionally he raised his head and stared into space, bitterly agonising over the meaning of what he had read and its factual and logical implications.

“So, it was a vision in a dream! He awoke from his sleep and after embellishing the story, began to tell it to those around him. Or, according to some books, it came to him after he suffered following an epileptic seizure. So he chose a strangely-coloured creature, given to him by God, which was to have taken him to Jerusalem. He would therefore be able to answer anyone’s questions about where the creature went following the miraculous night journey.”

Pointing and waving his finger in front of himself, he intoned, “Adding to the farcical claim he then stated that dead Prophets had prayed behind him, but he never mentioned the living people! He named the place the al-Aqsa Mosque, which means the farthest and which was formerly known as Illia. There was then no mention of Jerusalem as the original name of the city. So was this the beginning of the annexation of the town which was inhabited by Jews and Christians?”

He rose from the chair unthinkingly and headed towards the conservatory with his hands behind his back and his eyes trained on the floor. He was walking back and forth, awash with his thoughts as they waxed and waned. He would first dismiss them as nonsense and then correct himself. In one moment he would be about to reach a conclusion, only to be thwarted the next. He knew that hell was merely an abstract idea. Nevertheless, he learned it in his childhood, and his fear came from the accumulation of this illusion with the atmosphere of panic at an earlier age which had reinforced the fright within him. His fear would appear and disappear, die and then be reborn, fade and then return. “On the other hand,” he said, “the Prophet didn't order his followers to pray towards the Ka'aba, probably because in it was a black stone brought by Abraham who was Jewish, but rather he pronounced that the direction of prayer be Jerusalem. So was Mohammed therefore Christian in the beginning?”

He asked himself the latter question and waited for an answer. He picked up the history book he had read and said, “Yes, he was Christian, and the ten years that the Muslims, in their own traditions, concealed this, makes it true. Yes, he was

a follower of Christianity, he was one of them! His Quraish tribe, which wanted a new leadership, convinced him to announce a new religion which wasn't Jewish or Christian. If not, then why did he claim to be a prophet in his forties, when all other Prophets were born so?"

He digressed in his ruminations, saying, "The Creator of this great universe cannot be interested in sending verses pertaining to juvenile wives, slavery, mistresses and prisoners of war except to justify the sexual whims of Mohammed! This whole history is a lie, a wicked lie! There is not a single sound mind that would believe such things! There is not a single person of conscious thought upon whom such lies could be imposed without them stopping and asking of the truth. Half of the Koran carries the stories of Christianity and Judaism and the other half concerns wives. So was the Creator merely concerned with the sex life of Mohammed? With this, has he become so small that he simply curses ordinary people for opposing Mohammed?"

He stole himself once again from his thoughts and questions and paced up and down, signalling with his hand as if addressing someone in front of him. He rubbed his hair and scratched his beard in search of answers. Important truths had been revealed to him and with it he wanted more. The significant facts which had been uncovered clarified the finer points, shedding light on his doubts and now he sought more answers. It is unreasonable to think that the Creator is just a tool in the hands of everyone. The great force of the cosmos, and its ambiguities which are yet to be explained, shouldn't be exploited by religions emerging during the times of

backwardness and ignorance, in order to make people believe such stories about donkeys and mules which litter the holy books.

“This is contempt!” he announced furiously, “Contempt for the mind in that ancient time. Would the mind accept it nowadays?”

He sank back in his chair, exhausted, bags under his eyes, flooded with a sense of satisfaction and certainty about what he had concluded. He was happy, and very tired.

He blinked before closing his eyes to take a short nap. He lowered his head onto his chest. He settled motionless in the silence of the house as the rays of sun fell on him through the glass panels of the conservatory roof.

His son Nasser came and gently shook him by the shoulder. “Get up, there is a fire in the house!” He opened his eyes to find the furniture on fire and flames engulfing him. He could hear the shouts of women. He made his way through the middle of the fire, the flames licking the walls around him. The kitchen door was stuck and inside there were a number of women, veiling their heads and wailing whilst stopping him from entering. He wrestled with them with feeble hands as the panic gripped his heart. He made his way to the second floor and there he saw his two children climbing through the window, still holding their computer game controllers. He jumped through after them, suddenly finding himself in the street, but he couldn’t see them. He turned around to see Nasser disappear, along with the house. He kept looking up and down the rows of houses for one which was on fire, his heart

filled with bitterness. He walked for a long while following his wife, Noura. She was walking at a leisurely pace and so he ran behind her. Though she was ambling along, still the distance between them grew. The road ended as they arrived at an Arabic school where he began to search for his children. The school children were clinging to him and blocking his way on the path. One of the teachers shouted to ask what he wanted as he staggered along among the children. He happened upon a long, dark staircase and he clambered down it. At the end of it he found a chicken-like creature creeping along, battered and unable to stand on its own two legs. He felt disgusted by it as the heat intensified around him. He wanted to strip off his clothes but they clung to him. He saw his first wife holding a bottle of drinking water out to him, which turned out to be empty. He noted that her clothes were shredded and Nasser, who appeared to be ten years old, clung close to her, walking in her shadow.

He trudged behind them through a foul-smelling swamp and a moray eel suddenly swam forward and attacked his chest. He screamed as he tried to bat it away, but no sound came from his mouth. He woke up abruptly, covered in sweat, the sun beating down on him with relentless heat.

He wiped the sweat from his chest and moved to the couch in the shade. Gradually, he calmed down. He couldn't remember anything about the nightmare other than the huge, toothy eel. Then he remembered his son, Nasser, young and walking alone. In the back of his mind, he felt a beautiful tenderness towards him. The house, although stiflingly hot,

was filled with calm. He then thought of his wife and the two children who had gone out that morning.

He felt reassured once more and the recollections of the dream faded from his mind. He got up and went up the stairs towards the bathroom. “This confused dream will not scare me!” he said to himself as he lathered his haggard face with soap and massaged his heavy beard to shave. Then, he stripped off his clothes and stood under the cascading water of the shower, which was cold at first before running warm. The torrent revived him and he was invigorated by the strong current of water. He poured shower gel on his body and massaged it around with a sponge. “We’ll find him!” he said, speaking about Nasser, “Here or wherever, we’ll find him.”

He slathered himself with soap and water and went back under the shower again to enjoy its warmth. He poured soap on himself for a second time and it ran over his eyes. “You can see the illusion with your eyes closed.” The water spilled above his head and washed the foam away, washing with it the myths of years gone by. He turned off the tap and grabbed a towel and wrapped it round his waist before going downstairs barefoot. As his feet touched the carpet, it soaked up the moisture from them. He searched in the kitchen for the leftovers from the previous day’s dinner. There was some kofta meat, made with tomatoes. It was congealed and covered with oil. He placed it on the stove and turned on the gas. He began imagining once again the picture of the wailing women in his mind, but immediately banished them from his thoughts. He felt hungry when he saw the kofta, with its meat and its red sauce. He took a morsel of bread and dipped it into the pan,

munching it with delight. He spooned in some red chillies and the sauce splashed everywhere as the heat from the bottom of the pan was suddenly allowed to escape. He continued to tear off pieces of bread, dunking them in the mix before chewing them. The red chilli sauce left a strong and burning taste in his throat.

When the pan was hot enough, he'd already eaten the contents, and with another piece of bread, he mopped what was left in the pan until it was clean before turning off the gas. He massaged his unshaven face and felt profound comfort. He sat on the sofa in the conservatory away from the sun. The books which were perched on the table and which he had spent the last three weeks poring over reminded him of stories of the strange animal that Muhammad rode to Jerusalem, the spider, wives and the long dead. None of them had returned to speak about their experience of heaven or hellfire. "For fourteen centuries, the religious figures have been accumulating the myths!" he said. "They kept adding things until logic was lost, and nothing was left except praise and blessings. They have developed a new breed of myths and mythology!"

From behind the front door, he chose some trousers and a shirt which hung on the coat hook. He put them on, grabbed his shoes, and went back to the sofa. He thought about his children, then about his wife. "She's still sad! She put the food out and then went off into town," he said to himself. "I'll join them." He held the second shoe in his hand without putting it on his foot, thinking of a way to appease her. He now only rarely spoke to her: she was always asking when they would be returning to their country. He still saw her as a spoiled child

whose heart was always won over by pretty presents. He felt desire for her, seeing her in his imagination stripping off her underwear, lying on her back, with her brown skin bathed in eau de toilette. Even her vagina was bathed in perfume.

“Have I begun to get old in her eyes?”

He put his foot in one shoe and took the other out. The image of his former wife, in her loose clothing, came back to his mind, and he asked himself what these dreams meant to him. “The grave,” he said to himself. “Death slowly rots our bodies, until only the bones remain. That which is called the soul, where does that go? Is there not a place where it departs to? They must be stacked up on top of each other somewhere, but where?”

He thought that if we were to rid ourselves of religion, then we would be ridding ourselves of the soul. He was pensive about the accumulation of feelings and emotion within every one of us, as well as the so-called consciousness, the self. Does that die when we are in the grave? If Mohammed knew the answer to this question, would he not have told the people? Was paradise the bait with which he attracted believers, and continues to do so after all these years?

As he held the shoe in his hand, his eyes bulged at this thought; the thought that the soul was separate to the body, with no alternative. “We’ll never go any further than the grave,” he said to himself, anguished. “Everything comes to an end. Half a ton of earth on top of us, and we have nowhere to go underneath. This endeavour, work, profit, children, this is for life only, and then we die like the millions before us –

millions, billions of dead. The so-called day of resurrection will not come. Nobody will be calling on the dust which remains of us after we decompose!”

He began sweating heavily once again, and stepped awkwardly with one bare foot towards the dinner table, his shoe in his hand. He walked into the glare of the sun, stopping to contemplate the stack of books. The sun’s heat was oppressive and his chest glistened in the light through his unbuttoned shirt. He went back to the sofa and proclaimed, “Let the end be in the grave!” He put his shoe on and prepared to go out. “Most of Arab history is based on mythology!”

He stopped the car on Route 52. The wind licked his face and he felt refreshed. It was Wednesday 2:00 P.M., when Brighton’s tourists begin to emerge in small numbers. As a result, he had little difficulty in finding a place to park the car along the coast.

“Where would the kids and their mother be?” he asked himself as he walked along the pavements of Brighton, which, be it a weekday or the holiday season, were always filled with crowds of children. He crossed over and headed for the town centre, and decided to have his hair cut. On the corner of one of the streets, he saw a barber shop and went inside. He waited his turn among a number of youths before a good-looking girl came over and asked if he would like a coffee. “Yes please!”

He sat and looked on at the passers-by; women, children, elderly, all heading somewhere sporting smiles on their faces. He recalled a similar situation in his home country, and also in other Arab countries. Veiled women would pass by,

some of whom would have only their eyes showing, others would hide literally everything in baking heat. Their clothing would be so long that would drag along the ground and the women would resemble bats – bats on their way to paradise of course! There would be lines of them waiting to go to heaven, after they'd finished the shopping! Then Mohammed takes them back, "Ah, not yet." There would be sweat running from their armpits, down their bodies and onto their legs in the suffocating heat. They give birth to the martyrs, who would go to paradise before them after blowing themselves up among the innocents from their own kith and kin. Upon me, and upon my enemies, O Lord!

The girl brought his cup of coffee over and he thanked her before drinking it in a leisurely fashion. This girl won't go to paradise, he thought, because she shows her bare cleavage and legs, and looks on smilingly. Over there, a guy marries a girl swaddled in clothes, dressed like a mummy, "Ah, make way, veiled ones first!"

"Do you want to take a seat?" asked one of the barbers.

"Yes," said Ibrahim, as, cup in hand, he made his way to a seat and sat down.

He thought back to the postman who hadn't called him in a long time. He wondered whether or not Jeffrey was sincere. However, after all, wasn't it like looking for a needle in a haystack? He had to resort to asking young Arab asylum seekers about Nasser. There were a lot of asylum seekers, refugees, people on the run in Brighton, and he knew how it was to deal with them.

When the barber had finished cutting and trimming his hair, Ibrahim felt refreshed. Then he looked at his reflection in the mirror. "I've become old, Noura!" he thought. Then he smiled, paid, and left the shop.

He made his way along the pavement, passing the restaurants, cafés, and amusement arcades, but he didn't see his children or their mother. He felt a strong urge to do so. He went down onto the southern coastal path and walked slowly back to the car. As he did so, he gazed longingly at the sea and thought about how it resembled the Tunisian coastline, except the waves were much higher. When the wind picks up, the water becomes muddied, and the water resembles rain as the blueness disappears. If there is no Creator, then who is responsible for the waters of the sea, making them of one level, of one taste? Then they abused Him until they had turned the divine verses themselves into the pettiest things. He now felt free of the myths, but who was it who caused and turned these waves? Who creates the winds in the sky and forces them to the ground? "Indeed, it is a natural phenomenon," he said. Lightning, thunder, rain and earthquakes, the people know about them, and the weatherman talks about them. The people follow the weather's progress without being so backward as to think it the work of a Creator like those of religion, which imposes its clumsily constructed views to intimidate the ignorant.

As he wandered along the path towards the coast, the seagulls circled at high altitude and his thoughts were far from the whereabouts of his car. He saw two youths, laughing, sharing one fishing rod, their line coiled beside them. One of

them cast it and looked for a moment before moving, jerking it back. He could hear the two of them exchanging some Arabic words. He looked at their faces and saw that they were indeed Arabs, so he headed down the steps towards them.

“How is the fishing today?” he asked, stepping close to them.

“It’s nothing to sing about, and won’t fill our bellies!” said one, grinning as the other giggled.

“You need to keep the line in the water for longer.”

“It’s only three metres, not much more than shallow water. You have to jig it up and then let it settle. The bait is a big piece of meat.”

Still smiling, Ibrahim said, “I reckon you won’t be singing about fat bellies if you carry on like this! What country are you guys from?”

“Morocco.”

“The best people,” said Ibrahim. “How long have you been here?”

“Six months,” the same man answered. “We’re illegal immigrants, and if the police catch us, they’ll send us back to Morocco.”

“How did you get here?” asked Ibrahim.

“We sneaked onto one of the lorries,” the man replied as he cast the line back into the water.

“And how’s the work here?”

“A day’s work, then no work for a week. The police monitor the restaurants and the cafés as well as the other workplaces.”

There was a period of silence as they pulled the line out and then cast it back in. Finally, Ibrahim asked, “Do you know a Tunisian guy, his name is Nasser Ibrahim? You might have seen him somewhere.”

“Nasser Ibrahim?” responded the man as he tried to recall the face. “Is he legal?”

“I don't think so,” said Ibrahim.

After a long period of silence, the other one said:

“Some head for London or the like, unless they came in boats.”

“Perhaps.” said Ibrahim.

“Nobody knows about them apart from Sheik Mahmud in Dover.”

“Sheik Mahmud?” inquired Ibrahim, now focussed on this development.

“Yeah,” said the second guy.

“Do you know his address?”

“In Dover, he runs a small mosque in a shop,” added the guy.

“Where is it, this mosque?”

“They say it’s on the Eastern side of the town,” announced the first guy as he caught hold of the line.

Brighton was three-quarters of an hour from Dover, and the sun was setting, but it was summer and so the sun would remain on the horizon for an hour or so afterwards. Ibrahim decided to head to the English port. He hurried once more to his car, thinking about the means by which he could obtain information about his son. As he knew the ways of the sea, and that the two men would be motivated by fifty pound notes, he reluctantly handed some money over to “reward their fishing.” They immediately threw the rod into the water and headed off into town.

This was rush hour, and the traffic made him think about putting off the trip till the following morning. However, once he saw the streets at Saltdean, he felt inspired to continue heading east. The sea to his right looked stunning, and he would not be delayed because of matters at home. After an hour and half of driving through the throng he arrived at Dover. He hugged the coastal road until he reached the east side of town. There, he found low-grade housing with shops scattered about. He stopped the car and got out as the sun was setting. Behind him the silvery waters lay calm beneath a light breeze.

As he walked along the pavement his eyes scanned the area for a minaret and mosque, but the shops were all small stores, paper shops and offices for rent. He stopped in front of a shop with old fruit baskets outside. Inside was a bearded man, unmistakably Arab, speaking on his mobile phone, surrounded by empty shelves. He looked closely at the customer without stopping talking.

Ibrahim stopped and waited. He asked himself what the man was selling and how people could shop in such an intimidating environment.

Once he had finished his conversation and placed the mobile back in his pocket, he looked up at the customer. He knew from his appearance that he was from the Middle East as well. He didn't say anything and waited for the customer to say something.

"I've heard that there is a mosque in this area," said Ibrahim.

"You're in front of the mosque, and it's Friday prayers," the man smirked.

He didn't believe what the man was saying and he turned and looked behind in search of mosque-like features in the area suggested before saying, "I think that this is the mosque."

The man didn't respond, and his eyes remained fixed on Ibrahim suspiciously.

"Are you Sheik Mahmud?" Ibrahim asked cautiously.

"No, I'm his brother!"

"I think there is another sheik," said Ibrahim to himself, "I think I should leave this man alone and ask for his brother."

"When will Sheik Mahmud be here?"

"In half an hour," the man said drily. With the looks the two men were exchanging, an onlooker would think they were

about to come to blows. “What do you want with him?” the man demanded of Ibrahim.

“I’ve come to ask about a guy who has come here from Europe.”

“We don’t know which people have travelled here,” he said, seeking to end the matter there.

“Is it possible to await Sheik Mahmud’s return?” said Ibrahim, not caring how the man might answer.

“As you wish!”

Gauging the space within the shop, Ibrahim estimated that it could hold six worshippers, gathering on Friday for prayers and other things. They were most likely illegal immigrants.

He went back to the car and moved it to the other side of the coastal road so as to face the shop.

On the horizon three widely spaced fishing boats stopped, and the line where the sea and sky met darkened, leaving the east lit by a haze. He thought that his wife and children would be worried by his lateness. If only they had a mobile phone, but Noura had lost three of them as she disliked carrying them. His mind drifted back to the shop, and he concluded two possibilities for the man’s shiftiness. First, that it was just his nature; second, that the man thought he was a plain-clothed policeman. Nevertheless, he was suspicious of the shop, which had just a few bananas and some rotting apples, among other odds and ends. This task would be to assist the efforts of the postman. Talking with Arabs would be

hard for him, he thought as he walked along the coastal road. “Perhaps I would be able to glean a little from them now and again,” he conjectured.

An hour passed and he hadn’t seen anyone. The light in the shop was dim and the bearded man within seemed concerned as he got up and sat down again, speaking constantly on his mobile. The night sky had descended quickly, and the inside of the car had become dark. He told himself that he wasn’t concerned with their affairs and that he was just after information about the boats and their passengers. Then the light-sensitive street lamps illuminated, one by one, along the coastal road.

He closed his eyes and thought once more about his wife. How could he convince her to rid herself of the illusion of religion which was blinding her? She is naïve, he thought, adhering to these myths as she hears them. She is surrounded by myths, happy in her belief in a religion forced upon her, swallowed wholesale without any discussion. This is what I did, what our fathers and grandfathers did too. They were trapped under a thick slab of cement, and if one wished to smash it, everyone would be scared and turn on you for trying. So how to convince her that this slab which sits in front of our eyes and our emotions represents the biggest obstacle to the truth?

“It’s best if I keep silent for the time being,” he concluded on reflection. He sat with his eyes closed. “Let’s leave it until she has forgotten about it and we can go back to living a normal life. We will spend the rest of our days being a

family, and I will lavish her with gifts. We will enjoy the better side of life. I'll ask her to throw the books in the bin, and when I go back to her in a new frame of mind, after the barbers, she and the children will go back to the old way of life."

From his far-left side, he could hear two people quarrelling. He opened his eyes and looked towards the shop. The brother had returned: he was gesticulating and speaking in Arabic, snippets of which Ibrahim was able to catch.

He got out of the car and made his way towards the shop. The two men were still arguing, and it had become difficult to understand as their speech descended into thick Egyptian accents. He stopped in the doorway and the two men noticed him.

"Welcome, sir. You were asking about me," said Sheik Mahmoud. He was plump, with an open shirt and a beard like his brother.

"Hello," said Ibrahim. "Yes, I've come to ask you about a guy called Nasser. Perhaps you've come across him."

"Welcome, please," he insisted, pushing one of the chairs from the shop towards him.

"No thank you," said Ibrahim.

"By God, no, you must rest!" the man continued to remonstrate, expressing a magnanimity that did not match his cranky demeanour.

He abandoned the chair which had been brought out of the shop to the empty pavement. "You said his name was Nasser Ibrahim? With God's grace, all is well with him. Are

you his father, sir?" (Ibrahim had not revealed his son's full name when he asked if the man knew someone called Nasser.)

"Yes," said Ibrahim.

"Ah, a father's worry over his son. I understand that only too well. And how old is he?"

"He's twenty." said Ibrahim. The misunderstanding as to the circumstances now seemed to be finished.

"Peace be upon the youths, praise be to God," Sheik Mahmud said with intensity.

Then he turned to Ibrahim, lowering his voice. "Do you want to come with me? We're going to meet the boats. They're a bit late. As you know, sir, the seas have been rough along the French coast, but God willing, they'll be arriving tonight."

Darkness had spread everywhere and the sea was a black mass. The town of Dover, which he didn't know except for the coastal road, was empty except for the street lamps. He was heading on an adventure of the kind he had heard about but had never been close to. He kept his questions about Nasser to himself as Sheik Mahmud chatted constantly while driving the car.

The car made its way eastward, sounding too loud for its actual speed. Ibrahim noticed that God was always with them, as Sheik Mahmud called on Him in everything he said, did and planned with regards to the world.

After around half an hour, the car turned up an unpaved road and headed up a high hill overlooking the sea where it came to a stop. The sheik took a heavy jacket from the back

seat, placed it over his shoulders and suggested that Ibrahim keep his voice down whilst speaking. Ibrahim had not said a word up to that point, and he followed the shadowy figure to the shore. Sheik Mahmud asked him to choose a rock and sit down. They both sat down and gazed at the sea in front of them.

They waited in the calm of the night. After a while the sheik took a torch from his pocket and began to signal intermittently in front of his face as he listened carefully to the water's silence.

A whole hour passed as they sat like this, signalling and listening in the unbroken silence. Every so often, the sheik would express his confidence in the arrival of the two boats that evening that hadn't appeared the previous night due to the bad weather. God willing, they will arrive at one moment or the next. He revealed that police patrols hunt for the boats as they enter English waters and so he may have to find out through the owners if they had ended up in Portsmouth, Dover or Southampton. Thank the Lord there had been no boats detained the night before. Ibrahim asked when the boats had left. Sheik Mahmud told him that it had been two weeks ago. "They've been in the water for two weeks?" asked Ibrahim, alarmed.

The sheik answered that some of the boats arrive, with the grace of God, after three weeks at sea.

"Where do the boats start from?" Ibrahim wanted to know

"From North or West Africa," the sheik told him.

Ibrahim's heart sank when he heard this – he felt that his efforts had been fruitless. He was expecting the vessel to arrive from Europe, and with it, information about Nasser. He thought these hopes were dashed when he heard that the boat was coming from Africa.

He kept his sense of disappointment to himself. What was the use of informing the sheik of his mistake? He should have asked from the beginning, tailored his questions, and made his aim clear. The cool breeze blew through his shirt onto his chest and arms and he felt contempt for the bogus sheik who was smuggling these refugees. He felt like kicking him into the water. All of his chatter, charm and confusion had not afforded him the opportunity to clarify what he needed. There he was, seated beside him, swathed like a bear in a lined jacket, signalling over the waters with little thought of what would happen if one of the patrols should spot them. It would be a scandal in all the morning papers. What could he tell his wife about his lateness? The first thing she would fear is that he had been to a brothel, and even if he was to swear on the lives of his son and daughter, she would stay silent. But she would certainly have revenge upon him by taking herself and the children back to their homeland.

As he was busy in thought, he heard a sound in the distant waters. It was coming towards them slowly but without stopping. He turned to find the sheik crouching down, urging him to give a few signals to the boat approaching them. As the sound neared the shore it gradually turned into the noise of a motor. As if in a dream, the sheik said, "Here they are!" He proceeded to signal almost frantically before turning to

Ibrahim, saying, “They have arrived with God’s help – praise be to God!”

Amidst the blackness the shadowy skeletons of the boats advanced and their clumsy noises seemed to echo down the whole length of the beach. He could see the morning’s headline: “Arab merchant controls illegal immigrant smuggling”

“It will be a scandal!” he thought, reproaching himself for agreeing to come along with the sheik. Ibrahim hid behind him in fear of being seen by the authorities. The boats sped forward so as to heave up on the gravel beach, and they came to rest around a metre from the shore.

When the growl of the engines stopped, he could hear the faint shouts of the passengers, interspersed with the screams of children along with the wails of women who had landed on the men, who, in turn had been trampled by others. All of them thought that the boats had struck a rock at sea and they were inevitably drowning.

Sheik Mahmud was calming them, urging them to be quiet in a hushed voice so as to not attract the attention of the sea patrols. When some of them realised that they were actually on the English coast they began to climb over the sides of the boats, throwing themselves to the ground; they were between life and death. The wails and screams of the women and their children increased and Ibrahim looked inside the boat to be met with a scene from hell, where the dead are sent as described by religions. He couldn’t understand all of the different languages as they were all speaking at the same time,

though he wanted to make out what they were saying. They all wore shabby, tattered clothing that the salt water and sun had turned into rags. Some had believed that they had fallen into the hands of the border police. The number of children became more apparent when a group of them was taken out under the eyes of Ibrahim. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, more and more he could see their faces were gaunt with hunger. Then he realised that the bottom of the boat had been swamped with water and the men, who were now beside it, collapsed with thirst on the sand, unable to climb without a helping hand. One of the youths told Sheik Mahmud in broken English that the second boat had sank off the coast of Spain due to high waves and wind; just four of its passengers survived by clinging to the side of the first boat. The youth added in Arabic that they had stayed on course then headed towards the Irish coast before changing direction for England. He went on to say that they had run out of water, had not eaten anything of sustenance in a week and stayed stranded in the sea, scared to approach because they had not received the correct signal.

All of them were asking for food and water. They had now climbed up onto the shoreline and were spread out on the gravel beach. The children kept shivering and screaming whilst the women took cover between the rocks as though in a state of severe exhaustion. Not knowing what to do after they had all disembarked, Ibrahim started to move off, stumbling in the dark among the bedraggled passengers, who came empty-handed, afflicted by hunger and thirst. Some were lying down, others were sitting or standing. Befuddled, he heard a subdued banging on the side of the boat near the rudder as someone

tried to make an opening with an axe. The blows continued until the side split open. The hole widened and two planks were removed, after which the boat was heaved back into the water. It drifted off, sinking away from the shore among the large swells.

After the man finished scuttling the boat, he proceeded to search for Sheik Mahmud. His angry eyes shone through the dark. When he found him he pounced on him like an eagle, hitting him and insulting him in African dialect. Others joined in until the sheik was cowering on the floor. They kicked him repeatedly, then left him groaning before he picked himself up, following his humiliation.

Chapter 12

Bob Aspen belongs to a family in which most members worked as civil servants. These include Frank, Adam, Matthew, and Colin Aspen, all of whom were from Brighton. Frank was a corporal in the army and his picture, adorned with a few campaign medals, hangs in the kitchen. Another picture is kept in the drawers to the side showing him with four soldiers. Underneath it is stated that he is second from the right. The smoke from their cigarettes, lit for the camera, created a haze in front of them. Their eyes looked impatient: behind them a mule stood loaded with heavy equipment. Bob was in the police and retired aged fifty, but worked with the administrative side and so wore no uniform. He progressed through different positions, beginning with logging complaints, up to serving as a clerk for the courts dealing with public records. All were important internal positions supporting the hard work of the police. He remembered during the sixties the first time he had to deal with the rioting, when he was a mounted policeman. He saw the rioters, who appeared small from his position on horseback, and who were wearing helmets or hats. He was ordered to hit them lightly over their backs with his baton. It all started because the Conservative Party had taken to the streets

demanding that the Labour government leave Downing Street because of inflation. Before he could strike anyone, the horse was startled by someone passing under its nose. Bob was thrown from the horse and he dislocated his ankle. In spite of medication and treatment, nothing worked, and Bob walked with a persistent limp. Though the word lame was never uttered in the house after that day, “Bob the Cripple” still circulated in the market, and the name stuck.

Bob was known to all of the shop owners; plumbers, butchers, fishmongers, tobacconists and even tattooists. He wasn't known among those workers at the new fashion stores or the big, modern shopping centres; therefore he remained very much a part of the old Brighton. It was said that he had rescued three children from drowning when the first Brighton pier collapsed and fell into a pile of metal and concrete columns. These iron pickets are still at the northern end of the current pier today, echoing a bygone era in Brighton's history. Bob Aspen is considered, if truth be told, a genuine local gentleman, a reputation enhanced by his act of heroism.

Bob Aspen, tall and skinny, was known for walking quickly, perhaps to disguise the slight limp in his right leg. He was able to get around all the shops in half an hour where he knew all of those friends. “Hello Jim, How's it going Sid? Beautiful day today William! Hi Steve!”

What threatened the simple habits of Bob Aspen was the creeping growth of the great chain stores and their swallowing up of shops. However, he didn't hope to live for any more than another ten or fifteen years and then – bang! –

he'll be gone. He takes his long journey, satisfied with one last trip to church to be forgiven by the local vicar.

Amongst his daily wanderings and exchange of pleasantries in the markets, and unbeknownst to Jeffrey, he had also been asking the whereabouts of Julian Smith. He asked about his address whenever an opportunity arose to do so, and from day one had been trying to sniff out some information about him. As a result, the story of a sheik searching for his son began to circulate around the heart of the market. The shopkeepers would also follow the story by adding to the greetings, "Have you heard any more about the sheik and his son?" Finally, the day came when he stood in front of his son and asked, "Do you want to know the whereabouts of Julian Smith?"

"Julian Smith?" said Jeffrey, astonished. "Yes!"

"Well, he lives at the Old Hudson, 25 Bedford Street," his father announced proudly.

"How do you know this?" asked Jeffrey, stunned.

"Like I say, it's 25 Bedford Street," Bob said matter-of-factly. Jeffrey's mother shared her husband's sense of pride as she looked on from beside the cooker, not saying a word.

"Do you want to see him today?" asked the father.

"Today? Well, yes!" spluttered Jeffrey as he curled his tongue in surprise.

"Okay, then meet me at the corner of Lloyds Bank at 2:00 P.M."

Bob Aspen had used a number of methods to track down Julian Smith and had vowed to keep it a secret until he was sure of the person and of his address. The last method had been a crucial meeting with a retired police officer named Fenton-who had retired to a small village near Brighton where he enjoyed a small plot of land and a vineyard. The vines were covered with peat and hay for the winter to protect them from the frost. The first buds of spring bear bunches of grapes which are then pressed and fermented in huge concrete pots. The result is a wine resembling a French vintage, of which Fenton was proud.

The name Fenton had beamed like a flash of inspiration across his mind. They had retired in the same year, having risen among the first generation of honest police officers together. Today honesty is engulfed in bribes and skiving. He knew the old Brighton; he knew the nooks and crannies like no other and was familiar with the tactics of both offenders and ex-offenders, pickpockets and alcoholics who are arrested during the night and released the next day.

“Hello, Mr. Fenton,” said Bob as he saluted him.

“Who – why it’s Mr. Aspen!” answered Fenton.

“Yes sir!” said Bob, smiling as he relaxed his military posture.

“How are you?” asked Fenton as he trimmed the vines with scissors. “So what brings you here then?”

“A small favour,” said Bob. “You have beautiful vines.”

“There are only four rows of them!” he responded modestly. “The neighbouring patch is over there.” He pointed to a stretch of ground nearby. “They put it for sale with a non-negotiable price and I’m too old to grow new vines and so as you can see, I’m not in a position to buy it. What can I do for you anyway, Mr. Aspen?”

“I’ve come to ask you about a man called Julian Smith,” said Bob.

“What does he do?” asked Fenton.

“He claims to be a private detective.” replied Bob.

“Detective,” muttered Fenton to himself. “There isn’t a private detective in Brighton unless you mean Anthony Stafford. This fox changes his names a lot but lives at the same address and does petty things. Have you fallen victim to him?”

“God no, he worked for an Arab sheik who came to Brighton in search of his son.”

“Yes, that’ll be him,” affirmed Fenton. “I’ve sent him to court dozens of times and he’s always got off, perhaps because of his disability. It might be worth heading to Mrs. Hudson at 25 Bedford Street.”

Jeffrey headed for Lloyds Bank at the stated time. There he saw his father chatting with a man who was about the same age. They spoke to each other about anything and everything so as to not run out of things to say. When he left him, Jeffrey and his father headed off for around ten minutes into the old town, and Bob told Jeffrey of the surprise that awaited him. Finally he asked, “Why two o’clock?”

“It’s when the fox leaves his hole!” smiled his father.

The two of them finally arrived at a small park between the houses. They sat on one of the concrete benches before Bob declared, “Here is number 25,” pointing to an impressive looking house. The two then waited.

After no more than ten minutes the door opened, and an electric wheelchair appeared. It descended the specially-built slope at the right of the house.

“That there is Julian Smith!” said the father.

“I’m not sure,” answered Jeffrey, still surprised, before they started to follow him. When Julian sensed the footsteps behind him, his wheelchair began to gain speed as Jeffrey shouted at him whilst running.

“Mr. Smith!” called Jeffrey.

The wheelchair ground to a halt, but the man didn’t turn around. Jeffrey, still surprised, ran up to him, stood beside him and asked, “Mr. Julian Smith?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’ve been looking for you,” said Jeffrey.

“Can I help you with something?” quipped Julian.

Julian was sporting a thin moustache above his broad lips and carefully arranged, greying hair. He was around fifty and wore high-end clothing; a blue jacket with a white carnation threaded through the buttonhole, complemented by a burgundy ascot and a light blue shirt. His legs were wrapped in

a dark blanket as he stared into Jeffrey's eyes, awaiting an explanation for this intrusion into his daily routine.

"It's about a young man named Nasser Ibrahim," said Jeffrey, hoping to surprise him.

"What about him?" asked Julian.

"You worked as a detective for an Arab sheik for a year and after you had been given the money, you disappeared," Jeffrey confronted him.

"Where did you get that information from? You're talking like you're in a court room giving evidence to the jury," said Julian, challenging Jeffrey's nerve.

"His father is here, in Brighton!"

"So do you offer services as a private detective?" said Julian, smiling.

"I think it's best if you speak directly to him and finish your work. Failing that, you need to pay back the debt you owe." said Jeffrey, who had now overcome his initial surprise at the whole situation.

"You didn't answer my question," interrupted Julian. "Are you a detective?"

"No, I'm a postman," responded Jeffrey.

"I think you should stick with your letters and parcels, mate!" said Julian as he pressed the controller on his wheelchair and began to move forward.

“It’s not fair to leave things like this. He could sue you!” said Julian, following alongside.

Julian laughed at the threat without halting his wheelchair. “He won’t be suing anybody, my dear postman. That’s because I’m not Julian Smith, my name is Tony Hale! And even if he can provide proof of our conversations, he still won’t win a penny!”

“What about the e-mails that you’ve been exchanging? They’ll search your computer,” said Jeffrey confidently.

“I don’t have a computer. They can search my room.” said Julian.

“But what stopped you from seeing the sheik with the results?” snapped Jeffrey.

“Julian Smith means nothing to me,” retorted Julian. “You should look for him, perhaps he’ll tell you all you need to know.”

The man seemed resolute and completely unperturbed. The wheelchair continued to the end of the street and turned onto another. Jeffrey turned to see if his father was still there but he couldn’t see him. He followed alongside Julian, who had seemingly changed his identity in an instant, and he acted as if he really was Tony Hale. He truly was a fox, just as his father had described.

Therefore he decided to reason with him, not to try to box him in as it was a situation he was well versed in escaping from.

“Mr. Julian, the sheik doesn’t think any of the things about you that I do,” said Jeffrey before continuing. “He just wants to know the truth about his son!”

“You should be putting all of this to Julian Smith, and not to me!” he answered, as he kept rolling in his wheelchair along the ever more crowded pavement. They travelled along, and the wheelchair bounced up and down over the bumps on the pavement

Jeffrey tried to stay with him, or just behind him and the conversation came in fits and starts.

“Have you found any evidence that he is in Brighton? This is all he wants to know!” said Jeffrey.”

“Who was that man beside you in the courtyard?” Julian asked, having completely ignored Jeffrey’s question.

“My father,” said Jeffrey.

“If a little different in size, he resembles you,” said Julian before asking “Is he the one who led you into this mistake?”

“Not exactly,” said Jeffrey, grinning. He was astonished to learn that Julian had clocked them through the corner of his eye as he emerged from his front door, and that he lived just ten minutes from his delivery route. “He was under my nose all the time and yet I never saw him!” he muttered to himself. “Perhaps I’d met him numerous times and just not realised it! And, who would have thought that he would have been confined to a wheelchair!”

The chair came to a halt outside a newsagents and Julian took some money from his wallet. The shopkeeper came out with a bundle of local papers and magazines and handed them to him. Julian gave him the money and thanked him and the newsagent went back inside his shop. It was a daily exchange between the newsagent and the disabled man. Then the chair turned around and Julian went on his way.

“I’ve seen him a number of times in the market,” said Julian.

“Who?” said Jeffrey.

“Your father,” responded Julian. Jeffrey noticed that the wheelchair had slowed down to his walking pace.

“He’s retired. He spends his day here and there,” said Jeffrey before asking “Do you think that the son is in Brighton?”

“How should I know?”

A silence fell between them. The wheelchair stopped at another street and it became apparent to Jeffrey that he was headed for the North where there were fewer passers-by. He didn’t hesitate to stay at the side of Julian Smith. It was Sunday, and he had nothing more pressing to do, so he decided to stick with him until the end.

“What’s your opinion of satellite imagery of the earth?” inquired Julian.

“Satellite imagery from space?” repeated Jeffrey, bemused. “What do you mean?”

Julian opened one of the newspapers and gave it to Jeffrey.

“This,” he said. “Read!”

He unfolded the paper and proceeded to read the headline as he walked.

“It’s a good idea. But how can humanity benefit from it?”

“They can know the houses and streets close up, without knowing the people living there,” responded Julian, “or their names!”

Jeffrey paused to think about what he meant regarding the names and returned the paper to Julian after rearranging the pages. He thought that even if you can photograph the earth from space, you still can’t reach any individual in particular that way; Julian Smith; Tony Hale, or for that matter an endless list of names. It is still less than straightforward to find any specific individual.

“A good idea if the people can benefit from it in one way or another,” Jeffrey said, ignoring Julian’s intended meaning.

“At school, I was the leader of a group of lads,” said Julian. “I taught them how to be true villains; to steal the other students’ things, their pocket money and their meals. When the net tightened, they would blame the disabled boy. Then I would start to cry and say that I didn’t know who had put the things in my wheelchair. My wheelchair would make them laugh and they would forget about the offender. Little did they

know that I would fly every night in the wheelchair right over the towns and farms and mountains, and only come down to earth in the morning!”

“Are you still flying above the beautiful towns during the night?” asked Jeffrey with a hint of sympathy.

“Yes, it’s my dream” answered Julian. “Who can live without dreams? Can you?”

“No, I can’t,” said Jeffrey, with a secret empathy towards Julian. He understood his need to dream. He understood his need for magical scenes to remove him from the shackles of the wheelchair, which had blighted him all his life.

As they neared a group of isolated shops, between which sat a café with its tables on the pavement outside, Julian asked, “Do you fancy joining me for a cup of coffee?”

“Gladly!” said Jeffrey, his face hardly concealing his surprise. “Provided I can pay!”

“There are no conditions with a cup of coffee!” responded Julian as the wheelchair stopped at one of the tables. Jeffrey was quick to make room for him and he settled down at a place from where a chair had been removed so Julian could get to the table. Jeffrey sat in front of him, happy to be in his company.

“Can you smell that aroma? This café does great coffee,” said Julian as he placed the stack of newspapers on the table.

“The place smells of ground coffee,” said Jeffrey, noticing for the first time the smell. Then he realised that he

was still confused in his own mind. He struggled to think what he should say and what answers he expected from his companion, who sat quietly with him.

The waiter came and asked them what they wanted. “Two coffees with milk, please,” he said, before turning to speak to Jeffrey.

“Tell me, why are you concerning yourself with the issue of someone else’s son?”

“I found his father, alone. He and his family need help and are offering money. But I volunteered for free to help him,” said Jeffrey, explaining his position. “Perhaps because he is a stranger to Brighton.”

“So you’re a do-gooder then?” asked Julian.

“You could call me that,” said Jeffrey.

“Perhaps the good doesn’t lie in what you’re doing; maybe it lies with the absent party,” said Julian, who then took out a small cigar from his pocket.

“What do you mean?” asked Jeffrey.

“Never mind,” said Julian as he lit the cigar. “You’ve no experience in such matters, investigating, searching and enquiring. Did you think that your job as a postman would afford you the time to do all of that?”

“I know it’s hard, as well as simple at the same time!” said Jeffrey, aware of the fact that Julian was trying to portray the issue as something impossible. Jeffrey knew that it wasn’t like that at all.

After placing the cups of coffee and milk on the table, the waiter walked away. At the same time, Julian relit the pleasant-smelling cigar, taking a small drag from it. His thoughts returned to his companion, saying to Jeffrey, “You’ll thank me now you know about this café, even though I don’t come here often.”

“It is indeed amazing! Thank you!” Jeffrey said, grinning, as he sipped from his cup.

“Don’t mention it!” said Julian, a flicker of a smile appearing on his face for the first time.

He sipped the strong coffee and took a long drag from his cigar and then puffed slowly. He blew most of the smoke in front of himself until it rose up to a height of about a metre and a half. He took another sip, holding some of the smoke in his mouth as he did so. It seemed to Jeffrey that he enjoyed the taste of the coffee and tobacco combined.

After Julian finished tasting this favourable mix he asked, “Do you work for the Salvation Army?”

“No,” answered Jeffrey.

“I detest do-gooders and their work,” spat Julian. “I don’t think that you can call any work I’ve done ‘good work’, and yet I’m still happy with this. So tell this father that he should forget his son and leave him alone, whether he was here, or elsewhere!”

“Why?” asked a surprised Jeffrey.

“You will find selfishness in the heart of every human being,” Julian lectured him, “not a single person is free of it. I

don't say this because of my handicap. Tell him to avoid this problem now. I have nothing more to add."

Jeffrey stayed silent for a while. He looked into Julian's eyes for some sort of explanation for his unexpected words.

"I don't know who sent you my way today of all days," Julian digressed. "I don't intend to do any good for anyone; not for you or for the father who paid money to find out the whereabouts of his son. However, and I don't know why, I decided to humour you by speaking to you. This is because to some extent you're naïve, and you have volunteered to help with something without knowing the dimensions of it, or indeed the consequences."

"How so?" said Jeffrey, smiling at what he was saying.

"Because he will run away from him again, and he will have to resort to paying money to find him, only for him to flee once more. Money doesn't make a father. And when the parental instinct screams in the hearts of these people, ignorance and cruelty also scream and they cannot distinguish between the two. In effect, the two become mixed."

Jeffrey was surprised and so didn't say a word. Julian continued to sip his coffee and smoke his cigar, blowing the smoke high up into the air.

"I detest virtue in all its forms," he said finally, "and I'm happy with that. I have spent my days conning naïve people in order to pay my bills. The police have chased me hundreds of times and finally they reached a point where they had to give up. They would reach my door and, as if a two-

headed snake was guarding it, they would shrink into submission. I am also happy with this and I have been able to blend in and live like a normal person. You do your work, I do mine. In order to be a conman, you need to open your eyes more than others. You will find them confused and absent-minded, chasing dreams which have no place in the real world. This works in my favour. The weakness of human beings is that they are innately selfish creatures, whichever way you look at them. This makes my job easier.”

Jeffrey kept his lips tightly sealed and simply nodded in agreement. He understood Julian’s surprising confessions, betrayed by what life gave to him, crippling him and denying him the right to move, to stand on his own two feet. He had become someone who saw nothing but darkness in life.

“Selfishness is present in the hearts of everyone,” announced Julian, “nobody is exempt from it. I don’t say this because of my disability, this is not important. I have grown accustomed to this wheelchair since I was small, and a prostitute visits my house once a week. I’m talking about the bad side of life.”

Jeffrey was surprised as Julian had seemed to read his mind and he responded directly. Once this side of Julian’s life had been revealed, the weapon of sympathy had been stripped from Jeffrey. He stopped nodding and just listened as Julian continued.

“The doctor asks me why I smoke so much. Don’t you have to think of cancer? A funny question! Does he not understand that cancer is born in every one of us in the womb?”

We breathe selfishness; we inhale it in the air around us. Have they done anything about that? Have they thought about its origins? Why do they fear cancer and yet ignore the epidemic in front of them? Because they all participate in it themselves!” he said passionately.

Jeffrey remained attentive, listening to what Julian had to say, happy that he had chosen to reveal the secrets about himself.

“There were three of us, I’ll tell you this story,” said Julian, “the days of demonising I told you about, when we used to play in the park. There was a young woman playing with her son and dog at some a distance from us. There were a fair number of people around when a young man appeared. He began stabbing her with a knife. We didn’t know why, but she was screaming as he stabbed her five or six times. He kept stabbing her until she collapsed in a pool of blood. The child began screaming and the dog stood frozen with fear. Then he turned, I mean the killer, and ran away in front of the surprised and scared onlookers. We ran, one of the lads pushing me, towards her. She was gasping her last breaths, the child was still crying and the dog had shaken off its fear and begun to bark near to the body, except the bark was more like the howl of a wolf. He raised his head towards where the killer had gone and let out another howl. A policeman arrived and asked who had done it. By God in heaven there wasn’t a single person around except us four. Where had all the people gone who had witnessed the incident? Had the ground shook and swallowed them up? Had lightning swept them up from the park? We said that a man had done it, and that he was wearing a black sweater

and navy blue trousers. We were talking over each other and we offered the description of what we had seen in one voice. Finally the policeman said, 'Go home, don't stand around here like this!'" Julian continued, "Why then ask who did this? Who was he asking? Was he asking himself? And where were the people who had witnessed the attack from close by?"

Julian fell silent after enthusiastically recounting his story. He returned to smoking his cigar, taking long drags before exhaling and continuing, "When we were older, and knew more of the obvious things, we knew what the ugly face of selfishness meant; kill and steal and don't interfere, and others will not interfere with you. This repugnant principal is what bonds us all. So why are you interfering in things that don't concern you without even getting anything in return?"

Jeffrey remained silent for a short while before responding almost apologetically, "Like I told you, I wanted to help him. We have to create more favourable links between ourselves so we can get rid of the selfishness! It's true that the incident that you witnessed in your childhood is irreparable, but we have to do something different!"

"For my part, I will not do anything which I'm not used to," said Julian. "This is a fair principle!" After a short pause he went on to say, "I'll tell you something, I'll reveal it only to you. It can be our secret, do you agree?"

"Yes," replied Jeffrey.

"What day is it?" asked Julian

"It's Sunday, the first of October," said Jeffrey.

“For four years I have been wearing these clothes, which are elegant in their own way, and I stop at the end of Brighton Pier at 1 A.M. every night. I imagine throwing myself and my chair into the water. Tonight, I will try again. I hope that the will to live won’t overpower, as on previous occasions, the desire to die and so I may be able to end everything by jumping off.”

Jeffrey sympathised with what Julian was saying and was about to speak when Julian raised his hand and stopped him.

“Don’t say a word.”

Silence descended upon them and Jeffrey looked at Julian’s large fingers, clutching assuredly at what remained of the cigar. He thought of him as a crippled child who had adopted a shrewd mentality, even in the way he chooses to end his life. He stared at the ground pensively and the silence continued as Julian smoked his cigar.

Jeffrey thought that he wasn’t being entirely honest with his hatred for life, but was bored of the chair; bored of the dream of flying around under his tattered blanket. Bored from the prospect of being stuck in his wheelchair since his youth to the day he is buried. Indeed, without even knowing, he would be a member of the Happy End Society if he manifested the courage to throw himself along with his chair into the sea. He would be the first member to decide willingly to enter eternal rest.

Jeffrey saw the bitterness written across Julian’s dry lips and the image remained seared in his mind. They were a

symbol of his long suffering and his lost dreams; how his life had betrayed him; a symbol of a child who had witnessed the selfishness of human beings, and thought that, because of his infirmity, somehow he was the one being punished for it. He discovered that people tend to avoid responsibility, whether they are able to stand on their feet, or crippled and helpless. He himself was no exception, and so could see nothing wrong in their avoidance of responsibility. Everyone wants safety and avoids inconvenience.

Chapter 13

“Would you like to see your son?”

Jeffrey’s question stunned Ibrahim, who remained silent as he turned the question over in his mind for a while. The sun shone with intensity on Prince Albert Street as the seagulls swooped from high altitude down to the ground and the half-filled bins. The tourists, partly scared, partly laughing, dodged them as they swooped.

“Do you want to see him?” asked Jeffrey, repeating the question.

“My heart says yes, but my head says something else,” a tongue-tied Ibrahim eventually replied.

Before leaving Julian, Jeffrey had forced him to agree to let Ibrahim see his son, but the sudden shift in attitude of the father had caught him off-guard.

It was 4:00 P.M. when Jeffrey had called Ibrahim to tell him the news. He had found him in Brighton with his family and so they agreed to meet at the Black Tiger Café in Prince Albert Street. Ibrahim had said that he wished to see his son

before their trip back to Tunisia and so the series of surprises began to unfold in front of Jeffrey.

Ibrahim chose a separate table so as to be alone with Jeffrey whilst the family sat at another, some distance away. His wife was dressed in her best clothes which revealed her beautiful, alabaster brown legs. Next to her sat her son and daughter, both flushed with laughing at a fat woman who had knelt down to tie the laces of her young boy and whose trousers had come down slightly, revealing the top of her buttocks.

“Life distorts what we have built because we have built it with feelings alone,” said Ibrahim as he stared straight past Jeffrey. “It’s a strange thing this God that we worship. He rules over the great and the small things around us, the poverty and the prosperity, the calamities and the joys, before sending us to the day of judgement. What else are we left with in life? We are stuck with nothing but our emotions as we seek our own place in heaven.”

Ibrahim’s words surprised Jeffrey as he admitted the role of emotion in the lives of his people. When his gaze returned from staring blankly past him towards the street, he focussed on Jeffrey. He saw in him a completely different person; a person with a different level of consciousness.

“I don’t know what I would do if I saw my son!” blurted Ibrahim.

“He is speaking in exactly the same manner as Julian,” Jeffrey muttered to himself. “The man has been estranged from his son for two years and I assumed that he would have

rejoiced, and would be in tears of happiness, to have found him. So what's changed?"

Life had been moving slowly and days had no longer been counted. However, now things had speeded up on Jeffrey who could hardly keep up with the surprises. Ibrahim sat before him like the Egyptian sphinx, about to open his heart, and then suddenly hesitating to explain the enigma which consumed him. The seagulls redoubled their air raids around the heart of the street and swarmed in their dozens around the bins as if they had found something of worth. The passers-by were still scattering in all directions with increasing laughter. Jeffrey's gaze was fixed on the sheik's lips, awaiting the truth.

Ibrahim broke the silence to reveal the first admission. "When Nasser was fifteen, he disappeared for the first time. In fact, we didn't know how to deal with him. We didn't understand the psychological impact the loss of his mother had on him. We thought, 'What does someone at his age need other than good food and nice clothes?' We had neglected him, and blamed him for his little outbursts. He found no interest in food or nice clothes; he found all he needed with his aunt. We thought as a family that she was spoiling him and we banned him from seeing her."

Then, as if addressing Jeffrey directly, he asked, "How can one live within a ring of iron around which women whisper hatred and denunciation as the men just listen?"

Jeffrey didn't say anything, but just took in what was being said while staring into the dark eyes of Ibrahim before switching his gaze to the surface of the table.

“We came to say goodbye,” said Ibrahim before adding, “We thank you for your efforts, and the fact that you have done this free of charge. But now you have surprised us by knowing the whereabouts of Nasser which has put me in a quandary; how would I meet him? How would I look him in the eyes? What would I say? Had it been a month previous, I would have gone and seen him. We all would have. We would have gone victoriously, wiping away tears of joy, and returned him like a lost sheep to the enclosure.”

He was silent for a while, then, as he stared directly at Jeffrey added calmly, “I have found that the Lord, our Lord, is actually without fangs, and that ignorant tribes will continue to enjoy impunity. The illusion of paradise will also remain on their consciences. Allow me to say such things which are not meant to be offensive, either directly or indirectly.”

“I understand!” said Jeffrey, nodding his head in agreement.

Silence fell once more, and as the buzz of the passers-by hummed in their ears, it didn't seem to pierce the hush between them.

Ibrahim told the story of Algeria and the slaughter of the children, and of how this had affected him mentally. He told of the nightmares where he saw his son and daughter as those children, and how the sight of the blood haunted both his waking and sleeping states. He also said that he no longer spoke about the worries weighing on his heart, except to fellow foreigners. In his country he would be ostracised by the people, and so he would keep quiet about his epiphany so as to not

place his children at risk – the society simply wouldn't tolerate it. He added finally, "I have found myself in a new state of clarity amidst the shadows under which I previously languished."

Jeffrey sensed the transformation in him and he understood the reason for his worries. However, he couldn't understand the reasoning behind his wish not to see his son. He thought that if Ibrahim had wronged him in the past, he would be able to apologise to him and settle matters on a better footing, instead of offering more neglect and acting as though he didn't exist. He questioned the value of paying money to Julian Smith, and perhaps the time spent travelling through Europe. And now they knew the whereabouts of their son and yet were choosing not to see him; he was their son after all.

"I won't disown him!" declaimed Ibrahim, comforting Jeffrey in the silence between his questions. "I may go back and meet him sometime, and I will explain, in private, the mistake we inflicted on him. But for now, I want it to be a secret between you and me."

The enigmas returned once more, and Jeffrey was confused. Somewhat surprisingly, he had become a secret partner but disconnected from the logic. The family seemed odder than he had thought. In the end, it was best to keep your own counsel.

Ibrahim turned to make sure that his wife was still busy with the children before saying, "The fifth time he ran away, Nasser went to Europe. What did Europe mean to him?" he asked before answering. "Europe meant salvation from us and

freedom for him. We discovered that his aunt had paid for his trip and his fees for the naval college. We didn't happen upon him by accident, she admitted to his whereabouts after we had reported him as missing to the authorities and had gone through many travails. Our desire to find him and bring him back to us intensified. We tracked him down to Germany, but he fled when he heard we were coming and has been missing ever since."

Ibrahim's bit his bottom lip in regret and then continued, "I was carrying on foolishly, unconsciously insisting on what the women of the family were demanding. I listened to their chorus of blame, and took to heart their insinuations about the rebellion of my son towards his father's will. I saw it as just disobedience towards his parents, and this didn't change when he ran away. This is the reason I accepted your help free of charge. Since I arrived in Brighton I have been divided. Part of me wants to find him, while another part wants to find no trace of him. I thought that you would not have approached this like a professional, but would simply do it in your spare time, asking questions here and there, before you would just get bored and continue with your own life."

The truth about Jeffrey's role had been revealed. Ibrahim apologised because, one way or another, he had exploited him for what he termed his split between wanting to know where his son was, and his reluctance to actually find out. Jeffrey didn't respond to Ibrahim's apology; he had nothing to add to what was being said. The strangeness of the family and their scheming was unfathomable. He wanted to know more, all that was going on in Ibrahim's mind; he wanted

to know what was clouding his outlook. Jeffrey's intentions had been sincere, and yet Ibrahim had scorned them. Nevertheless, he was determined; he wanted to find out what provided the basis to the structure before him, albeit decayed.

He felt strongly that, during all these efforts, he had been a victim of manipulation, whether innocent, planned, or the product of a confused and terrible chain of events. Nevertheless, he wanted to know what the man in front of him intended regarding his son. The secrets shared meant nothing to him. He wouldn't share them with others. What's to say that he would stay here? What if the police came, grabbed him and deported him? He hadn't yet laid eyes on him! What if he was an exact copy of his father, indecisive and torn within! He was done with the illusions of religion, but the complexities of life hadn't gone with them. So why couldn't he make a decision with regards to his son who was wandering around the streets of Brighton?

As these thoughts echoed through Jeffrey's mind, Ibrahim remained equally pensive about what had been said. Jeffrey surprised him by asking, "I don't mean to impose, but I need to know what your decision is with regard to your son. Do you really not want to see him?"

"Let him live his life!" said Ibrahim. He pointed his index finger towards his wife. "If she knew, she would insist that he be brought back. She considers me an apostate from religion because of the words I uttered earlier. To her I'm an unbeliever and that will turn both her family and mine against me. I was wrong to have done this."

Jeffrey was even more puzzled. What Ibrahim had just said made Jeffrey look at the floor before he slumped back into the cushion of the chair. He looked at Ibrahim and then moved his head to watch the people passing by. He turned back, leaning on the table with his hands clasped together, looking at them as if he wanted to separate them but couldn't. He looked at one arm, then the other, and when he returned his gaze towards Ibrahim, he could see the image resembling the Sphinx and so turned his attention back to the passers-by.

In England, an infinite number of families suffer from one problem or another, although usually not at the same time. Ibrahim had borne the blame, and now he was the victim. He would be going back to his country filled with worry and fear, as well as having lost a son. If Ibrahim continued to speak, he might see yet another image appear, one filled with even more shocking revelations. Frank the waiter looked on from afar, not knowing what was being discussed.

On that day, at just after midnight, Julian Smith would push himself and his wheelchair into the sea. This family would be returning to its country filled with worry, and would be at the mercy of their fear. He would go back to being lonely with pints of beer coming and going. "We will continue to count the days and the years," thought Jeffrey. "We will all die. Linda will die, my father and mother too, along with Frank the waiter. One after the other, whether they were happy, or filled with grief and sorrow, all of them will expire and leave nothing behind except for bits of bone, which will soon crumble into dust. People will still be born, while the dead will fade from memory until it seems that they had never existed. Then

eventually, the memory itself will disappear. The poor creatures responsible for the bedlam of this era will too disappear, having never actually chosen to be here in the first place.

“One final request, Mr. Jeffrey,” Ibrahim said as he reached into his pocket to take out a bundle of banknotes. “Please pass this onto Nasser – it might help him to realise whatever he chooses to do!”

END

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