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The Paranoid Metanarrative and The Postcolonial
Response in Post-9/11 Fiction

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The Pit and the Ladder

In HBO sensation *Game of Thrones*, the Machiavellian spymaster Varys walks into the royal hall and finds the equally cunning council member Lord Petyr Baelish staring intently at the Iron Throne. Initiating the conversation, Varys revels in awe of the throne and the thousand swords taken from King Aegon's enemies and melded together to fashion a throne worthy of the first king of Westeros. "There aren't a thousand blades. There aren't even two hundred. I've counted," replies Baelish, the more incredulous of the two. Varys slyly concurs with his fellow council member's observation. It is a scene that presents characters driven by entirely different motives - positioned in a binary opposition of sorts - but simultaneously demonstrates the affinity of their respective natures, foregrounding the political complexity of the series.

Varys comments on the aesthetically grotesque nature of the throne before Baelish states, "it still has a certain appeal." After a brief digression, Baelish redefines the narrative or - shall we say - the metanarrative behind the Iron Throne as a self-perpetuating fallacy. It is a mode of narrativisation that consolidates the social structure of the kingdom. Varys, far from denying the fictitious nature of the metanarrative, advocates its necessity as the lesser of two evils. He forewarns Baelish that in its absence, the population would fall into a pit of chaos; the kingdom devolving into a ruinous power vacuum. In response, Baelish likens that absence to a ladder instead of a pit, hinting at his true intentions and suggesting that this potential vacuum is not necessarily a calamity. He doesn't seek to dismantle the current metanarrative but replace it with a metanarrative that is more advantageous to his personal plans.

Much like the metanarrative of the Iron Throne, the dominant 9/11 metanarrative was similarly perpetuated to bring order alongside polarity to an event that was akin to Varys' gaping pit of chaos. It is employed by those who created it to generate global paranoia and xenophobia. It continues to operate to unite and mobilise nations of different creeds and cultural backgrounds against members of a particular ethnicity and ideology - whom they accuse of fostering global terrorism. The dominant 9/11 metanarrative is utilised as a ladder so those who perpetuate it can climb closer towards their own political goals. Simply put, the intent behind this project is to deconstruct this ladder, and demolish it through a series of interpretive acts. It may appear like a harmless nudge, rather than a brute kick to the ladder's base, but it is a start.

In the critical component of this project: "Fiction Under the Clout of the Dominant 9/11 Metanarrative", I will examine the extent of the influence of the dominant 9/11 metanarrative on post-9/11 fiction. This section is conducted in terms of literary analysis and gauges whether the selected novels succeed at producing counternarratives that incite literary and public incredulity in the dominant 9/11 metanarrative or, conversely, if they aid in perpetuating that same metanarrative.

Through the creative component entitled *The Righteous Man*, I will recreate the post-9/11 world, but from a perspective that is loosely based on my personal experience after 9/11 in both the US and Saudi Arabia. I would contend that this perspective deterritorialises and forces the reader to look through the vantage point of someone who is neither a direct victim nor a culprit of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Through the construction of a protagonist who suffers unjustly from racial profiling - under the guise of the implementation of stricter security measures - I hope to showcase how the perpetuation of the 9/11 metanarrative creates a vicious cycle of paranoid and

xenophobic tendencies. These, in turn, feed into the metanarrative's pool of doctrines and exacerbate the endless cycle of victims-turned-offenders.

The need to construct this project as a creative-critical thesis stems from its dual objectives. Through the critical component, I aim to examine the nature of the relationship between three works of post-9/11 fiction and the dominant 9/11 metanarrative and evaluate the scope of their dependence on this metanarrative. Through an exploration of the literary techniques employed, and a comparative assessment I determine which text most successfully challenges said metanarrative. I endeavour to ascertain which novel provides the reader with a deterritorialising, thought-provoking experience, and reconfigures the porousness of the borders defined by post-9/11 terrorist discourse. I also attempt to identify the literary devices at work in this particular counternarrative, that enable it to pose such a challenge to the dominant 9/11 metanarrative.

In my creative component, I intend to develop some of these literary devices to compose a narrative that further deterritorialises readers and incites them to question the widespread 9/11 metanarrative. Both a critical examination of the relationship between post-9/11 fiction and the dominant 9/11 metanarrative, and a creative implementation are essential to this project. It is only through literary analysis, coupled with the reconstruction of self-perpetuating paranoia and xenophobia in the form of a novella, featuring a protagonist that falls neatly under the categorisation of the "other" in terrorist discourse, that a deconstruction of the "ladder" can take place.

This approach has led to the discovery that there are numerous modes of adhering to the multi-pronged, negative depiction of the "other" and conciliating oneself

with the dominance of the 9/11 metanarrative. But, moreover, there is also more than one way of challenging that metanarrative. The development of an ominous uncertainty in a counternarrative that employs an unreliable narrator, examined in my critical component, is one means of achieving this. Through my creative component, I have realised that the creation of an atmosphere of instability, that emphasises the vicious, cyclical nature of the dominant 9/11 metanarrative, is yet another way of subverting this superstructure of narrativisation. I hope that this project sheds some light on the fallacies and ramifications of the dominant 9/11 metanarrative and arouses suspicion of this metanarrative in the minds of readers, expanding the spectrum of debate in post-9/11 fiction.

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Critical Component:

Fiction under the Clout of the Dominant 9/11

Metanarrative

During John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign, he interrupted a female supporter at a town hall meeting in Minnesota. Midway through her question, she contended that Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate for the presidency, was untrustworthy, due to the pervasive rumour that he is of Arabic descent. Unfortunately, McCain's deplorable response was in no way better than his partisan's xenophobic comment. Instead of refuting the woman's claim and the basis on which it was constructed, he responded with a trivialisation: "No, Ma'am! He's a decent family man, a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with." McCain's feeble insinuation that being an Arab was antithetical to American values of decency, being a good citizen and a family man, reveals the extent of the damage that the dominant 9/11 metanarrative has inflicted on not only the general populace, but even on those in the highest political echelons. These tendencies in opinion failed to abate even after Obama won the presidential election. There was even controversy in Obama's own camp over whether he should use his middle name "Hussein" during his swearing-in ceremony.

Such misconceptions are merely the instinctual reaction of those who have been steeped in the all-pervasive metanarrative. It is a narrativisation that limits people's capacity to conceive of identity exterior to its superstructural parameters. According to

John Stephens, a metanarrative is “a global or totalising cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (6). All religions, ideologies, and scientific disciplines are in essence, metanarratives unquestioningly embraced by their adherents and dogmatically perpetuated within their cultural domain. Thus, a metanarrative can be defined as a comprehensive and all-encompassing grand narrative that explains and provides contextual depth to sub-narratives that are affiliated with it. A metanarrative is the architectural foundation of culture, shaping and defining its limits, and the various mediums through which said culture is represented and disseminated to the public.

In the aftermath of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks in 9/11, the American public required a means of putting this unspeakable atrocity into words: to articulate and contextualise it, to turn disorder into order, to redefine the unfamiliar as the new familiar. They turned to the President, government officials, and other political and cultural figureheads as guides, mystified as to how to react to these attacks. Cooler heads called for prudence and patience. However, these voices of reason were discounted, and their pleas were overridden by the official publication of lists of people and organisations presumed responsible for the attacks. Vindictive warmongers demanded the heads of those responsible, even before the dust from the attacks had settled.

In his essay, “Narratives, Meaning Making, and Dominance in Analogies: 9/11 as a New Pearl Harbor”, Brian Connor discusses how mainstream media and US officials frequently compared 9/11 to Pearl Harbor in an initial attempt “to make sense of the events” and how this analogy eventually played a major role in formulating the 9/11 metanarrative. Connor posits that the “9/11 - Pearl Harbor” analogy implicitly answered

“questions about whether the attacks were acts of war, how people should cope with the attacks, and what the nation should do next, and much else” (1). The 9/11 - Pearl Harbor analogy was responsible for constructing a new American metanarrative that “[stresses] the strength of the US and its eventual triumph over its ‘evil’ enemies”, casting Arabs and Muslims as the villains instead of the Japanese (2). This metanarrative gave rise to the “War on Terror”, and the ongoing military campaigns in both Afghanistan and Iraq. It justified and even condoned widespread xenophobia against Arabs and Muslims in the US. Delineated as the villains in this narrative paradigm, Arabs and Muslims have been relegated to the pernicious and inferior elements in the binary system of terrorist discourse. Under the ascendancy of this metanarrative, they have been fictitiously characterised as a subversive group, opposed to modernity, and blindly committed to an ideology plagued with violent propensities.

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, many counternarratives have been created. These counternarratives dispute the legitimacy of the predominant 9/11 metanarrative, and the 9/11 Truth Movement - a loose body of private organisations and individuals, who publicly voice skepticism of the official 9/11 metanarrative - is one example. However, these counternarratives remain unpopular within the American public domain and are objects of ridicule in mainstream media. Further exacerbating the situation, no American novelist of credible literary standing has succeeded in producing a piece of fiction that presents a serious challenge to the dominant 9/11 metanarrative. This failure begs the following question: Does the influence of this narrative superstructure on the works of American literary giants portend a new grievous era, where fiction does not dare to displace its audience beyond the boundaries of the dominant 9/11 metanarrative? Or even gesture at reframing it?

The concept of metanarrative was brought into prominence by Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He defines postmodernism as an “incredulity towards metanarratives”, and calls for an increasingly skeptical attitude to resist “the totalising nature of metanarratives” (Lyotard 24; Mitchell). Metanarratives inevitably seep into the subconscious of those who uphold or are continuously exposed to them. This is evident in the efficacy of the 9/11 - Pearl Harbor analogy. As Connor purports, it subliminally obscures the stark disparity between Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, rendering the American population more amenable to the prospect of waging war in retaliation to the terrorist attacks (1). Since it is insurmountably difficult - and against the interests of those who promote the dominant 9/11 metanarrative - to shield the public from its influence, the American everyman inevitably falls prey to a barrage of subliminal and overt messages in mainstream media that function to incriminate members of a certain religion or ethnicity. This, in turn, leads to the social acceptability of paranoia and xenophobic attitudes towards this cultural segment of the population. It is at this point, when the role of public intellectuals becomes critical. Edward Said describes the necessity and ideal nature of these thinkers in *Representations of the Intellectual*:

Capable of resisting [the mass politics of representations embodied by the information or media industry] only by disputing the images, official narratives, justifications of power circulated by an increasingly powerful media - and not only media, but whole trends of thought that maintain the status quo [and] keep things within an acceptable and sanctioned perspective on actuality (22).

Members of the intelligentsia in post-9/11 United States and the West should be held to the same standards; to remain incredulous of the dominant 9/11 metanarrative and impervious to its subliminal influence. Fiction is revered as one of the primary modes of

artistic expression intellectuals utilise to disrupt the familiar “reality” of any ingrained grand narrative. This disruption can come in the form of publicly “rais[ing] embarrassing questions...confront[ing] orthodoxy and dogma [rather than reproducing them], to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and...to represent all those people and issues who are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (4). It is tragically detrimental to all when those who should be in a position to analyse and critique this metanarrative, fail to fulfil these standards and shy away from the challenge.

In the tradition of Lyotard’s injunction, the aim of this essay is to revive postmodern incredulity in the prevalent 9/11 metanarrative through a critical analysis of three post-9/11 works of fiction. This analysis determines whether these works of fiction succeed at producing a challenging counternarrative to the normative narrative schematic. The three novels I will explore, are Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, John Updike’s *Terrorist*, and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

In “The Depiction of 9/11 in Literature: The Role of Images and Intermedial References”, Sonia Baelo-Allue analyses DeLillo’s implementation of memorable 9/11 photographs and camera footage in the narrative of *Falling Man*. She posits that post-9/11 fiction has relied on images from the media to increase the readers’ interest and imbue the audience with the vicarious sensation of actually taking part in the story; as a mode of inclusive engagement. These images serve as the starting points with which DeLillo develops the consciousness of each character. While he may have succeeded in this attempt to cinematically engage readers, and interpolate them in the construction of the three primary characters, it is clear that these images are not the only artefacts that DeLillo incorporates from the dominant metanarrative. The stereotypical representation

of terrorists as “the ominous agent” in his novel is obviously derived from, and further reinforces the prevailing metanarrative’s ubiquitous characterisation of the “other”.

Slavoj Žižek asserts in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* that:

It is the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction. In this paranoid perspective, the terrorists are turned into an irrational abstract agency - abstract in the Hegelian sense of subtracted from the concrete socio-ideological network which gave birth to it (41).

This “paranoiac perspective” is conspicuous in DeLillo’s portrayal of Hammad and Amir in *Falling Man*. DeLillo’s failure to explore the motives and the socio-ideological background of the terrorist perpetrators and to navigate beyond the shores of the official metanarrative surrounding 9/11, highlights the author's misplaced trust in the public rhetoric and inability to undertake a challenging interpellation. An interrogative analytical approach to the 9/11 metanarrative may have provided the reader with a new perspective on the attacks, or terrorism in general.

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo introduces two characters: Amir and Hammad. While Amir - whose full name is Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir el-Sayed Atta - is the resolute ringleader of the terrorist cell with unwavering religious conviction, Hammad is portrayed as the protégé lacking in Amir’s drive and certitude. Hammad is a terrorist who still harbours doubts regarding the mission, even when on board the plane headed to the World Trade Center. This hesitance and self-doubt on Hammad’s part, according to Linda Kauffmann, is what makes his character “memorable” (355). The persistent doubt that clouds Hammad’s conscience regarding his suicide mission humanises his character, lending it a deeper dimension than that of Amir’s. In indirect stream-of-consciousness,

readers capture a glimpse of Hammad's inner thoughts and qualms regarding his mission and his perception of the West. He struggles to fulfil what is required of him as a member of the terrorist cell, experiencing internal conflict, and combats his desire to be "normal"; to individuate (83). Despite Hammad's uncertainty, DeLillo's depiction of the character remains abstract and one-dimensional, but incrementally less so when compared to Amir, the quintessential terrorist in *Falling Man*.

In his essay "The Languishing of *Falling Man*: DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer's Photographic History of 9/11", Aaron Mauro argues that DeLillo fails to accurately unveil the motives and reasons behind terrorist attacks. Mauro goes on to say that "with only eighteen out of 246 pages dedicated to this character, Hammad is manifested as merely a confused boy with repressed sexual desires and a dislike for long facial hair. DeLillo offers Hammad's internal monologue as evidence of his confusion, but the terrorist rationale is so absurd that even Hammad struggles to believe it" (592). Mauro then goes on to argue that:

Though he ultimately carries out this misguided plot, Hammad's confusion and flawed logic are unable to convey to readers the political or personal suffering that could drive the real attackers to commit suicide. In short, Hammad's brief appearance in the novel says more about the inability of any author to factually account for the motivations of these men (592).

This failure to explore the motives behind terrorist attacks is arguably related to DeLillo's reliance on the dominant metanarrative in his depiction of the terrorists and the ideology they profess to uphold. In *Falling Man*, there are many images and excerpts which serve little purpose, merely depicting Hammad and his compatriots as zealous believers of a bloodthirsty and senselessly vindictive belief system. This characterisation is explicitly stated in the first paragraph of the chapter "In Nokomis", in which Hammad recounts

an episode wherein his compatriots and he “sat around a table on day one and pledged to accept their duty, which was for each of them, in blood trust, to kill Americans” (171). By means of Hammad’s monologic discourse, we can see DeLillo simplistically registering Islam as a violent ideology. This is evident when Hammad comments on the mundanity of life in the US compared to Afghanistan, where he and his “Muslim” compatriots “received instruction in the highest jihad, which is to make blood flow, their blood and that of others” (173). The implication of Islam’s culpability and proclivity to terrorism and violence through the depiction of Hammad and his compatriots as irrational ideology-crazed savages neatly equates to the doctrines of the dominant 9/11 metanarrative.

The inability of *Falling Man* to constitute a serious challenge to the 9/11 metanarrative resides in the narrator’s failure to distinguish between the ideologies that drive members of an extreme cult-like offshoot of Islam and Islam itself. By converging the two and neglecting to shed light on their radically different definitions in terms of jihad, DeLillo falls into the trap of inadvertently legitimising the predominant official narrative, continuing to incite paranoia and xenophobia. The narrative voice in *Falling Man* tacitly incriminates Islam in several sentences by suggesting that the terrorists subscribe to the righteousness of their goals by proclaiming to be “the followers of the Prophet”. They believe that they are “being chosen, out there, in the wind and sky of Islam. There was the statement that death made, the strongest claim of all, the highest Jihad”, and that they are destined to carry out this sacred mission (83, 174). The sincerity of this belief in the sanctity of their mission is further emphasised by Amir in one of his exchanges with Hammad when he declares:

The end of our life is predetermined. We are carried toward that day from the minute we are born. There is no sacred law against what we are

going to do. This is not suicide in any meaning or interpretation of the word. It is only something long written. We are finding the way already chosen for us (175).

There is no doubt that the terrorists believed in the divinely ordained nature of their plot to kill innocent civilians by flying two jetliners into the World Trade Center, but to suggest that this belief is justified and encouraged in Islamic doctrines is callously disconcerting. This superficial caricature of these terrorists as vindictive youths driven by an ideology that promotes the senseless killing of Americans as a goal in itself, exacerbates the designation of Muslims as society's pernicious refuse. This same claim - firmly in line with the 9/11 metanarrative - is recursive on mainstream news programming and several primetime dramas, inflaming the paranoid mindset already prevalent in a volatile public domain.

The fact that such a claim against Islam - aside from being unfounded - is disseminated in DeLillo's *Falling Man*, absent of dispute or question, mars the authenticity of the narrative and is illustrative of its unwitting dependence on the dominant 9/11 metanarrative. This is a distressing sign. It hails a dawn of an era where fiction becomes intellectually regressive, shying away from introducing deterritorialising works that contest the long-established, conventional perceptions of the public into literary discourse.

Another example which highlights the narrator's tendency to ascribe negative characteristics to Islam occurs when he alludes to the terrorists' primitive tendencies:

In the camp they gave him a long knife that had once belonged to a Saudi prince. An old man whipped the camel to its knees and then took the bridle and jerked the head skyward and Hammad slit the animal's throat.

They made a noise when he did it, he and the camel both, braying, and he felt a deep warrior joy, standing back to watch the beast topple. He stood there, Hammad, arms spread wide, then kissed the bloody knife and raised it to the ones who were watching, the robed and the turbaned men, showing his respect and gratitude (174).

In this scene from *Falling Man*, Hammad issues cries of joy and revels under the watchful eyes of his tutors and peers, with the blood-stained blade in his hand before kissing it. This seemingly primal ritual, encourages the reader to accept an absurd depiction of terrorists, fostering a stereotypical image of an irrational war waged against technology and modernity. This depiction - symptomatic of the metanarrative's ubiquity - is incompatible with certain parts of this metanarrative, particularly those relating to the education the terrorists undergo. It is incomprehensible that highly educated young men enrolling in aviation schools and employing multiple facets of modern technology, would conspire to strike at the symbolic heart of the modern world in one of the most meticulously orchestrated terrorist plots in history, simply for the sake of annihilating modern civilisation. It seems self-defeating for these terrorists to employ the fruits of that modernity with the supposed aim of destroying it, and amounts to a simplistic representation of the "terrorist" figure.

The only character in the novel that presents a feeble defence of Islam and seems willing to analyse the motivation and socio-ideological background of the terrorists is Martin Ridnour. Considering his illicit activities in a past life when he was previously known as Ernst Hechinger, his personal motives behind the advocacy of the "other" become suspect. Ridnour endorses a more objective and practical approach in handling and reacting to 9/11, believing that "these jihadists...have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies...they're all part of the same classical pattern. They

have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood” (147). In more than one instance in the novel, Ridnour discusses the terrorist attacks with Lianne’s mother Nina and attempts to exonerate Islam as a belief system. It is a sterile debate that is played out as a sideshow - considering how little space Ridnour is afforded to state his case in the novel. Ridnour’s opinions are the closest the narrative ever comes to casting doubt on the dominant metanarrative. But the skepticism that Ridnour strives to engender in Lianne and Nina, his lover, is short-lived. Ridnour’s role in *Falling Man* is minor, even when compared to that of Hammad’s, to whose consciousness readers are at least – albeit begrudgingly – granted access. Even when Ridnour covertly questions the dominant metanarrative by repeatedly stressing the complexity of the situation and urges Nina and Lianne to take a more objective and discerning stance towards the terrorists, he is restricted from providing a thoroughly structured and logical counternarrative of his own as to why they committed such acts. Ridnour’s truncated exposition reflects DeLillo’s inability to provide a complex and multi-dimensional account of “the ominous agent”.

One could argue that DeLillo subtly attempts to subvert the dominant metanarrative by obscuring the dichotomy of the “self” and the “other” in terrorist discourse. There are two instances which support this claim, although the inconsistency with which the narrator alludes to this subversion raises doubt over the author’s intentionality, and whether he legitimately intended for readers to reflect and question their stance concerning the metanarrative. The first instance of apparent subversion occurs when Lianne reflects on what she learns about Ridnour’s past and the possibility that he is, in fact, a terrorist. The narrator reveals that, “the thought chilled her, shamed her - one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white” (195). In this excerpt, we witness an unexpected obfuscation of the terrorist binary through which Lianne defines

those close to her as comparable to the jihadists. This disruption of characteristics ascribed to Westerners in general on one hand and the ominous “other” on the second, correlates to the fact that Martin is by origin, an irreligious European terrorist. This reconfigures the binary system and the entire mechanism through which characteristics are distributed between the two groups and subjects in question. It thereby situates the dominant metanarrative to intense scrutiny. This reading of the novel effectively nullifies the whole binary system that official and mainstream media promote, and potentially, could have transformed the novel into a serious challenge to the dominant 9/11 metanarrative, had it been comprehensively developed.

Secondly, there are undertones of another binary system present in *Falling Man*, one beyond the realms of Lianne’s control or knowledge, wherein she and the West as a cumulative group are actually cast as the “other”. It is a mode of dualism that establishes an alternate metanarrative. In one of the conversations between Hammad and his mentor Amir, Hammad asks about the fate of those who are to die in their terrorist plot and whether it is justifiable to kill them: “Amir said simply there are no others”. DeLillo writes, “[t]he others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying” (176). According to Amir’s systemisation, Americans are the “other” in this schematic, subject to the roles and characteristics ordinarily accorded to the “terrorists”. Thus, Amir succeeds at “deanimating” those who are to die in the attacks, reconstructing the victims as abstract beings without function, other than their divine assignation. Consequently, Hammad becomes more willing to carry out the mission as he sees the deaths of these dehumanised people as fulfilment of an allegedly, divinely ordained mission. In a sense, *Falling Man*, could be interpreted as an attempt to deterritorialise readers by gesturing towards the existence of another binary

apparatus in which the “white” populace are assigned a series of negative characteristics. Intimating at the existence of another binary system where positive and negative characteristics are inverted between the two groups can drive readers to reconsider their preconceived views concerning those they define as the “other” and to objectively reexamine the dominant metanarrative.

While the narrator’s attempt to deterritorialise the reader is commendable, its developmental extent in the larger scheme of the novel is insufficient to effectively incite readers to interrogate the 9/11 metanarrative. The indication of an alternate binary schematic, although a challenge to the binary system present in the prevailing narrative superstructure, is a mere reflection of DeLillo’s perfunctory acknowledgement of other fringe 9/11 narratives. Not only does DeLillo refrain from exploring and venturing into fringe narratives at the forefront of the novel, he instead continues to perpetuate the conventional rhetoric, according others only a nod of acknowledgement. The mere concession that these marginalised 9/11 narratives do drift in the periphery of mainstream culture is inadequate to consider *Falling Man* an authentic challenge to the dominant 9/11 metanarrative.

In an interview in the *New York Times*, John Updike stated that he had “something to say from the standpoint of a terrorist”. He went on to say, “I think I felt I could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody’s trying to see it from that point of view. I guess I have stuck my neck out here in a number of ways, but that’s what writers are for, maybe”. The subliminal influence of the official 9/11 metanarrative on Updike can be seen in his cavalier interchangeable use of the terms “terrorist” and “Islamic believer”. It bears repeating that most Muslims do not bear any ill will to democracy, freedom, or any aspect of the

American way of life. It is true, however, that writers ideally, should introduce their readers to different perspectives and delve deeper into the psyches of their characters, particularly when these characters adopt unpopular beliefs or represent a threat to populist rhetoric. While one may claim that Updike conducted more research on Islam and terrorism than DeLillo, and that the intent behind the novel is laudable, Updike's overt reliance on the dominant 9/11 metanarrative restricts his authorial creativity and prevents him from depicting his characters in a manner that could deconstruct it.

Terrorist is a novel that chronicles the life of Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, an eighteen year-old high school graduate who decides at a young age and without any prompting, to become a devout Muslim. Ahmad is subsequently mentored by an extremist imam with ties to terrorist groups in one of the local mosques in the fictional city of New Prospect, New Jersey. Bereft of a father-figure in his life, Ahmad spends most of his adolescent years under the tutelage of Shaik Rashid, who plots to turn Ahmad into a pawn in his religious war on the US. The role of a father-figure in Ahmad's life defaults to Rashid, until Jack Levy, an American guidance counsellor at Ahmad's high school, takes an interest in Ahmad. Levy strives - but to no avail - to induce Ahmad to make more of himself, rather than relegating himself to a mere truck driver. Only at the end of the novel does he finally convince Ahmad to abandon the terrorist plot to blow up the George Washington Bridge.

Updike could have succeeded in crafting a complex and intriguingly original protagonist if he had avoided stereotypically portraying Ahmad under the familiar and polarising lights of the 9/11 metanarrative. If, as Updike claims, *Terrorist* is an exploration of what compels a Muslim believer to become a terrorist, then it seems that Updike has chosen to neglect the political and socio-economical aspects of the terrorist make-up and

opted to solely focus on the religious factor: Islam. Through the creation of a Muslim terrorist born in the US - insulated from the political and socio-economic parameters that define an Islamic Middle Eastern nation - Updike loosely amalgamates the traits attributed to “us” (the “white” public) and the “other” in the binary of terrorist discourse. But this characterisation continues to underpin the normative 9/11 metanarrative by suggesting that Islamic terrorism - personified in the novel by Ahmad - can be born and raised in a secular Christian environment, even within a politically and socio-economic European structure.

This failed attempt results in the fabrication of a “caricature of a jihadist plunked down in a modern American urban area, spouting phrases like ‘Western culture is Godless’, ‘the American way is the way of infidels,’ ” as Loreta Ulydyien describes in her essay “Literature After 9/11: John Updike’s *Terrorist*” (69). This anomalistic representation of an American teenage jihadist is evident in Ahmad’s idiosyncratic demeanour: plain drab clothing and unconventional vernacular. It is difficult to believe a character of Ahmad’s habits and behaviour would be the equivalent of a “normative” eighteen year-old American teenager. Ahmad’s character evokes the cultural bearings of a Muslim Middle Eastern, and is more akin to DeLillo’s Hammad. Maryam Salehnia concurs with this reading in her essay “Political Zionism and Fiction: A Study of John Updike’s *Terrorist*”, remarking that “Ahmad is an Arab-American who is more representative of Muslim Arabs than a model of an American teenager” (487). Ulydyiene further stresses this point in her essay, asserting that “Ahmad never really comes off as real. Although he is a somewhat likeable character, he neither speaks nor acts like a teenager born and raised in New Jersey” (69). In “The Goals and Discourses of Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* and John Updike’s *Terrorist*”, Tawfiq Yousef “wonders why an 18 year-old Islamist born and bred in the US should develop these feelings of bigotry,

animosity and finally choose to commit suicide in a manner that would kill as many people as possible and in the name of Islam” (213). *Terrorist* is remiss in explaining what prompts Ahmad to become such a devout Muslim, and aside from the imam’s role in converting Ahmad into a potential terrorist, few cultural, historical, or political motives that compel Ahmad to take such drastic measures are indicated. For the reader, this vacuum of credible motivation behind extreme aggression can only be filled by the prevailing 9/11 metanarrative.

In consonance with this metanarrative, Islam appears to be the only motive that drives Ahmad in his terrorist plot. Updike is seemingly suggesting that the story of the terrorist in this novel - and in life in general - begins and ends with Islam, neglecting in the process all other driving factors, such as America’s political presence in the Muslim world. This operates to negatively universalise Islam as a subversive, violent political and ideological element in the cultural superstructure. David Walsh states in concurrence:

[The] novelist more or less separates out Ahmad’s seamless willingness to take part in a terrorist plot from any questions of US policies in the Middle East. While others occasionally refer to Iraq and Palestine, including Charlie Chehab, who is not what he at first appears to be, Ahmad hardly ever does.

Updike’s authorial decision to dismiss any other incentive except religiosity is, as Tawfiq Yousef puts it, essentially, “[a]ttributing Ahmad's inclinations to hatred, violence and destruction to the teachings of Islam and to his Islamic doctrine [and functions as] stereotypical and prejudiced” (214). This simplistic and superficial depiction of the terrorist in Updike’s novel is identical to the congealed portrayals found in mainstream media. It further highlights the prevalence of the 9/11 metanarrative in Updike’s *Terrorist*, which flagrantly proclaims “that Islamic fundamentalist terrorism has nothing to do with

predatory US foreign policy over the course of decades and stems, rather, from a long-standing ‘clash of civilisations’” (Walsh).

The only other sign that we, the readers, are dealing with an American teenager in this novel is Ahmad’s repressed infatuation with his classmate Joryleen Grant, an attraction that culminates into one of Updike’s literary trademarks: a sex scene between the two. It is a narratively gratuitous sex scene that only serves as an authorial self-gratifying absurdity, continually highlighting Updike’s feeble depiction of his Muslim protagonist and Ahmad’s unconscious dependence on the broader American metanarrative of “normativity”.

Ahmad is depicted as a staunchly devout Muslim and soon-to-be suicide bomber, prepared to sacrifice his life for his beliefs. Yet, on the eve of his suicide mission, he comes dangerously close to breaking one of the major commandments of his religion and gravely offending God, whom he believes to be closer to him than the jugular vein in his neck. How can an apprentice of such an extremist imam be unaware that having an extramarital relationship is one of the mortal sins in Islam? And why would another devout Muslim (Charlie Chehab) orchestrate such a union? While it can be argued that such a scene functions as an Updikean literary trademark, it is eerily similar to what some of the 9/11 hijackers - according to the official 9/11 metanarrative - did the night prior to their suicide mission. This is again demonstrative of Updike’s inadvertent dependence on the indoctrinated metanarrative, despite his intention to produce a work of fiction that explored alterity: “the standpoint of [the] terrorist”, as he claimed in the *New York Times*.

In terms of character development, it is apparent that Updike has abided by the dichotomy attributed to the “self” and the “other”, or, to the West and Islam in 9/11 terrorist discourse. Caught between the absence of his Muslim Egyptian father who abandons him prior to the novel’s events and his inattentive Irish mother, Ahmad is drawn to Imam Rashid as a parental surrogate. Rashid’s function as the father-figure is unchallenged until Jack Levy sees Ahmad’s potential during a routine meeting at school. Consequently, the novel is depicted as a struggle for Ahmad’s mind and soul between a Yemeni Muslim imam who inculcates Ahmad in radical Islam and an American Jewish guidance counsellor who seeks to liberate him from the imam’s grip. Maryam Salehnia concisely summarises the conflict between Levy and Rashid and stresses the manipulative and unreliable nature of the Muslim characters in comparison to the Jewish school counsellor:

The characters’ true natures come to be revealed at the end of the novel when Ahmad, religiously brainwashed by Shaikh Rashid, heads to fulfil his suicidal mission in the name of Allah and with the hope of entering the Paradise as a martyr. Here, this is Jack who insists on dying with Ahmad: “I don’t think I’ll get out. We’re in this together, son” (296), while Shaikh Rashid has left him alone to do his mission by himself the night before (487).

It is worth noting that none of the Muslim characters in *Terrorist* are shown to be reasonable, reliable, or rendered in a favourable or sympathetic light. None of them evince sincere concern for Ahmad as a human being. Charlie Chehab, Ahmad’s employer’s son, initially meant to show Ahmad the ropes in his father’s business, operates as the link between Ahmad and the terrorist cell. Chehab attempts to convince Ahmad through numerous conversations, of the legitimacy of their cause, likening their “struggle” to that of the American Revolutionary War to relieve Ahmad as well as

himself of any feelings of guilt or remorse (181). Only at the novel's close is Chehab revealed to be a CIA informant intending to use Ahmad "to flush out the others" (292). Hence, Chehab appears doubly treacherous: first, he is presented as the traitorous Muslim American citizen cooperating with local terrorists, and secondly, there is the subsequent revelation that he is in fact a CIA operative on a mission to lure out terrorists from sleeper cells, using Ahmad as bait.

Even after Chehab's ostensibly patriotic role is disclosed, it is difficult for the reader to engender any sympathy for him. His efforts in foiling the terrorist plot are minimised and eclipsed by the fact that he remains an unreliable character due to his duplicitous nature and readiness to utilise Ahmad as mere bait, failing to recognise Ahmad's humanity. The narrator does not deign to distinctly acknowledge Chehab's official role in the terrorist plot, his valuable contribution and service to the government, and in the process impedes Chehab's character development. This narrative structure operates to neglect a revision of the readers' stance towards this second generation Muslim Arab-American, which could have potentially subverted the dominant metanarrative and presented *Terrorist* as a viable 9/11 counternarrative.

Alongside his inconstancy, Imam Rashid, the purported Muslim flagship character, is depicted as abstract, rigid, and obsolete. Throughout the novel, he is never seen outside the mosque and his only function is to prepare the young Ahmad to slay infidels in the name of Islam. Compared to the modern and rational Levy, Rashid is the personification of Updike's Islam: an adamant and monolithic individual with absolutist and violent tendencies that disrupt the harmonious nature of the fluid modernity of the Western world. To Updike, this relic of ideology is a visible extrusion - just as the imam in his white garb appears during the graduation party - "a bone in the

throat” (112). Rashid’s inability to exist anywhere but the mosque - emphasising his absolutist nature - and the other imams’ inability to blend in with the surroundings at the graduation party, exposes Levy’s and - by proxy - Updike’s inadvertently racist and propagandising depiction of the “other”, conforming with the dominant 9/11 metanarrative.

In line with this grand narrative, Levy, representative of the democratic free-thinking West, does not think that Islam and modernity can coexist; he does not believe that one can be modern and Muslim simultaneously. Levy even condemns Islam as the precipitant for 9/11. During the graduation party, Levy scrutinises an imam present at the event and describes what he sees as “a slight, impeccable man embodying a belief system that not many years ago managed the deaths of, among others, hundreds of commuters from northern New Jersey” (112). Employing Levy as the focaliser in this scene, the audience is aware that this is Levy’s internal narration, and not what the authorial voice sees in the imam. Through this narrative technique, Updike distances himself and maintains his façade of impartiality. But the novel does not end with Levy’s realisation of his fallacious belief in Islam as the cause of 9/11, or Islam’s intransigence to modernity. It does not end with the author proposing a more complex counternarrative that challenges the simplicity and polarising nature of the pervasive 9/11 metanarrative. It instead ends with Levy proven right in his superficial, racist, and malicious views regarding Islam. These predisposed beliefs are consummated in readers’ minds as Levy saves the life of Ahmad, on the cusp of fulfilling his alleged Islamic duties, and the lives of a multitude of commuters on the bridge by convincing Ahmad not to press the button and blow up the bridge. The novel closes with Levy convincing Ahmad that his God is that of creation, not destruction. Not that of “Islam”. Since we detect no change in Levy’s perception of Islam at the end of the novel, the reader assumes that

Levy believes that he succeeded at convincing Ahmad not to act as his religion supposedly commands him; to cease being Muslim and to opt for the God of the West instead, embracing capitalist consumerism and the relentless pursuit of self-advancement and self-preservation (310).

Another character in *Terrorist* employed as a focaliser and uncontested outlet of the paranoid and xenophobic attitudes packaged within the dominant 9/11 metanarrative, is the director of Homeland Security. During a conversation with Levy's sister-in-law, Hermione Fogel, the Secretary complains of the lack of progress and the several setbacks the department has suffered. He condemns the Arabic language for rendering his Arabic-speaking assets "feeble-minded". He laments the fact that he does not have enough of them and that half of these recruits on the department's payroll have a different mindset from himself and his undersecretary. He is emphatic about his distrust in these recruits and urges his undersecretary to tell her sister to leave the "Arab-infested" city of New Prospect (259-260). Though a minor character, Secretary Haffenreffer's outspoken disdain towards Arabs and Muslims resonates strongly with the tenets of the dominant metanarrative and remains unchallenged throughout the novel. Some might argue that Updike was merely a realist in his depiction of Levy and the director; that the general Western populace post-9/11 maintain these attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims, but this realism introduces nothing new or unorthodox to the fabricated "truth" of 9/11 and essentially defeats the fundamental purpose of the novel. These themes and characterisations derail what Updike professed to be his intention behind writing *Terrorist*: a genuinely progressive exploration into the point of view of the "other".

Updike's refusal - evident in the absence of a voice that challenges Levy's or the Homeland Security director's views on Islam and its culpability for the 9/11 terrorist attacks - to suggest that Islam is not responsible for 9/11, or to at least attribute the blame elsewhere, illustrates that Levy and the director are not just signifiers of the West in the novel; they also represent Updike's unconscious stance regarding 9/11. *Terrorist* clearly reinforces the agenda of the American 9/11 metanarrative: to tacitly incriminate Islam for the heinous attacks of 9/11 and to construe the act as the first military strike of a malevolent nemesis, in the process mobilising the western world for a new global war.

Another aspect regarding the problematic nature of metanarratives is that a novelist may subconsciously perpetuate that same metanarrative which he or she strives to undermine. Like any other metanarrative, the pervasiveness of 9/11 rhetoric that writers are exposed to, induces them to duplicate or incorporate - intentionally or otherwise - snippets of that metanarrative into their own narrative apparatus. In his essay "Literary Lions Tackle 9/11: Updike and DeLillo Depicting History Through the Novel", Bob Batchelor claims that "readers return to authors who provide them with a setting, situation, or characters they can adapt in their own minds", and that "[in] chaotic times people often desire a window into the minds of others" (181).

Despite adopting a writerly mindset bent on projected empathy and undertaking significant research, both Updike and DeLillo fail to produce narratives that challenge and subvert the master narrative of 9/11, which has seemingly solidified into a "universal truth". An instance of the ubiquitousness of the official 9/11 metanarrative in both *Falling Man* and *Terrorist* is the identical dynamic between Hammad and Amir in DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Ahmad and Imam Rashid in Updike's *Terrorist*. This hints at the dominant metanarrative as the origin of these homogenous and recursive portrayals of

the impressionable and sexually repressed radical Muslim youth. Such predictable portrayals of the “other” - evident in the mentor/apprentice relationships (and the acts of love) of those playing the roles of the terrorists in both *Falling Man* and *Terrorist* undermine DeLillo’s and Updike’s attempts at crafting novels that explore the motives and backgrounds of those conventionally cast as the evil “other” with any complexity or depth.

In “Migrating From Terror: The Postcolonial Novel After September 11”, Margaret Scanlon criticises both *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* for their inadvertent reinforcement of the dominant metanarrative and calls for “serious fiction [that challenges] the complacencies of public rhetoric” (266). As an example of such fiction, Scanlon refers to Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a novel that dares to challenge the dominant metanarrative, that operates to exclude and alienate the reader, and succeeds at transforming the fault-line between the binaries of terrorist discourse “into a living, breathing space in which the human consequences of rigid and lethal polarities become visible” (267).

The Reluctant Fundamentalist tells the story of Changez, a Pakistani university professor and former financial analyst at a prestigious consultancy firm in New York. He narrates his personal experience and subsequent tumultuous transformation from promising financial analyst to terrorist suspect, to then, an unidentified and silent American man at a café in Lahore. As the narrator-protagonist of this story-within-a-story, Changez relates his experience in the US prior to and after 9/11 and his subsequent cultural and political realisations after enduring such an ordeal to an American stranger. The exchange takes place throughout the course of a single evening and underscores the distinction of bodies in a post-9/11 environment: the external

embodiment of “black” or “brown” as opposed to “white”, and the internal life within this exteriority.

One of the most remarkable aspects in Mohsin Hamid’s novel - which is not found in Updike’s *Terrorist* or in DeLillo’s *Falling Man* - is the inherently unreliable nature of the narrator. This stylistic feature prevents readers from thoroughly investing trust in Changez, and forces them to constantly remain wary. This unreliability is engendered in the text through Hamid’s use of several literary devices. The first of these is the monologic nature of this story-within-a-story. The whole novel is narrated entirely by Changez, who assumes and maintains authority over the story as he addresses his silent American counterpart and whose actions and responses are solely conveyed to readers through Changez. Everything the readers learn of the American addressee is filtered through Changez’s perception: the American’s visible wariness at the sight of the bearded Changez is construed as fear, his preference to sit with his back to the wall is met with benign indifference, and his refusal to take off his jacket is merely deemed “[so] formal” and untypical of Americans (2). Even the addressee’s most subtle physical motions and facial expressions are relayed to the readers, but always accompanied by Changez’s suggestive commentary. For example, at one stage that evening, Changez discloses how he felt in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to the American addressee. He then goes on to say, “[your] disgust is evident; indeed, your large hand has, perhaps without your noticing, clenched into a fist” (83).

As the silent and entirely passive - at least in terms of narration - addressee, the American’s bodily reflexes and innermost emotions are subject to Changez’s interpretations and assessments as the sole narrator. This exclusivity in narration is not only limited to the visible physicality of the American addressee, but encompasses his

thoughts and emotions as well, exposing a level of bias that undermines the reliability of an assuming narrator. Nonetheless, this suspiciously one-sided narration in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is intentional on Hamid's part. It is, as Margaret Scanlon claims, "much of the novel's point" (274). Peter Morey concurs with Scanlon in his essay: "The Rules of the Game Have Changed: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Post-9/11 Fiction" adding: "[i]ts one-sidedness actually performs that archetypal novelistic trick of taking us inside the head of the character but, in so doing, refusing the normalising consolation of a dialogue" (139). Thus, while the readers come to see everything in the novel through Changez's eyes, we are completely deprived of the perspective of any other character. We never hear the American addressee introduce himself or refute any of Changez's denunciations, we never discover if he is a harmless tourist or a CIA operative; if he is "predator or prey" (35).

The intentionality behind the novel's stylisation is confirmed in Hamid's retort when asked why he chose to have a silent American addressee. Hamid replied by saying: "in the world of media, particularly the American media, it's almost always the other way around". Hamid considers the dominant metanarrative promulgated through mainstream media equally as one-sided and lacking in objectivity as Changez's narrative. In an attempt to subvert the dominant 9/11 metanarrative, Hamid insinuates that one-sided narratives should always be considered unreliable regardless of the ethnicity or the religious orientation of the narrator.

Architecturally, the monologic story-within-a-story construct is not the only technique employed to heighten the questionable narrative voice in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Left with only one character to identify with and relate to, readers can only rely on this voice; and their faith in Changez is tested even before they begin reading

the novel. The title of the novel itself is testament to the dubious nature of the narrative. Instead of reading about the confessions of a former radical Islamist with terrorist designs against democracy, the readers learn that Changez - though Muslim - is far from being a fundamentalist, at least in the religious sense of the word. In fact, the fundamentalism that is being referred to in the title of the novel is drawn from the fundamentals of capitalism that Changez was inculcated in during his time at Underwood Samson. In support of this view, Morey states:

Changez is never a religious fundamentalist. He does not even claim to have some renewed awakening of his faith after the discrimination he experiences in the second half of the book. As such, he cannot be dismissed as just another “hot head” or “religious nutter” - particularly, of course, since the story is told from his point of view only (139).

Changez does not fit the description of the religious fanatic persistently found in the terrorist metanarrative, especially in the absence of a differing voice that would beg otherwise. The fact that Changez was a fundamentalist only in relation to his work ethic - a characteristic he shared with many of his American colleagues - further subverts his representation as the fanatic “other” in the dominant metanarrative. This first display of narrative unreliability in the novel’s title functions to destabilise the reader’s preconceived notions, espoused in the prevalent 9/11 rhetoric and “plays upon the curiosity stimulated by political rhetoric that sees the Muslim as irredeemably different but, nonetheless, needing to be decoded if the ‘battle for hearts and minds’ is to be won. It exploits the reader’s expectation of what such a text may contain” (139).

But it is a fine line that separates the readers from having little, continually questioned trust in the narrator, and from completely dismissing Changez’s narrative, and, in turn, discounting the entire novel as a credible challenge to the dominant

metanarrative. If Hamid's intent is to provide a challenging counternarrative to official dogma and to sow seeds of doubt in those who have concretely subscribed to this metanarrative, then he must carefully negotiate this balance and the credibility of the narrative voice.

Hamid, recognising the unreliability of Changez's narrative as it is so frequently accentuated, attempts to demonstrate that Changez is worthy of some trust; for a level of trust has to be established to engage his audience and maintain their attention. Changez seems amicable and hospitable towards the American man, and is forthright and willing to share his most personal and intimate of experiences with his addressee, which some might interpret as cause for further suspicion, but these inclinations are insufficient to entirely dismiss him. He even goes on to admit that he experienced a sort of satisfaction and was "remarkably pleased" as he watched the Twin Towers collapse. Changez is, of course, quick to explain why he felt this way, stating that he was "caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (83). Surely this statement is not apropos for a narrator looking for empathy from his audience. It does, however, indicate that this narrator is willing to honestly confess all sins and innermost emotions, regardless of how despicable they may be deemed by his audience. Changez does not seek endearment, or even acceptance; he's only looking for their understanding, trust and to simply be heard. Scanlon, in support of this view, claims that, "[a]lthough Changez never casts himself in a flattering light, frequently confessing to past deceptions and to emotions he will later characterise as 'uncharitable - indeed inhumane', his self-criticism never quite manages to disarm" and his frequently repeated proclamations of innocence never quite manage to convince (274).

This failure to disarm the reader on Changez's part places the reader's alliances and empathy - albeit understandably - in question. On one hand, Changez's frequent reiterations of innocence might seem justified considering the degree of stereotyping and racial profiling he would have experienced. On the other, the frequency of such iterations also have an adverse effect as they further disarm readers instead of raising their awareness with regard to Changez's subconscious prejudices and misconceptions. Ultimately, readers are left to their own devices, to make of this unreliable narrative as they see fit; it is up to readers to either grant or withhold trust in this narrative, or any other narrative, no matter how authoritative and mainstream.

Even after establishing this level of fragile trust in the narrator, Hamid never ceases to disrupt that trust and to put its fragility to the test by reminding readers of Changez's unreliability. For instance, after presumably being asked by the American addressee about the physical description of the belligerent man who verbally assaulted him en route to his rental car in a parking lot, Changez claims that he can't recall details before saying that: "it is the *gist* that matters; I am, after all, telling you a history, and in history, as I suspect you - an American - will agree, it is the thrust of one's narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one's details" (134). It is hard to believe that a man as perceptive as Changez; a man who reads the body language of his addressee as if it were an open book, would not remember what the man who was about to assault him looked like, especially since he relayed the rest of the encounter in vivid detail. This leads readers to deduce that Changez could have recalled what the man looked like but opts not to, perhaps in fear that his addressee - and by proxy - readers might identify and in some way relate to this character. Changez's declaration that it is all about narrative and not the accuracy of detail in a narrative, compels the reader to be nothing but appalled and suspicious of Changez's entire "history". Such an enunciation recalls the countless times

politicians and mainstream media have stood in defence of the dominant American metanarrative despite the many discrepancies and inaccuracies upon which it is based. Hamid indirectly incites the reader to question the authenticity of the 9/11 dominant metanarrative to the same degree that they question validity of Changez's claim and his reliability in the process.

Another instance where Changez further raises suspicion about his veracity as a narrator arises later in the novel. After sensing his addressee's growing reservations, he says: "there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you" (172-173). Syntactically, on face value, it is obvious that Changez is trying to say there is no cause for him to lie about this particular event. Another way of reading the sentence is: this incident could be just as false as the others; that there is no reason why this incident would be any more likely "true" than any of the others he has related. In fact, there is no reason why the reader should regard any of what Changez narrates as "truth". Changez's statements devolve into a kind of liar's paradox, a deliberation on Hamid's part. Changez then discourages his American addressee from paying heed to his suspicions by reminding him that they "have passed through too much together to begin to raise questions of this nature at so late a stage" (173). Akin to those who have begun to question the dominant US metanarrative at this late stage of the post-9/11 era, Changez's American addressee is discouraged from asking such questions or doubting the reputability of Changez's story and is reminded of how much time and energy he has invested in listening to this narrative. Additionally, the only viable course of action left to him, is to commit to this dubious narrative, as a silent listener and partner. Embedded in the fallacy of this line of reasoning is Hamid's attack on the dominant US 9/11 metanarrative and those who, in defence of it, still dismiss any public or literary calls for a revision, simply because too many lives and resources have

been invested in it. Moreover, the mere concession of its possible inaccuracy implies that the US itself might in some way be responsible for the attacks.

Another theme in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* cultivated by Changez's unreliability is the undercurrent of impending doom that hangs by a thread between Changez and his American addressee throughout the course of the novel. In contradiction to the American addressee's unwarranted wariness and hostile overtones, Changez, as Kathryn Lee claims in "Clash of Fundamentals? Challenging America's Self-Image in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*", "remains until the very last page, the perfect gentleman. His jovial, self-deprecating patter both staves off any ill-will from the American as well as disguising his at times rather blunt criticisms of America" (58). Framing the novel as a dramatic monologue, focussing on a sole character with whom the audience can easily identify, and featuring an "American" listening quietly, without any authority whatsoever over the narrative, to the Pakistani author-narrator, refracts the readerly experience. Readers are forced to hear the "other's" narrative of the post-9/11 experience, and are silent listeners and partners alongside the American.

The juxtaposition of Changez across the table, from the allegedly clandestine and intently aggressive nature of his American addressee, casts Changez as the sensible and peaceable of the two; a role usually reserved for those who represent the West in the binary of terrorist discourse. The American is positioned as the emotional and impulsive counterpart, and enacts the role that is usually reserved for those representing the "other". This reversal of roles further estranges the American addressee from readers, directing them to identify with Changez, and destabilises the preconceived signifiers of the "other" found in the public terrorist rhetoric. Throughout the novel, the American's

implied readiness to pounce and fire his allegedly concealed weapon at Changez - who has been nothing but the perfect host - fills the scene with taut tension.

Yet, if readers of this novel can be sure of anything, they can be sure of the unreliability of the narrator, who more than provides probable cause to foster distrust. According to Anna Hartnell, “[t]he suggestion that the American might himself be armed and hostile while the ostensibly peaceable narrator may have turned to jihadi violence informs an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and impending violence, an atmosphere that challenges and implicates the reader’s own processes of identification” (337). This atmosphere of mutual suspicion and impending violence is maintained to the very end of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and culminates when Changez asks his American addressee: “[w]hy are you reaching in your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal,” and then quickly avers that it must be the American’s business card holder since, according to Changez’s reasoning, the intimacy they have shared over the course of the evening rules out the possibility of the American clutching something sinister in his blazer’s pocket (209). By closing the novel in this manner, the reversal of the normative terrorist binary is further buttressed by the suggestion that it is Changez - and not the American - who is plighted with innocence and naiveté. However, we the suspicious readers are safe to reconsider our position and assume that Changez - as the narrator-protagonist of this nested narrative - could be manipulatively casting himself under such a light in order to appear as a soon-to-be victim. This precarious position Hamid forces readers into is the essence of the entire novel, for the narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as Scanlon describes it, is meant to function as “a Rorschach inkblot test exposing our own interpretive strategies, histories, and desires” (277).

This precarious and menacing uncertainty makes it difficult for the reader to side with either of the two; the silent standoffish tourist who could be a CIA agent, or the amicable, hospitable, university professor who could be a Muslim terrorist. This constant underlying menace and uncertainty linger, and induce readers to deeply contemplate and reassess their position concerning Changez's narrative and - more profoundly - the official 9/11 narrative. Both are racked with more than one uncertainty and a cluster of implications that transcend the realm of fiction. Morey contends:

Despite coming from a character we have perhaps grown to distrust, these reflections effectively reinforce the novel's concern with the reverberations from the response to 9/11 that have been just as cataclysmic as the initial atrocity itself. The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath are still claiming victims around the world. It is just that they are not recorded or commemorated like those actually killed in the Twin Towers (145).

Mid-2010, a controversy erupted around the proposed construction of an Islamic centre in Manhattan, two blocks away from the site of the World Trade Center. Protests erupted in the streets of lower Manhattan and public organisations and politicians voiced their opposition to the project, pronouncing it inappropriate and profoundly offensive for the families of the 9/11 victims and the memory of Ground Zero. This is clear evidence that a sizeable segment of the US population continues to hold Islam as the religion accountable for 9/11. Frankly, it comes as no surprise that so many Americans still adhere to this belief, considering how these notions have been zealously and perpetually propagated through mainstream media and literature even prior to the attacks of 9/11. It is vital for the survival, validity and progress of not only literature and critical thinking, but of the human condition to produce fiction that challenges the official

populist narrative; fiction that deterritorialises and impugns readers' misconceptions and identifications; fiction that, as Morey puts it, "[records] such experiences and [keeps] the eyes of the hyperconscious western world on the possible estranging effects of its violent and self-aggrandising policies" (145).

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Creative Component:

The Righteous Man

I

It all began with those bloody rampaging Ethiopian gangs. The brutal assault of lightly armed Ethiopian burglars by Saudi civilians in a small town less than fifty kilometres away from Riyadh, triggered gang riots throughout the southernmost neighbourhoods of this city. This venomous retaliation erupted suddenly; uncontrollable, like a virulent respiratory epidemic. The precipitating incident had taken place when, exasperated by the absence of competent law enforcement in the little town, a group of civilians had taken matters into their own hands and hunted down Ethiopians they suspected of burglary. Camera footage of the citizens' arrest was proudly posted online by one of the initiators. In the video, the three burglars were heavily bruised, ropes fastened around their wrists, torsos, and necks, and were repeatedly beaten while being dragged through the town streets. The vigilantes who eventually handed the three burglars over to the cops were subsequently apprehended for an unlawful citizen's arrest, amongst other more serious charges.

I found it ironic when I heard that the three burglars spent less time in jail than the civilians who had hunted them down. Perhaps the civilians should have realised that there was no room for half-measures or the wishful thinking that cooperation with the authorities was feasible. They seemed to invest in an illusory belief that the cops would

appreciate their efforts and hand them the key to the city as a “thank you” at a gauche ceremony, under the glare of camera flashes and the ostensibly grateful looks of the Mayor and the Riyadh Police Department Chief Commissioner. That had never been a realistic outcome. They should’ve decisively gone all the way or, instead, remained fixed in their passive civilian status.

I lived in a lovely cream two-storey villa. It had frontage on two parallel streets in the capital’s northern outskirts. My home overlooked the construction of many residential buildings. These sites teemed with flocks of overworked and underpaid Asian labourers, who would naturally do or take anything to help supplement their measly wages. They spent their breaks scouring the rubble surrounding the construction sites in the neighbourhood, looking for scrap metal or copper wires. If sufficiently desperate, these labourers would even rob from the same construction sites they worked in. I always wondered how these immigrant workers felt towards their jobs and those they worked for. I tried to imagine how the Indian electrician felt about slaving away over shimmering crystal chandeliers in spacious marble-tiled halls at day and having his supper by a single lamp in the corner of an overcrowded, stuffy shack that he inhabited along with five of his co-workers. That decrepit, untiled shack with dirty, tattered black rags for curtains and two wooden boxes for chairs was where he lived and slept, mere kilometres away from the villas and mansions where he fixed the wiring for the air conditioning and lighting systems that cost more than his year’s pay. An environment where the disparity of lifestyles between those who were well-off and those who merely subsisted in the shadows of construction and menial labour - the invisible wage-slaves - was the perfect breeding ground for crime. This was why I had always been simultaneously suspicious and aloof yet intensely sympathetic towards these construction workers. I was as

protective of my family as any father and husband, but with the addition of this alien menacing factor to the equation, one couldn't help but grow even more vigilant.

The Ethiopians who had illegally immigrated and taken residence in one of the oldest suburbs south of the city took offence at the natives' brutal and undignified treatment of the burglars. They retaliated by physically assaulting anyone who was not Ethiopian. News spread like wildfire through social media - since official and traditional media outlets were forced to impose a media blackout - about the multitudes of lightly-armed Ethiopians who marauded the southern parts of the city at night. Rumours of children being kidnapped, women and young girls raped, houses burglarised and their residents viciously murdered or injured, incensed more hatred towards the Ethiopian population - and anyone who was dark enough to be mistaken as Ethiopian. The inexplicable and blatant incompetence of law enforcement agencies agitated the restless city residents.

I paid no mind to all the talk about "those Ethiopian immigrants" and I even found this generalisation and simplistic characterisation of them offensive and racist - but something naturally to be expected in a racially hierarchical, superiority complex-plagued society. Not until the day, on our way home from Grandma's house, when my seven year-old daughter Danah popped her head up from the back seat of the car, with her tiny hands clinching the edges of both the driver and passenger seats, said that she was afraid that the Ethiopians might "come to our home while we are asleep and hurt us".

"What? Who told you such things, baby?" I asked.

"Nadia did!" this was my nine year-old orphan niece. "She said they come from the south and take young boys playing outside their homes, slit their throats, and drink

their blood.” I could tell from her voice that she was fighting the urge to burst into tears. I wanted to look into her eyes and witness the glint of tiny tears accumulating along the edges of her lower eyelids. But I had to keep my eyes on the road and I feared that her tearful outbreak would devastate me; that I might dissolve like a grain of salt in the ocean of her eyes.

Knowing that she was looking at me and waiting for a response, I smiled and snuck a peek at her in the rearview mirror. I saw her eyebrows contorted with a frown, forming two vertical creases between a pair of young eyes, evincing angst a child should never encounter, especially at such a young age.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. We live so far away from them.”

“We’ll lock the doors, honey. God will protect us!” said my wife Haneen, adroitly surpassing my efforts to comfort our baby girl.

I did not utter a single word the rest of the way home. I kept thinking of what needed to be done and how I could ensure the safety of those close to me. I could not stop myself from heaping the blame on the law enforcement agencies whose lackadaisical approach and mediocrity were the cause for the lawlessness that had engulfed the city even prior to this current “Ethiopian” outbreak of crime.

My mind was haunted with the worst possible scenarios. Unspeakable ones. I imagined someone climbing over the wall, picking the lock, and fiddling with the door handle, the faintest clacks audible. I envisaged shadowy tall men with long arms and hunched backs tiptoeing their way upstairs and making a run for my little girl’s bedroom. I imagined the chain of events that might take place after that - events that I’m too

unbearably petrified to articulate. Horrible unspeakable events, where there would only be death and anguish and misery. And two limp cold bodies.

Then, in stark opposition to the previous mental scenario, I imagined myself defending my family and defiantly laying waste to those who had invaded our house with nothing but malice in their hearts and weapons in their hands. I imagined myself wresting a serrated hunting knife from the hands of a trespasser and launching myself on top of him before thrusting it deep in his chest cavity; the hilt of the blade preventing me from thrusting it any deeper; the chill of the sharp steel inducing one last shivering gasp throughout his body, his bulging bloodshot eyes protruding, his abdominal and pectoral muscles contracting, pleading for mercy with a sideways shake of his head. The sideways motion of his head would degenerate into violent horizontal spasms and his body would be overtaken by convulsions; there was satisfaction in hearing him gurgle and suffocate on the toxicity of his own venomous blood. Or, in another - shall I say - “fantasy”, I would shoot down the intruder and stand next to his corpse. Watch his blood slowly stream out of his body from the two bullet holes in his chest and back as it coagulated on the rosy Venetian marble tiles in the moon-lit living room; a cold breeze rushing through the door and into my adrenaline-ridden body. It was easier for me to concoct such unshrinking audacity in my mind. It was even more gratifying than the original fantasy, I don't mind to admit. I felt stimulated on a very primal level.

But I didn't know if I would feel or act the same way if one of these fantasies actualised into a reality. Would I truly be able to protect my family if they were assaulted? Would my hand shake if pressed against the cold metallic feel of a pistol? Could I really look an armed robber dead in the eyes while shoving a knife with all my might through

his ribcage? Would I really have it in me? These were the unanswerable questions that disrupted my savage reverie and returned me to the equal incivility of the real world.

It was almost time for dawn prayer when I checked the clock on my bedside nightstand. I thought since I was already up, I should get ready and head to the mosque down the street. I don't want you to get the impression that I'm the embodiment of piety. In fact, I'm not pious in the least, and I rarely wake for dawn prayer and fulfil this religious obligation. I always find it hard to wake up and extricate myself from the warmth of my comfy bed, wash up, and walk all the way down to the mosque to pray. I'm a heavy sleeper and that's always been my excuse. But I couldn't omit this duty to pray that early morning, as I was already awake. I would have felt remorse for the rest of the day. I know skipping prayer on account of being asleep is a feeble excuse, but a feeble excuse is always better than no excuse at all.

As I was locking the outer gate of my villa, a dirt-covered truck with a broken right headlight pulled over in front of my neighbour's house across the street and a skinny soft-featured teenager with his hands languidly rummaging the side pockets of his white *thobe* for keys to the door emerged. His slender frame could barely fill his creased ankle-long garment.

I couldn't make out the face of the truck driver as he growled at the kid.

"You better answer my calls next time I ring you."

"Yeah, alright," was the teen's indifferent reply, before turning his head away and entering the house. I didn't get a good look at the truck driver but I know my eyes met his in a brief exchange of acknowledgement, before my gaze shied away under the pretence of focussing on securing the gate. He had only his left hand on the steering

wheel and his seat was tilted backward as he drove past. I questioned my neighbour's parental methods and wondered what his son would be doing this late at night with a shady, unsavoury-looking man who was my own age.

After I returned home from the mosque, I went straight to bed and thought I should get some shut-eye for a couple of hours before taking my daughter to school and then heading to work. The three hours of sleep that I had were not nearly enough and I had to drag myself out of bed and then downstairs to the kitchen after I took a brisk shower and got dressed. Once I set my foot inside the kitchen, I couldn't help but feel the presence of my beaming daughter and Haneen's corresponding buoyancy. Nothing used to brighten my day like the sight of my two girls at the breakfast table illuminated by sunlight.

Children are remarkable in their resilience. The past and the future mean nothing to them. My Danah, who was sitting on a kitchen stool that she would never have been able to reach without assistance, who was tearful and terror-stricken the previous night, was now brimming with glee. Nothing seemed unusual or out of the ordinary to her, and no concern clouded the whites of her big black eyes. Kids: they live everyday as if it's the first day of their lives. And their mere presence can make your life a little brighter.

The anxiety that tormented - and perversely entertained - me last night seemed a faint and distant memory. That was until I got to work and returned to the adult world. Two of my colleagues - I share an office with four at the National Power Company - were absorbed in their daily buzz session about local and global news. They were exchanging the latest rumours on the Ethiopian rampaging gangs.

“So, boss - ” this particular colleague, Jalal, loved to address everyone as boss, “ - you got nothing to chime in with?” I pretended not hear him and occupied myself with turning on my desktop.

“Hey, boss! I was asking you!” he exclaimed. There had always been a genuine and reciprocal dislike between Jalal and I. I’m uncertain what started it but I suspect he hated me since my very first day. Mansour, the most senior employee; a man in his mid-forties who seemed to have lost all ambition and hope of a promotion, contenting himself with his current placement, once told me that Jalal had put in a good word with the Head of Personnel for one of his cousins. He was upset when I was hired instead. I assumed my dislike for Jalal was just an automatic reaction to the perceived contempt he bore for me.

“Pass,” I said. I wanted to get to work and not dwell on the things that had kept me awake last night.

“Well, well! That’s a new one. For once he’s got nothing to say!” Jalal exclaimed, before he moved on to pester Mansour, who welcomed him with jaunty banter.

Three hours later, I was inside my car on the stroke of midday, adjusting the setting of the air conditioner. I was exhausted, and couldn’t last the day. I had to ask my manager for the rest of the day off, a request which he halfheartedly and reluctantly approved. As I drove north through the highway that dissected the city into halves, and eventually led to an outlying desert, I called my daughter’s school to let them know that I was coming to pick her up. I parked by the school gate and signalled the guard on watch, who was shielded from the searing rays of the sun’s relentless scorch with nothing but a white sweat-drenched *kufi* and knock-off Ray-Bans. He announced my arrival with his speakerphone. His dark skin glistened with large beads of sweat, which he wiped off his

face and neck with the ragged, red-checked *keufiya* that rested on his shoulder like a squat parrot on a perch.

A moment later, he opened the gate and Danah stepped out. She guilelessly looked up at the old man, vision partially obscured by her bangs, her squinting eyes requesting his permission to cross the threshold between school and the outside world. She ran towards my white sedan with her backpack swinging and a big grin. She sat in the back seat and there was a sly exchange of looks between her and I, initiated by my request for two kisses on each of my cheeks. She giggled while she fiddled with her seat belt and I tried to appear grave in my request. She acquiesced and planted a kiss on both cheeks, only after I insisted that I would be incapable of turning the keys in the ignition if she didn't grant my wish. By the time we reached home, the call for noon prayer was reverberating through the sky from mosques all over our district. I dropped Danah home and drove to the mosque across the street from the mall - not my usual place of worship.

Mosques located nearby or within commercial areas are known to be the first to commence the actual act of prayer and are the most expedient at times, as these imams are customarily limited to reciting only brief verses from the Quran. I parked my car about fifty metres away from the mosque. I could've parked closer but I didn't want to return from prayer and find that some asshole double-parker without respect or consideration had boxed me in, forcing me to sit sweltering in my car like a schmuck and wait until he finished his own worship. Then, only to be further incensed, by his perfunctory, insincere wave of apology in my direction before driving away.

As I walked towards the mosque I noticed that three middle-aged Saudi men were talking to the mosque's Pakistani custodian. They appeared tense, intent on

whatever the custodian was saying. Two of them clutched the edges of their *thobes* with their hands, as if to ensure that their dainty white garments didn't contact the murky liquid on the surface of the street, whether it be wastewater that made its way from the overflowing underground sewers to the surface, or just water that had accumulated on the street from garden sprays. I only intended to make a gesture of greeting to them and walk past, but when I heard the custodian talk about the cops and some young men he saw trying to flee the scene early that morning, I had to stop and enquire.

In broken Arabic, the custodian tried to communicate his knowledge of the incident. He said three men had accosted and stabbed an old man, a retired septuagenarian, after he refused to hand them his watch and wallet on his way to dawn prayer earlier that day. The custodian said he was washing the floor and the sinks in the restrooms when he had heard the commotion outside. It seemed that the old man had attempted to resist and had yelled and cursed at them before one of them stabbed him twice in the back. All he saw when he ran outside were the three men jumping inside a red-striped Datsun mini-truck before speeding away from the scene, leaving the dying old man moaning and lying on his side with blood pouring out of his wounds, forming two dark blotches on his wrinkled white *thobe*. The custodian ran towards the scene but it was too late for him to catch a glimpse of the car's number plate. He sat next to the dying man, held his hand and tried to comfort him until he saw another elderly man - a close friend and neighbour of the soon-to-be deceased - trudging hastily towards them.

He left the dying man with his old friend and hurried to his room to call the police. He said it took the cops over an hour to reach the mosque, and by then, the scene of the crime had already been contaminated by numerous bystanders and the wife and daughters of the deceased who instinctively couldn't prevent themselves from huddling

around the corpse, wailing and crying. Their male relatives tried to restrain them and offer succour further away from the scene, urging them to return to their villa, but to no avail. To make matters even worse, all the cops did was stand around and casually inquire bystanders about the incident. The actual homicide detectives only arrived at the scene at eight in the morning. The body of the deceased was only hauled into the coroner's truck two hours after their arrival. He said that aside from taking the contact information of the victim's two sons and his own, they did close to nothing.

“They certainly did nothing that the regular cops couldn't have done,” he said, questioning why the body was left needlessly on the street for such a long time. To me, it was indicative of the utter lack of respect and gross indifference those in law enforcement agencies had grown to bear for their fellow citizens; for the true purpose of their jobs, and their disinterest in individuals' traumas and plights. Their disregard of their motto “to protect and serve” guaranteed little protection and service to us all. And for the general populace - who have no option but to call upon such inefficient agents in a time of need, still suffering from the delusory misconception that our nation is one of law and order - we are ultimately left with only disappointment and despair. An old man with a couple hundred riyals in his wallet is stabbed to death only a hundred metres away from his home. His body lies on the street, in close sight of his family, with his two sons and the Pakistani custodian warding off inquisitive passersby who long to lift the white cloth covering the face of the deceased to see if they can recognise him.

“Poor old man,” one onlooker had lamented, “he should've given them his wallet.”

I didn't like the fact that I thought doing so was the sensible course of action. When did defending oneself become the wrong thing to do? When is one supposed to

stand up for oneself? Maybe if more people resisted like the old man, thugs and criminals would think twice before engaging in theft or assault. Still, if I had been him, I would've given them whatever they asked of me. That thought filled me with disgust. I felt shame in terms of how far I was willing to go to preserve my own life. We are seemingly predisposed to beg, and humiliatingly prostrate ourselves at the feet of those who could take everything from us: our wealth, our dignity, our self-respect, as long as they leave us alive. And subsequently, we should feel grateful that we are still breathing. What kind of life is this for a decent, upstanding man, when mere survival is supreme above all else? I said nothing aloud, except to ask Allah to rest his soul and grant him forgiveness, and then I resumed walking towards the mosque.

A nap was one luxury too much now that homicide and assault had reached our bourgeois neighbourhood, an area which I had formerly believed to be insulated from criminal elements. I lay in bed, on my side, mirroring the posture of the murdered old man, except that I was breathing, clothed in my damp underwear, which stuck closely to my back and side. The humidity was oppressive, and the whirring air conditioner was more of a nuisance than comfort. I would've slept with the air conditioner off, had I thought I could fall asleep before soaking the whole bed with my sweat.

Time slouched on, the echo of its ticking hands resonating deeply within the cavernous expanse of my skull. Each second was like a drop of water, falling and creating ripples in the deathly still surface of a subterranean lake, reminding me with every tick, how little time I had before the sounding calls for afternoon prayer resounded, disrupting the auditory tranquillity of the neighbourhood. I abandoned hope of having a refreshing nap and went downstairs to find Danah lying on her stomach; her head resting on her magnificent little arms, face cuddled between her palms, legs bent at the knees

and swaying back and forth like two inverted pendulums. She was watching cartoons and paid no attention to me as I sat on the couch behind her. Although my eyes were fixed on the TV screen, one wouldn't guess that I was watching cartoons due to the grim nature of my gaze. Coming out of the kitchen, Haneen observed my pensive mien and asked why I didn't nap. I blamed it on the loud whirring of the air conditioner but she was unconvinced. "I know you didn't have any sleep last night, honey. What's the matter?" She sat next to me with her left hand on my right knee.

I recounted the story of the old man's murder. The shocking news caught her off guard and her back stiffened before she asked for more details, which I provided with reluctance. She cast her eyes downward momentarily then asked God to rest the man's soul in peace. She then suggested that we pay our condolences to the deceased's relatives.

That evening, the old man's house was crammed with mourners: close and distant relatives, neighbours, lifelong friends and acquaintances, all present to pay respect to the sons and brothers of the departed. I sat in the sombre guest hall, surrounded by people I had never met in my life, suffering from the excruciating awkwardness of the occasion and the scorching cup of coffee I was promptly handed by one of the deceased's adolescent nephews. The heat of the coffee rapidly abated but the discomfort of the situation continued to persist. I wondered if Haneen felt exactly as I did, sitting in the female guest hall of the house. I kept my mouth shut and my eyes on my cup as older and more prominent men loudly prayed to God to grant forgiveness to the deceased before urging the rest to say, "Amen!" Then one of his relations decried the times we lived in, where criminals of every sort snatched the lives of those dearest to us. This instigated a chain reaction where the attendees exchanged stories of their encounters with crime; tales of rampant car-jacking gangs and underground chop-shops

selling automobile parts to wreck yards, drug addicts house-hopping in the dead of night looking for portable methane cylinders, and hoards of teenage drifters swarming the streets.

“And now we have to worry about those Ethiopians whenever we drive south,” bemoaned the man seated next to me.

“Between thieving immoral young men on one side and Ethiopians on the other, it’s impossible for one to feel safe in this city any longer. All we can say is: may God safeguard us all,” said an old man sitting next to the deceased’s elder son, in a tone intended to put an end to this subject.

“Amen!” cried almost everyone in the hall, suffused with an oppressive sense of helplessness.

Initially it was comforting, to learn that I wasn’t the only one feeling helpless and despairing, but the fact that the men in that hall were at comfort with their impotence to the degree that they’d publicly express it distressed me. I wanted to do something about this state of affairs; something more than merely asking God to keep us in his refuge, and it seemed at that moment that I was the only one with the desire to act.

While waiting inside the car for Haneen, my thoughts drifted back to what took place in the men’s guest hall, only to be lurched back to reality when the latch of the passenger door clicked.

“Poor lady. She’s still in shock,” said Haneen before reminding me to pick Danah up from my in-laws’ place. During the drive, silence prevailed. This vacuum of dead air persisted, until it became unbearable for Haneen.

“What’s wrong, honey? What’s upsetting you?” earnestly wanting to know.

“I just can’t get the image of that poor old man dying on the street out of my mind. All for a trifling couple of hundreds and an old watch.”

“I know what you mean, but look at it this way: he died on his way to the mosque to pray. That’s a good way to die. One of the women even said that his death qualifies as martyrdom. I know she meant it as a way of consoling the widow but that doesn’t mean she wasn’t right.”

“I’m not talking about that, Haneen!”

“What is it, then? Tell me.”

“It’s just that...I mean...what is the world coming to when an old man is stabbed to death for so little?”

“I know, sweetheart, but - ”

“And I saw something last night on my way to dawn prayer that - ”

“That what?”

“Nothing. Just forget about it.”

“Honey, don’t worry about what you saw today! Things like this happen. Tomorrow will be different.”

Tomorrow will be different. That was exactly what I had said the night before three US Immigration and Naturalization Services officers arrived outside my apartment door in the autumn of 2005. Lying in bed after I left Haneen to put Danah to sleep, I delved back to the surreal memory of when the INS agents had knocked on my door early in the morning. All I heard were discourteous knuckles rapping on the wood with a sense of urgency. At first, I had thought it was the property manager coming to discuss the issue of the long overdue rent - something I hadn’t been prepared or willing to discuss at that time. I don’t think I would’ve gotten up and looked through the glass peephole, if I hadn’t heard the agents call out my full name.

It had been years since I'd thought of that fateful day. I wondered if the civil unrest in the capital or the murder of the old man down the street was what jogged my memory. I asked myself: What if I hadn't opened the door? What if I had pretended to still be asleep? Would the INS agents have demanded the key from the property manager? In this scenario, I imagined them standing over me, one of them nudging me in the shoulder twice as I feigned sleep on the floor, their sturdy full-grain leather black boots would have been the first thing I saw as I opened my eyes. But that was not how I had laid eyes on them for the first time.

I recall that after I opened the door, an obese white man, with a thick greying moustache, identified himself and his subordinates as INS officers and asked me for my full name and passport. He aggressively launched on an onslaught of questions. I remembered that they had kept their hands on their gun holsters, which deeply unnerved me. The commanding officer then told me to get dressed and accompany them to the immigration office.

"Will I be back before five o'clock? Because I've got a couple of errands I need to run," I had asked. I'd never yearned for an affirmative response from someone so ardently in my life.

"It will take a while. Sir! You need to get dressed right now!"

His insistence that I hurry up and dress, compounded by his command to another officer to check the bathroom and guard the door prior to my entry, made me feel like a notorious criminal. Why did I warrant this degree of vigilance? It's funny that the first thing I'd worried I was going to miss was soccer practice later that day. Obviously, the severity of the situation had not yet become clear to me.

The first reality check that jolted me into a state of panic, casting away all residual sleep-hazed clouds, was when the obese officer flicked out the handcuffs tucked in a black leather pouch which dangled from his overstretched black leather belt. He instructed me to turn around. I asked him if this was necessary and stated that I was willing to go voluntarily. He answered with a plain, authoritative, “Yes!” I skimmed through my options. What if I refused to be handcuffed? The metallic snap of the cuffs registered in my mind even before I began to conceive of the possible consequences of a refusal to acquiesce. It was unnecessary to consciously arrive at the conclusion that it was out of the question to refuse to cooperate.

Oriented in a diamond shape encircling me, the other two - also overweight, but comparatively less so - officers on either side, and the commanding officer behind me, we left the building. I can't recall if they locked the door to my apartment, but I do remember that I fantasised about kicking the officer clutching me in the balls, running through the corridor towards the emergency exit, and shoving the door open with my shoulder before being tackled down by the other two officers. Handcuffed and escorted by three Immigration officers, I had never felt so bewildered or humiliated. I hoped no one would witness this scene. This wish was granted, however, as the commanding officer opened the door to the backseat of the police car and - with the top of my skull under the span of his gargantuan right hand - shoved my head firmly inside the vehicle.

This unpleasant recollection was abruptly ended when I heard Haneen open the door to the master bedroom. I shut my eyes and feigned sleep. Even with my eyes shut, I could sense Haneen's tender gaze over me. This unreciprocated visual affection lasted for what felt like a minute. Then, the mattress gently shook and the bed covers rustled as

Haneen got into bed. The rustling sound of the sheets subsided, but the warmth of Haneen's gaze persisted and grew even more intense, especially on my right temple. I had to fight the urge to turn over, open my eyes, and stare back into her own. But this would betray my pretence to Haneen. Another rustling of the bedsheets began and abruptly ended when her right hand rested on my right shoulder; her delicate fingers languorously grazing my chest. Further unrest had to be quelled as I kept my left hand by my side. My right temple was on fire now. That furnace was extinguished when Haneen planted a dewy peck with her plump lips on my right temple.

I used to be so fond of Haneen's lips; every single facial expression was tantalising, especially when she pouted. I was infatuated by the corners of her mouth and how her lips picturesquely peaked up into plump rosy petals. She always looked as though her lips were too small for the circumference of her mouth. Her upper lip was shorter than the lower, which when stretched, made for a mesmerising smile, accentuated by the overall symmetry of her mouth and the prominence of her plunging cupid's bow.

With great effort, I turned my back to her, my chest out of reach of her electrifying fingers. She drew her right hand back and retreated to the far end of the bed, adopting a posture of sleep that was identical to mine. When her eyes were shut I opened mine. All I could see was darkness and the density of self-loathing that encapsulated me.

It had been a fortnight since I had last tasted the pleasure of deep sleep. My wife had grown anxious over what she referred to as "my night restlessness". She asked me repeatedly if something had been worrying me, if everything had been all right at work, longing for an explanation, but to no avail. She must've surmised that my insomnia and foul mood were related to the murder of the old neighbour. But she must've thought she

should refrain from reintroducing the incident into our domestic discourse; that she shouldn't breathe life into what had been laid to rest. At first, I told her that I was drinking too much coffee and tea at work. She began to monitor my caffeine intake, and you'd have thought she would relent after she saw no improvement in my mood or quality of sleep a few days later. She remained fixated on the hypothesis of over-caffeination, until one night, she woke and found me standing by the window at midnight, staring outside on a day when she had ensured I didn't imbibe anything caffeinated. Startled when she saw me standing by the window, she thought I must've been sleepwalking. The fact that I was simply standing awake by the window did not put her anxiety to rest.

She wanted to discuss the matter further and implored me to open up to her but I continually shrugged her queries off. She attempted to ignore the situation, as per my request. But some nights, I could feel her awake, torn up in silence beside me, distressed, saddened and riven by the thought that she couldn't help me, and by the fact that I wouldn't let her help me. I often felt like disclosing my concerns to her, laying myself bare, and came close to doing so more than once, but restrained my urge to expose her to my ordeal. I just didn't want her to know that our physical safety was of grave concern to me alongside my insecurity over my capacity to safeguard the family. I simply didn't want her to worry; to think I was unable to protect her. I felt castrated, and I was too embarrassed to divulge this to anyone, least of all my wife. It was the initial fissure in an emotional rift; one that would only expand as the weeks progressed.

I became accustomed to staying up at night and it almost became the norm. I would spend nighttimes sitting in bed with my laptop, scouring local crime watch websites for breaking news on the “Ethiopian unrest”. I read detailed reports on any kind of criminal activity that had taken place in Riyadh - especially the latest updates on the case of a fifty year-old man who had shot an Ethiopian burglar to death. My other nightly activities consisted of standing in front of the window, keeping watch over the desolate street. Sometimes I’d catch a glimpse of the suspicious truck driver dropping off my neighbour's kid, or I’d patrol the villa room by room, flicking the lights off and on, vigilant about anything out of the ordinary. Subsequent to both rituals, online, and around the house, I would return to bed mentally drained, longing for quietude and slumber. **But that would not be in the cards for me.**

I would be roused by any noise: the sound of cats fighting, the screeching and whirring of the garbage trucks making the rounds in the neighbourhood at three in the morning and the garbagemen carelessly flinging trashcans down indiscriminately after emptying their contents. It was not that my hearing grew keener; it was more that my apprehension was evolving into more than a fleeting condition. Or it could have been that in the long, still, sleepless nights, anything that broke the tranquil silence was beheld as a notable event.

One night, I heard a familiar screech and turned my head to check the clock to confirm if it was the regular garbage truck round. But there was a prolonged clanking noise. I got up from bed and looked out the window, seeing two garbage men in soiled yellow jumpsuits, their heads and faces wrapped tight with their red-and-white checkered

kufiyas. One of them had noticed a rusty septic tank lid in the rubble next door and was trying to fold it in half so it would fit in the garbage truck. He had set the iron lid on an incline, seized a large rock and used it to pound down on the rusty lid. After a few attempts, the second garbage collector, frustrated by the other's incompetence, snatched the rock away from him. Momentarily, I thought he was going to reprimand him for the racket he was making and order him into the truck. He instead directed the feeble-looking garbageman as to where he should stand and then heaved the rock over his head and hurled it with all his might at the lid. To their surprise, aside from a deafeningly raucous clank, the lid didn't even dent.

I was fascinated by the image: two Neanderthals, their upper backs bent and hands scratching the shaggy hair on their jutting heads and grunting in puzzlement. The alpha garbageman took another step towards the rock but before he could put his hands on it, I shouted "Hey!" They both looked up, searching for the window from which they heard the shout. "Stop that!" I yelled again. I wondered if I was willing to do anything more than shout and curse at them behind cast iron window bars, if I would be willing to grab a stout piece of wood and scuffle with the two of them if they didn't cease their hammering on the metal lid. They looked at my window, but it was too dark for them to make out my appearance, so they shrugged their shoulders and returned to the truck. One of them - probably the first who spotted the lid - took one last mournful glance at it before climbing onto the step at the rear of the truck.

Deep down, I knew the likelihood of them not stopping and refusing to heed my orders was minimal. I mean, these cheap immigrant workers would do anything to avoid getting into a physical confrontation with a Saudi citizen. They would even tolerate physical abuse before striking back, knowing that the consequences of assaulting a citizen

would be dire: they could be incarcerated for a lengthy period before standing trial, or worse, they could even be deported to their countries of origin, resulting in the loss of their livelihoods.

During the day, I largely compensated for my sleep-deprivation with brief fitful naps. I even started taking naps at work. My colleagues - with the exception of Jalal of course - cared enough to cover for me, dissuading Jalal from blabbing to anyone outside our office about my newfound delinquency. Mansour asked me more than once if everything was all right at home and discreetly hinted - after failing to extract any reason explaining my lack of sleep at home - at the ruinous consequences of drug-use. I laughed off his concerns and attempts to help and told him that I was just going through a rough patch that should soon pass. He didn't seem to believe me.

Sweet old Mansour! He was so naïve and always careful not to step on anyone's toes. He knew he couldn't engage in an outright confrontation about my state, or coerce me into verbal disclosure. He knew the limits of our relationship; the red lines of privacy he wasn't meant to cross due to the professional nature of our relationship. He reminded me of my father-in-law when we had our first serious chat a week after I had asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. He wanted to ascertain what kind of a man I had been and previous romantic exploits I had when I was in the US, if any. It was understandable. He was the ideal father, responsibly acting in his daughter's interests - "the light of my eyes" as he loved to call her - as well as being under the impression that those who spend lengthy spells abroad are prone to deleterious cultural influences that could affect the moral fabric of their character. He had wanted to know if I had drunk alcohol, if I had lain with strange women, if I had used drugs. Promiscuity and drug abuse: that was all he cared to know before he gave his blessing. He needed to know if I had the requisite

qualities to be a good husband, but I couldn't help but suspect that he had also been curious as to why I hadn't graduated from college while in the US. He had asked me about many things, but one thing he hadn't asked me about and one thing I certainly wasn't going to reveal, was my stint in prison before my return home.

The next Wednesday started like any other day I have had since I had been plagued by insomnia. It had been almost a month since the symptoms of my condition manifested - that's what the psychiatrist I later visited used to call it, and already the negative effects of the affliction were apparent in my professional, domestic and social lives.

A certain level of passive dysfunction had become standard in my marital life: days would pass without Haneen and I having the most banal, routine exchanges, and between my nocturnal activities, my restless daytime naps, and work, I had completely lost touch with her and my daughter. We had drifted so far apart that we were like two irascible flatmates; one occupying the first storey of the villa, while the other kept watch from the sofa in the living room, seemingly sharing no interest in each other's lives.

Our marriage was devolving into a hollow union. It felt more like an arrangement of cohabitation. Sometimes, late at night, I could hear Haneen nimbly coming down the stairwell barefoot on her way to the kitchen, clad in her lace nightgown, and I would glance at her slender legs and bare shoulders from the living room; the outline of her underwear arousingly visible through her sheer garment, an awakening scent of the intimacy we formerly shared; a seductive hint of an invitation to a man she had once known, but bound to go unanswered. This vegetative state of our marital life showed no signs of improvement; the frigidity I unconsciously emitted was now reciprocated by

Haneen. We hadn't had an intimate moment of tenderness ever since news of the Ethiopian criminal hordes crept into my life, constantly gnawing at my ears. It was a consequence of my dissembling, my inability to disclose my mental torment to my wife, which, if I did, would somehow intensify my sense of emasculation.

At work, my colleagues' cover for me had been blown, and I was reprimanded by my superior manager: deducted pay for the next two months and a permanent note of delinquency added to my file. Other than that, things progressed as usual, except for a heated and enlightening debate I had with the rest of my colleagues that Wednesday morning. It started when news broke out that the fifty year-old Saudi citizen who was arrested for lethally shooting an Ethiopian burglar was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. While the response and general tone at the office was sympathetic and morose - it seemed like a display of false grief to me - mine was, according to my colleagues, insensitive and brash. When they were asking God to forgive the old man for his deed and look after his family, I said that finding a man guilty of murder just because he killed an armed trespasser within the limits of his property was a miscarriage of justice.

"What do you mean it was a miscarriage of justice? He killed a man, shot him with an AK-47. Don't you at least think that was a bit excessive?" said Jalal.

"The type of weapon makes no difference. I don't think this Ethiopian would've preferred to be shot with a regular pistol or a hunting rifle any more than he would've with an AK? It was simply a case of self-defence."

"But the burglar was not armed."

"You can't say you would've done anything but shoot that bastard to death. I would've done that. Except, now that we know whose side the judicial system are taking,

I wouldn't have gone to the police to report it. I would have taken care of the burglar's body myself."

"You know, just because the dead burglar was from Ethiopia doesn't mean he wasn't human," Jalal retorted.

"Did I imply otherwise? I'm not saying 'let's go on a killing spree and shoot down any dark-skinned individual wandering about the city at night.' I'm just saying that if you end up in a hazardous situation where there is a trespasser of I-don't-care-what-color inside your home, you should shoot to kill and not bother reporting the incident to the police. Just drag the corpse to the trunk of your car and go on a little joy ride in the desert."

"I've never seen this vicious streak in your personality before," said Mansour.

"You know, boss, you're just saying that now but who knows what you would do if you were in that situation. Talk is cheap, I guess," Jalal sneered as he looked around the room for affirmation from our colleagues. As I had nothing to say to Jalal's last provocative remark, which in fairness was all too true, I thought it best to say nothing and get back to actual work.

After I got home from work that day, I went right to bed - Haneen didn't even bother to ask me if I wanted to have lunch before I headed upstairs - and napped until four in the afternoon. Then, I washed and got dressed before I headed to the mosque to pray. The heat was searing, and I felt beads of sweat gathering on my forehead. I wiped my face dry with my *kufiya*, and walked as fast and as carefully as I could, trying to get to the mosque on time and keep my leather sandals sand-less. I successfully made it to the mosque before it was too late but as soon as I set foot inside the mosque I was struck by the body odour and stench of sweat-soaked socks haphazardly tossed around the

threshold that permeated the entire space. It was so rank and damp that I felt momentarily lightheaded.

I tried to regain my composure and catch up with the ongoing prayer. Most of the attendees were Bengali, Indian, and Pakistani construction workers from sites around the mosque, praying in their tattered, sweat-soaked, sod-stained Shalwar Kameezes and orange and navy overalls. Only those working for reputable construction companies had the privilege to be entrusted with overalls. As I got closer to the final line of worshipers, the intensity of the stench grew, and I was increasingly compelled to head home. The sanctity of the practice that should've prevailed in this place of worship was choked out of the mosque. I doubted that any of the attendees would find serenity and solace in performing that sacrosanct religious duty with such auditory, olfactory, and visual disruption present.

For them, it must've been mechanical, habitual; something to get out of the way before getting back to work. There was no spiritual connection with the Divine; they were just perfunctorily going through the motions. I joined the prayer with a mind more focused on my breathing than on the actual act of prayer, and as soon as I finished praying I rushed outside with lungs desperate for untainted air. I felt no closer to God at the end of that prayer than I did before it and I despised those construction workers for this. Certainly, they were only there to pray and were not afforded the opportunity to go home, shower, and dress appropriately before coming to the mosque, but that was no justification as to why I, and other congregants had to be subjected to such an affront.

Later that day, we paid a visit to Grandma's house for the family's weekly reunion. My unkempt beard, the dark semi-circles around my eyes, and my thinning

cheeks discomposed my cousins and uncles, and they dispensed jokes to minimise my change of appearance and to conceal any worry. “What’s the matter, son?” said my eldest uncle Salem, “not getting enough sleep at night?” cheekily winking. I smiled and nodded.

Nothing remarkable happened during that hour between sunset and nightfall prayers. During this traditional weekly gathering, uncles discussed global and Middle Eastern news - the revolutions in Egypt and Syria dominating the conversation - Grandma and aunties discussed who was to be wed to whom, and cousins joked and teased each other, while the relatively young toyed with their iPhones and Blackberries. The young ones were absorbed with these gadgets and were seemingly incapable of any actual interpersonal communication with those present, instead, eyes locked on screens, cyber-socialising with friends from school and other unknown individuals. They reminded me of how my generation used to spend every single chance we had to chat, play, joke, tease, and literally fight each other; that was our mode of socialisation.

When the second call for nightfall prayer sounded, all the male members at the gathering marched towards the mosque, some displaying zealous dedication while the younger ones indolently lagged behind. After we finished prayer, we headed back to Grandma’s house but we didn’t go inside. It was our familial norm that after nightfall prayer, my older uncles would return home while the bachelors would meet up with their respective friends or embark on other plans. It was also the convention that the younger male members of the family would stand outside and resume their banter and conversations with more abandon, considering the absence of any elders that would call for more discretion and restraint.

Due to my uncomely appearance, I suffered more than my fair share of wisecracks. I sent one of the kids to tell my wife that I was waiting for her outside and after a couple of moments Danah came out, her shiny black bangs over her broad forehead. I clasped her small hand in mine, and she proudly showed me the bracelet her aunt had given her. She stood there basking in the adoration of the little ones, while one of my cousins jestingly asked her if she would give it to him. She flashed a toothsome smile before she buried her blushing face in my side.

While standing near the door with the rest of the boys waiting for Haneen, a white Toyota SUV with black tinted windows slowly pulled over in front of the door. We stood between the SUV and the gate to the house. The passenger's window rolled down. The banter halted for a second in anticipation of what the driver would say. The driver however, was silent. He then drove past us.

“What a psycho!” exclaimed one of the boys.

“I thought he was going to ask us something,” said the second.

“Come right in, why don't you?” sarcastically sneered the third. The rest loudly chuckled. I saw the brake lights brighten, and I didn't know whether he was slowing down because he had heard the boys' jeering and wanted to respond, or if he was only slowing down before turning left at the T-shaped intersection ahead. The boys kept laughing while this enigmatic driver turned left. I felt sorry for him and shook my head with a laboured smile on my face, vaguely disapproving of the boys' sardonic overreaction. As the row of houses on the left obscured our vision of him, our boisterous laughter and effervescent liveliness superseded the imminent danger that was about to befall us all.

A couple of minutes passed and the boys were still joking and chatting. I was now standing with my back to the street when another white Toyota SUV - eerily identical to the one that had driven past a few minutes earlier - momentarily made a stop right at the head of the other T-shaped intersection on our left. I turned my head to look back as I heard the engine of his car monstrously revving. And before I knew it, I saw the SUV charging right towards us. I flung Danah with all my might towards the sidewalk in the direction of one of the boys leaning against the wall and shoved the children in the same direction as we all leapt and scattered all over the street. While most of us were trying to scurry inside the house, three of my cousins were partially pinned between the right doorstep railing and the hood of the SUV as this lunatic attempted to crush them. Seeing that he hadn't succeeded at running them over, he reversed and again propelled the car forwards, ramming them into the railing. Tires and children squealed alike. Luckily the railing withstood both collisions and the maniac reversed a second time before he sped away.

I was overcome with rage as I briefly stood in the middle of the street, my knees trembling and my body flushed with adrenaline. I then sprinted after him with no idea of what to do next. The brake lights brightened as he slowed down before taking the same left turn he had taken minutes ago. Again, I didn't know why he had slowed and momentarily thought he was going to try and run me over. All I did was note the number plate before I rushed towards Danah, who was crying and screaming her lungs out with her left hand clutching her right shoulder. I wiped her tears and caressed her head and back as I carried her inside, her heartbeat reverberating violently through my chest, or perhaps it was the other way around.

Haneen was on her way out when she heard the commotion and screams outside. She herself screamed and whimpered as she seized Danah with both arms before carrying her to the living room. I went to check on the three who came closest to being rammed to death: one couldn't stand up and was complaining of severe pain in his hip, the second one said he must've strained his shoulder as he lifted the third - who was speech-impaired and crying of pain in the right side of his body, expressing his rage in sobs and unintelligible sentences - off the ground and onto the hood of the SUV. My youngest uncle chased after the perpetrator in his car and reported on where he had last seen the vehicle. He also wrote down the same plate number I had noted, confirming the identity of the car.

I looked around the street and there they were, my relatives standing scattered in pairs and groups of three, speechless panic masking their faces, the young ones crying and cursing, Danah sobbing inaudibly somewhere inside the villa. A primitive impulse threatened to overcome me and I longed to see the driver's body by my feet. Instead reason prevailed, and I called the police. I reported the event and gave them the address to my Grandma's house, then sat on the doorsteps and waited.

During the twenty minutes waiting for the cops to arrive, I brooded over what I could have done instead of calling the police. I envisaged myself running after the SUV and clinging to it as it swerved left and right in an attempt to make me lose balance and unhinge my grip. I saw myself opening the back door and climbing my way to the back seat directly behind him, forcibly choking him until he lost consciousness. I imagined dragging him out of his car and onto the asphalt. I envisioned my fists pummelling his face with visceral rage, and with every thrust my blood mingling with his. Blood seeping through the open gashes on my knuckles and from the lacerations around his eyebrows

and cheekbones. My unquantifiable rage fusing with the incomprehensibility of his. Mercilessly casting vicious kicks into his skull and vigorously trampling on the hands that earlier clutched the steering wheel. Feeling doubly furious before projecting that fury inward as I look at my bloodied fists with his pulped, haemorrhaging face in the blurry background. I burst into tears and fervently curse my weak, aching fists, grazed, and missing patches of skin, for their lack of strength, damning their inability to transfigure his face into an unrecognisable pounded mush of hair, skin, blood and flesh.

Would I have been able to do all of that? Could it have gone wrong, with me on the asphalt and him on top of me? What if he had a knife? Or a gun? Calling the police was the best I could do, considering the unknown variables in the equation. A siren was briefly sounded; a single officer came out of the police vehicle.

“You called about a hit and run accident? Sorry, it’s always rush hour in the city and I was the closest patrol unit to you and I tried to get here as soon as I heard the call through dispatch,” he said while copying my full name and National ID number from my card. I made little of this and told him that I could relate.

“Is everybody alright? Should I call dispatch for an ambulance?” he asked.

“My uncle has already taken two of my cousins to the emergency department at the hospital.”

“How serious are their injuries?”

“I don’t know how serious their injuries are. They both were pinned between an SUV and that doorstep railing.”

“Can you call your uncle and ask about them?”

“He’s not answering his phone. I’ll try again in a couple of minutes.”

“You said you got the vehicle’s plate number, is that right?”

“Yes, yes. It’s IEL119.” he looked up at me before scribbling it down and passing it through to dispatch.

“Now, tell me again in as much detail as you can recollect. What happened?” I went over the whole incident again, already tired of it all. My retelling of the incident was interrupted by my uncle’s call, who then reported that both the elder and younger cousins were bruised on their lower backs and right thighs. He also reported that some of the medical staff at ER said that they had admitted three young men with similar injuries who also claimed that they were victims of a hit-and-run by a man in a white Toyota SUV, a couple weeks ago.

“Well, thank God no-one was seriously injured,” the officer commented. It was hard to tell if he was genuinely relieved or just being courteous.

“Do you think he knows any of your relatives?” he then inquired.

“None of us could identify him when he first pulled over and took a look at us.”

“But you did see him. Do you know what he looked like?”

“It was dark inside the car, but he’s got a long bushy beard. The manner in which he wrapped his *kufiya* around his face was peculiar, having one end of it covering his face across the nose and cheekbones, and leaving the upper and lower parts of his face visible. He seemed to be a bit tall, and thin too.” The officer hummed as he wrote down my description of the perpetrator’s physical appearance.

After he finished writing down what I had said, he asked dispatch for an update and was told to stay on hold. A moment of awkward silence ensued and I felt uncomfortable, standing like a subordinate officer in front of him while he sat inside his car, with one foot inside and the other imperiously poised on the asphalt of the street. Then, the officer jumped into his seat as he strained to grab his pen from the dashboard

when his fellow officer on dispatch mumbled something in response to his earlier request.

“Is it a match? Have you got a name for that perpetrator?” I asked.

“Yes, but I’m sorry, I can’t give you that information.”

“I don’t want you to tell me. I’m just relieved that he has been identified.”

“He has been, for almost two weeks now.”

“Why is he still free?” asking as mildly as I could bring myself to.

“Man, you don’t know the half of it. In a nutshell, we’re sorely understaffed.”

“No offence but I find that hard to believe, officer.”

“They’ve been hiring young boys left and right, without any background checks. Everyone you bump into in the streets has probably got a stripe or two on their shoulders. Many of them drink, use and smuggle drugs. It’s even worse than before.” As if I needed to be anymore pessimistic about the state of law enforcement in the country. I responded with nothing but silence, resentful despondent silence.

“So, what now?” I desperately wanted to know as he tried to look busy scribbling something in his notebook.

“We wait for the traffic officer to come and sign off on this report.”

“What for? This is no traffic accident.”

“No, it’s not. But, this still can be certified as a vehicular collision. The traffic officer needs to sign off on my description of the skid marks before I conclude my examination of the scene. It’s protocol.” My patience was again tested as I studied this officer with doubt.

Almost half an hour had passed before his majesty, the traffic officer graced the scene with his presence. Yet another law enforcement vehicle with a different orientation of green and pale green stripes and out of it emerged a twig of a man in a pale brown

uniform and a green belt as wide as his arms. The cop began explaining the whole case to the traffic officer only for the traffic officer to determine that such a case was beyond his jurisdiction as it seemed more like an attempted murder and no other vehicle was involved in the case.

“I just need you to sign off so I can get back to the precinct,” replied the cop. The traffic officer obliged him before driving away. Thirty minutes of waiting for a government official to pompously decree in less than a minute that this was a crime scene. The psychotic perpetrator could already be out of the capital’s jurisdiction and here I was, standing in the same spot I had been when he had tried to run me over.

It was cramped in the backseat of the police car, even for a man of my diminutive size. The steel cage separating me from the driver’s seat inhibited my vision. I had been in the backseat of a police vehicle before; the only difference this time was my wardrobe and the absence of handcuffs. I remembered how I had gazed out the window of the INS vehicle at the shops and the people walking down the streets around downtown Columbia with a mournful expression on my face. Strangely enough, it had felt like I was never to see those shops and streets again in my life. I had directed my gaze at my feet and longed to cry. My nose had itched intensely but with my hands cuffed behind my back I had been helpless to do anything about it. Now, in the backseat of the police vehicle in Riyadh, my nose did not itch. Yet, I still scratched it vigorously and with great satisfaction.

The cop apologised for having me sit in the back but explained it was against regulations to let civilians sit in the front. I told him I didn’t mind. While driving past other vehicles on his way to the precinct, and turning the siren on whenever he wished, he abruptly pulled over when the dispatch officer called again and began communicating

the identity of the owner of the SUV. I promptly took out my cellphone and recorded the full name of the suspect. Then, I thanked God for smart phones. I had never known anyone with that last name but it was not unfamiliar.

We met Uncle Turki and my two injured cousins at the precinct. We sat in the hall waiting for the return of the officer who vanished after wishing both my cousins a speedy recovery. I told them that I had gotten the perpetrator's name and my uncle knew where a family with that surname lived in Grandma's neighbourhood.

The inside of the precinct was in pristine condition, the floors glistening with lemony-fresh disinfectants; the brown couch we sat on still had the scent of new leather furniture. The hall seemed too big for whatever furniture there was in it. Aside from the brown couch and those who sat on it, an apparently second-hand coffee table, and the gaudy marble counter behind which the receptionist officer swivelled his chair, there was nothing in that cavernous lobby to dissipate our frustrated silence; the incessant ringing of phones, and the inappropriate laughter that echoed from the far, yet-unexplored cavities of the precinct.

Finally, the cop stepped out from one of the offices across the hall and told me to come in. "Have a seat please. This is Captain Faris. He'll be in charge of your case." There was a hint of finality in his introduction of the captain. It unsettled me for some reason. I don't know which distressed me more: the loss of this seemingly sympathetic officer who during our chat at the crime scene seemed to share my views on the severity of the crime, or the demeanour of this captain, who drooped in his chair with his private cellphone in one hand, and his genitals under the other.

“Anything else, Captain?” the cop dutifully asked. He was dismissed with a limp wave before he bid me good luck, and I never saw him again.

“Now, sir, could you tell me what happened?” Captain Faris asked, still slouched in his seat. My patience was running out. I felt like instructing him to show some respect, sit straight, and read the report in front of him instead of having me endure recounting the traumatic event for a third time.

“So, did anyone get injured? How are your cousins?” he asked after I finished restating the incident, an account by now more refined and well-rounded.

“They are fine. Only bruises. They are outside in the hall if you want to call them in.”

“No, that’s not going to be necessary. So, no serious injuries, then?”

“No, just minor ones. They should feel better within a day or two.”

“That’s great! Thank God for that.”

I concurred.

“So, what do you want us to do about this?”

I couldn’t conceal my consternation as I smirked and said that I expected him to do his job and arrest this criminal who had already run over three people two weeks earlier.

“Oh, of course we are going to do that. We are definitely going to do that,” he replied lackadaisically. I didn’t feel any more assured. In fact, I stressed that the fact that no one was seriously injured or dead didn’t mean that I was willing to drop the charges. I found it absurd that I had to emphasise this point to a law enforcement officer.

“Would you characterise what happened as a case of hit-and-run?” Faris asked.

“I don’t know how to describe that according to the penal code, but I think it was more like an attempted multiple vehicular homicide,” my newfound cyber-obsession with local crime was rearing its ugly head.

“Really? What makes you think so?”

“Well, I’m not a lawyer but this guy drove by, pulled over, drove around the block, pulled over by the intersection, then steered right towards us. It seemed premeditated to me.”

“I see, I see.”

I was unpersuaded by this token concurrence.

“But he sounds like a very mentally unstable person. He might not be psychologically fit to stand trial, you know. Why don’t you just let it go and leave him to God to deal with?” Faris asked, spoken like a true shirker, unwilling to conscientiously fulfil his duty, waiting for the clock to run until the end of his shift. This government-appointed enforcer of the law was actually trying to convince me to drop the charges. A man who swore to uphold the law, to protect and serve, was displaying more sympathy for the offender than he was for the victims.

“What do you mean by asking me why I want you to arrest him? He tried to run us over and he seriously injured people two weeks prior to tonight and he should be under medical supervision in a mental institute if he is unstable, not roaming the streets in an SUV running over people,” I said with an argumentative inflection in my voice. Never in my life had I ever thought that I would one day have to argue with a policeman over the arrest of a serious offender. What I felt towards this captain wasn’t just my usual disdain of bureaucrats. I began to suspect it was something more than that.

He then called for both of my cousins to provide their accounts of the story. He insisted on having the child with the severe speech-impairment speak and he only

relented after he heard the mumbled words awkwardly choked out of the kid, who - aggrieved by what had happened to him and embarrassed, I imagine, of his inability to express his ordeal in words to the captain - broke down in tears afterwards. The sniffing child tried to hurriedly wipe away his tears and I felt an urge to reprimand this sorry excuse of a captain for insisting on having the kid's statement, but I knew that I'd end up spending the night in a holding cell if I did so. I thought the captain was trying to poke holes in my testimony; highlighting any inaccuracy or discrepancy between mine and those of my cousins, no matter how minute or subjective. I thought I couldn't hate this captain more than I already did but he seemed willing to prove me wrong.

While my older cousin was narrating his version of the incident, a moustachioed, cheerful looking officer with a prominent gut - that seriously tested the elasticity of the police-issued belt - walked in and hollered at the deputy officer who was writing down the depositions.

“What's the news?”

“We received reports of twenty-five assaults committed by Ethiopians,” responded the deputy.

“May God grant us refuge from these evildoers. But I was asking about the game, you know?” he shamelessly replied.

“Oh, Al-Hilal won. Two-nil,” the deputy said. I stole a glance in his direction to see what he would say and he looked as though he finally found it inappropriate to talk about sport in the precinct while a more serious issue was at hand. He still didn't seem disinclined to answer his fellow officer's question. We sat in front of the apathetic captain fiddling with his cellphone and to the right of the brash deputy, symmetrically at the centre of the office, feeling infinitesimally far from being the centre of attention.

“What's next?” I asked after he told us to sign our testimonies.

“We’ll search for him and we’ll contact you when we have any updates.”

“When should we expect to hear from you?”

“I can’t really tell. Soon, God-willing.”

“You better hurry up, now that his identity is out in the open. For his sake, get to him now before other people do,” warned my uncle discreetly.

“No, sir, we will not let it get to that,” he said before we left his office. We drove back to Grandma’s house, none of us in the mood for chat, but each one - excepting my aphasic cousin - tried to keep the conversation going to distract us from reflecting on what had taken place.

An hour later, I was in bed and every time I shut my eyes I saw myself standing with the white SUV revving behind me and Danah’s phantom hand in mine. The lights were off, except those in the bathroom, casting a fluorescent shadow through an ajar door. I could hear my wife brushing her teeth with the water trickling through the faucet. Another sleepless night loomed.

III

The following morning, I came downstairs to see my aunt sitting with Haneen and Danah in the living room, having coffee and breakfast. I sat next to Danah and she embraced me as I tenderly rubbed her shoulder. My aunt repeatedly thanked God for Danah's safety and started choking up, her voice turning hoarse with tears. I couldn't tell if they were authentic or the expected reaction of a woman preconditioned to cry on such occasions. I suspected that those tears were her first that morning. She then asked me how it went at the precinct last night. I briefly told her what had taken place there, my impression of the captain and that I hoped to hear from him soon. False optimism was rife in the living room that morning.

“Well, don't get your hopes too high. It's been more than two months since that maniac chased Basha round the street with a knife and we still haven't heard anything from them regarding that case,” she remarked, suffocating the irrational optimism I had tried to resuscitate in the living room.

According to her, a mentally disturbed man in their neighbourhood chased after her private driver with a knife while he was walking home from the mosque. He had reported it to the police but they hadn't acted on the case, aside from filing it and adding it to their endless list of open cases. This didn't shock me. What did, was when she said the perpetrator who attacked her private driver was known in the neighbourhood for his mental breakdowns and attended all five prayers at the mosque a block down from her house. A clear threat to society was walking back-and-forth between his house and the mosque in the clear light of day, praying next to those whom he could turn against in a second. A man still at liberty only two months since he had tried to stab Basha, a month since he emerged from home in his underwear and stood in the middle of the street with

the Holy Quran in his hands, giving a sermon about God knows what, and yet no one had bothered to go the cops or to the District Council to report anything. How could people be so indifferent and callously passive?

I didn't know who to direct my outrage at: the psycho who kept endangering other people's lives, the law enforcement agency that obviously wasn't fulfilling its duties, or the civilians who were well aware of this social menace in their midst and still did nothing to rectify the situation. Even sheep would panic and scurry in the presence of a wolf! Regardless of my opinion on what those people had done to the Ethiopian burglars a few weeks ago, at least they did something to put an end to the escalating number of crime sprees. They took action when everyone else remained complacent, even those who were charged with the duty to act. I respected them at least for that.

I asked my aunt for Basha's cellphone number to ask him if he knew what type of car his assailant drove, and met him an hour before nightfall prayer. I had seen him once or twice before, walking out of Grandma's private driver's room. He had a thick, meticulously groomed moustache and a round gut, closely resembling the insensitively indecorous officer at the precinct last night.

"Yes, *Baba*." I hated that he called me "Baba" even though he was at least twenty years my senior. "He lives in that house," he said as he pointed to a towering, antiquated villa down the road from my aunt's, only a hundred metres across the street from the mosque. I asked him if he was certain.

"I am sure, *Baba*. I see him at the mosque everyday," he said.

"Did you tell the police that your attacker lives there?"

"Yes, *Baba*." Again I was at a loss for words; a sensation that was steadily becoming an unwelcome familiarity.

“What did they say, then?”

“They said they would look into it.” I wondered if the police were being their usual ineffectual selves, or even more so as the victim, Basha, was an Indian private driver: a dispensable member of the cheap workforce, a human being whose life was of less value when compared to that of a Saudi citizen.

“What kind of car does he drive, Basha?” I enquired.

“A white SUV, *Baba*. A big one, but I don’t know what brand,” his equivocal description was due to his unfamiliarity with any car other than my aunt’s; an indicator of his social status.

Despite Basha’s indeterminate information, I thought that my patience might be finally rewarded, that justice might be served in the “legal” way. A surge of optimism coursed through my veins. I told Basha that this maniac could be the one who tried to run us over last night.

“It’s him, *Baba*. I’m sure. He tried to run over a teenager across the street from Mama’s house last night too.”

“Seriously? Did the teenager’s father go to the police?”

“No, *Baba*. People here know this guy is sick. They just make sure they stay out of his way.”

“This is madness. How can people live this way?” Basha responded to my broader social query with a lacklustre smile and a shrug shrouded with hopelessness.

“Do you think he will attend nightfall prayer? Do you think you can identify him to the police?” I asked, hoping for an affirmative yes to both questions.

“Yes, *Baba*, he will. I know what he looks like.”

“Let’s go, then.” I experienced a sudden buoyancy at the thought of this man being behind bars before midnight.

Basha gripped the handle rest so hard as I sped past other cars on our way to the precinct that I feared he would yank it off. I was proud of the investigative work I had accomplished and was consumed by a sense of urgency. It had been less than twenty-four hours and I could easily bring this psycho down. I thought I would have made a better law enforcer than most of those I had encountered the previous night. The surreality of feeling like the unlikely civilian who just cracked a major case in a TV crime drama loomed large. I was giddy with pride, soon to be thanked by the Police Commissioner for my help in solving this case. I wanted to be back in the neighbourhood with the arresting officers before the nightfall service as Basha said this maniac only left his house to go to the mosque or to drive around - presumably looking for other innocents to run over. I hoped they would arrest him immediately after prayer or even before. I didn't care which, as long as he was arrested and detained.

At the precinct's gate stood two officers. One of them stopped me and inquired what business I had there.

"I want to see Captain Faris regarding a case."

"Captain Faris is not on shift. You can come tomorrow if you like."

"I can't come tomorrow. It must be now. Can I see whoever is in charge?"

"What's the case about?"

"Someone tried to run over myself and nine others in my family last night and -"

"Your case is not the only one we are working on, man. You'll have to wait until we get in touch with you," he spoke while clutching a mincemeat sandwich in his hands with breadcrumbs strewn on his shirt. That was what he was working on at present.

“Listen, this private driver has important information and you can arrest this perpetrator now if you come with us. We need to be there before nightfall prayer!” I asserted impatiently.

“You’ll just have to wait until you see Captain Faris tomorrow,” he said before cramming another mouthful of the sandwich in his face.

“You wouldn’t say that if it were you and your cousins who got run over last night! Now can I see the commanding officer?” I erupted. The pandering had to stop.

“Let him through,” he said to his fellow officer.

I walked inside and paid no attention to the officer behind the reception desk shouting at me to halt as I walked straight into Captain Faris’ office, only to find it empty. There was no one there. I partially regretted my impetuosity as I backtracked to where the receptionist was standing and asked him if I could see the commanding officer. The intense fury within me had fused my eyebrows into a single brow-line of rage. He told me to have a seat. I told him I’d rather stand; I could barely control myself, quivering with indignation.

As I stood by the counter, I couldn’t help but notice a small TV set with a live camera feed of the holding cells located deep within the vaults of the precinct. I saw men splayed on the floor, a couple sitting cross-legged with their backs to the wall, a circle of four with playing cards in their hands, and a starkly gaunt teenager standing in the far corner of the cell and staring directly at the camera, pleading inaudibly for his release.

I had been taken to a holding cell at the Mecklenburg County Jail in downtown Charlotte, North Carolina, after the paperwork for my detainment by the INS officers had been finalised. After being officially admitted, I had been led to a tiny holding cell

occupied by three African-American men. One of them had looked, smelled, and sounded like a homeless man; his acrid body odour serving to ward off any who would dare to encroach on his larger private space in the cell, mumbling half-consciously in the corner. The second had sat in a corner brooding, his face and arms crossed as if by way of containing the storm brewing within his chest cavity. The third man had been so volatile and livid that he had spent most of my time there banging on the door of the holding cell, cursing at the guards outside, and reiterating his innocence. Whenever he grew tired of this tirade, he would plop down next to me and I would get a whiff of his stench, which was only marginally better than that of the homeless old man. The moist rub of the fatty back side of his immense left arm on my right would always fill me with revulsion.

I had dreaded the thought of this enraged giant getting into a vicious tussle with the other alleged criminal and that dozy homeless man caught in between. The cell was too minuscule for me to find a corner where I wouldn't get hit by a stray punch or kick. That thought inflamed the claustrophobia I already experienced - albeit more intimately - and I had to suppress the compulsion to bang on the door and shout just like that beast of a man next to me, declaiming my innocence in the process. Once that panic attack receded, I tried to scootch out of the shadow of that giant and as far away from him - while also keeping a considerable distance from the rank solitary urinal - as possible.

This flashback was interrupted when I was told to go back into Captain Faris' office. Once there, I was presented with a grim-faced yet dignified captain, properly seated in his chair, utterly dissimilar to Faris' crude, unbecoming carriage. How this officer slipped into the office was beyond me. Maybe he walked in while I was watching the camera feed of the holding cell. I burst into a recount of Basha's tale, keenly asserted

that he could identify the perpetrator and that they could apprehend him now if they came with us to the mosque in my aunt's neighbourhood.

"That's one of Captain Faris' cases. I can't do anything about it without his permission. You'll have to wait until he's on shift."

"What do you mean you can't do anything about it now? Is Captain Faris the only one who knows how to conduct an arrest?"

"Sir, I'm just following protocol here. Captain Faris is in charge of that case; he's the only one authorised to order an arrest. You'll just have to wait for Captain - "

"But this guy could skip town before then, don't you understand? You can have him behind bars now! There's got to be a way around this! Can't you call him? I just don't understand why we have to wait!"

"I don't know what to tell you, sir. I'm only following orders." Any faith I had in law and order was extinguished that night as I stepped out of the precinct, having confronted the impotence of the judicial bureaucracy in every respect.

Later, I sat in my car, thinking of my next course of action. Basha, looking at me in the passenger seat, probably wondered what I might do next. I felt like I had let him down. I was immensely disappointed and I didn't know how to mitigate this emotion, for either of us. I decided to go through with what I thought the cops should have done. So, I drove back to the neighbourhood and told Basha to go to the mosque and call me the instant he saw the perpetrator enter. I parked across the street about fifty metres away from the perpetrator's house. I turned the ignition off and waited, simmering in silence, for someone to come out of the house.

As I sat there, staking out this psycho, I imagined seeing him actually walking out of his house, or the lower end of his automatic garage door rolling up before a white

SUV emerged. Then I remembered that Basha had said that the house had two automatic garage doors directly facing each other, making it possible for the man to sneak his SUV through one door and exit the house from the other side. I worried that he might leave his house from the other door and I began to lose hope in the entire endeavour. Then I imagined a white car driving by and slowing down suspiciously before speeding rapidly into a head-on collision with my parked car. I turned on the ignition and drove around the block before parking next to the mosque. I thought it would raise fewer suspicions if I were parked next to a public place.

I resumed my stakeout, but had to suspend it again when hearing the second call for nightfall prayer sounded through the mosque's loudspeakers. I exited the car and entered the mosque, trying to maintain a low profile. I joined the ranks of worshippers, but my mind was an absent presence in the ritual.

At the end of prayer, I turned my head to the right and left, and saw a guy stand up and rush out of the mosque so remarkably fast that he caught my attention. He had a bushy black beard and a hunched back, but his walk was that of a man full of energy and determination. Basha called me right after I stepped out of the mosque to tell me that he was walking behind the suspect and that I was about to miss my chance to distinguishably see him. I didn't know what he expected me to do. All I had in mind was that I wanted to see this man's face; to know what he looked like.

As I got into my car I knew it was too late for that, but I saw him walk towards that murky mansion with the vigil of someone possessed by a spirit and summoned to his master. Standing tall in shrouds of darkness next to the villas next door, it looked like a house haunted by djinns that issue hair-raising shrieks or hypnotic trance-inducing

drums. I picked Basha up and told him about the man at the end of the row, and how he had dashed out of the mosque the second prayers were over. He said that this was the man.

I was beyond my exasperation with the police, and didn't think my moment to strike had passed. I thought I would share the information I had gathered that night with my youngest uncle and older cousins, depriving the older, "level-headed" ones of this knowledge, as the likelihood was, they would attempt to dissuade us from retaliating. I found it peculiar: the speediness of my preparations for other alternatives, in comparison to the efficacy of the police. I was exhilarated by this realisation, but dismayed by the thought that I was collecting data in preparation for something that I couldn't do alone, that required collaboration.

I returned home late that night, as I had driven around aimlessly, pondering the various scenarios that could eventuate, after dropping off Basha. Haneen and Danah were sound asleep in the peacefulness of the house. But that quietude had an adverse effect on me as it awakened the newly quotidian urge to remain vigilant. Clad only in my underwear I went through my nightly virtual and physical routines before I finally got into bed.

"You're home," Haneen moaned softly, her eyes still shut. I didn't utter a word.

I lay in bed, brimming with contempt for my indecision, my excessive caution, my feeling of emasculation, handicapped, less of a man, in the most brutish sense of the word. Was I masking cowardice with a thin veil of cautiousness, civility, and a misplaced trust in the system? I yearned for retribution, which to me equated to justice. I just didn't know if I had it in me to obtain this justice without damaging my pride. I formerly

believed in law and order, and that having the government resolve public conflicts was the best way to handle these issues. As an ideal citizen, I had subscribed to the belief that without the presence of a great and stabilising entity, chaos and havoc would reign, but considering the law enforcement agency's gross failure in that regard, we already lived under jungle law. One had no choice but to resort to handling such matters oneself; as a vigilante. Either fight or flight.

At breakfast the next morning, Haneen asked how my trip to the precinct with Basha had gone. I wanted to lie to her; to comfortingly assure her that reliable law enforcers were working diligently on the case. I attempted to brush off the subject but her incessant questions were testing the limits of my self-restraint. I felt like a pressure cooker whose nozzle was sealed shut and about to explode through the seams; an unstable bomb whose wires were tinkered with by someone who was indecisive over which to cut to defuse it.

"You want the truth, Haneen? They are going to do nothing to him. They'll just let the case file gather dust. They just don't care."

"Sweetheart, I can imagine how horrible it seems but you have to be patient. Trust me. They will do their job in the end. And even if they don't, at least no one in your family was grievously injured."

"So what? Should we just thank our lucky stars and wait until he kills someone? Nonsense! Maybe I should take care of him myself." An empty threat, through and through.

"Are you serious?" Haneen construed this as a legitimate threat. "You can't take the law into your own hands. This madman is obviously dangerous. Why put yourself in harm's way?" I sipped my cup of coffee.

“And you have a family to look after, or have you forgotten about us?” Haneen added.

“Why else do you think I want to do this?” I retorted.

“Honey, not like this. Not like this.”

Later that day, lying on the sofa in the living room while Haneen helped Danah finish her homework, I received a call from an undisclosed number on my cellphone. At first, I let it ring a couple of times wondering whether I should answer the call or not. It turned out to be a special unit detective informing me of the unit’s plans to arrest the suspect after nightfall prayer, asking me if I could help identify him. I told him that I would be glad to help but that Basha would be far more helpful.

“There’s no reason for you to go through all this trouble now that they can talk to Basha,” Haneen interjected. I thought she was afraid that this confrontation between the detective’s special unit and the perpetrator might flare up into a blood-ridden conflict, with reams of ammo fired between the two parties. Or maybe I was the one fearful of that possibility. Maybe that was why I decided to give the detective Basha’s cellphone number before saying that I’d try to be there. Both the detective and I knew the chances of me actually being present at the scene were minimal. Relieved that justice might finally be served, this new turn of events wasn’t cause for me to rejoice just yet. I rang Basha to see if the detective had called him.

“Yes, *Baba*. He is going to meet me after nightfall prayer.” He couldn’t conceal his thrill.

“That’s great, Basha. I want you to call me right after they arrest him.”

“Sure, *Baba*.”

I questioned whether the detective and his unit would actually succeed in capturing this madman. I thought that he'd be out of his house, or had perhaps fled the city but - much to my surprise - they actually caught him and not a single shot was fired during the arrest. After I got the call from Basha confirming the arrest I was overcome with a tingling sensation and for the first time, in a long time, I felt the natural urge to sleep. I went upstairs, threw myself into bed, and stared blankly at the white ceiling, taking in deep steady breaths before I sank into a pitch-black dreamless slumber.

I woke up the next day on the bed; Haneen wasn't there and my *thobe* was crumpled beyond recognition. I rubbed my eyes as I walked out of the master bedroom and found Haneen sleeping on the floor in the middle of Danah's room with her back to the door. Danah had a serene expression on her face; a sight worthy of painting. I lay on the floor and embraced my wife, my hand on her hip, then hers pressing warmly on mine, and I sank down again.

The following week passed by with a healthy sense of normalcy restored to my daily life. It was reminiscent of the days when no Ethiopian gangs scoured the streets of the southern suburbs of the capital and no old retirees were getting murdered on their way to prayer. The only thing that broke the placidity of the week was the call I received from the perpetrator's uncle one afternoon. After he introduced himself, in an attempt to mollify me, he alluded to how close a friend he was to my older uncles. He then pleaded with me to drop the charges citing his nephew's mental instability, his need for therapy and institutional medical care.

"Sir, first I want you to know that your call means a lot to me. You and your family are good people, I'm sure, and I appreciate your friendship with my uncles - "

half-lie, “ - but I can’t drop the charges.” The cursory nature of my tone was surprising even to me.

“Son, he is not of sound mind. He shouldn’t be in jail.”

“And he shouldn’t be driving a car and running over people either but here we are,” I snapped back, unable to control my tone of voice.

“I talked to the captain in charge of his case and he said none of your family was seriously injured.” The undercurrent in this crafty old man’s statement was: What or how much do you want to let my nephew off the hook?

“And thank God for that. But this is not about payback, sir, or payoff - ” another half-lie on my part, “ - your nephew poses a threat to the community. He needs help and the government should be able to provide care for him. We can’t just let him go on like this until he kills someone. Can’t you see I made this decision with your nephew’s best interests at heart?” I claimed. This was an absolute lie. I could sense the despondency in his voice as he asked me to reconsider before he hung up. I promised I would. An empty promise; another absolute lie.

A mere fortnight after that phone call, news spread that the suspect was released from jail due to the absence of substantial evidence linking him directly to the crime scene.

“We can’t verify that it was actually him driving the car that night,” Captain Faris said when I went to contend the decision.

“But, you identified him through the SUV’s plate number!”

“That’s not sufficient in a court of law. The defence attorney could poke all kinds of holes in your story. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” I said before storming out of that forsaken precinct.

My taste for sleep dissipated and I reverted back to insomnia, roaming the villa room to room with the utmost wariness. It was as if I expected a burglar to break in, as if I half-dreaded yet half-relished the possibility. During the last two weeks, I came to realise how emotionally and physically taxing my first bout of depression and insomnia had been on Haneen. It grieved me to think she was about to endure another but I couldn't help it. I wish I could have alleviated her worries and pled with her to go on as usual, but it was not a viable option. After the first few nights of his release, Haneen began asking me what was wrong and one night her incessant barrage of questions wore me down much faster. I relented; I told her what kept me awake at night, that the man whom we suspected of attempting to run us over was set free because there wasn't enough evidence to prosecute him.

“So the cops aren't sure that he committed that crime?” Haneen asked.

“They know he's the one, they just can't prove it in a court of law.”

“So, that means there is a chance that he is *not* the perpetrator who ran over your cousins.”

“Oh, he *is* the one. I can tell.”

“I thought you said none of you had a good look at him the night of the incident; that his face was partially covered by his *keufiya*. Honey, consider this: maybe the one who ran over your cousins lives far away from Grandma's suburb. Now, isn't that thought a little comforting?” Haneen was labouring to extinguish the smouldering fire that she saw in my eyes before it burst into an inferno.

“But he *does*. He *does* live there.”

“Well, even if he does. We'll just have to be careful and not let the kids play outside,” this was Haneen's effete attempt to douse the flames of that fire.

“No, I've had enough of this nonsense.”

“What are you going to do, then?” her voice rising sharply. Haneen was beginning to panic.

“Don’t worry about it!”

“Please, sweetheart, don’t do anything crazy.”

I turned my back to her and switched off the lamp on the nightstand, tersely indicating that the discussion was now closed. She stood for a while before I heard her ruffling the bedsheets.

I lay in bed until I was certain Haneen was deeply asleep. With my ear pressed firmly against the pillow, the only sound I could hear in the stillness of the air were the monotonous thuds of my heartbeat. The complete utter darkness of the bedroom startled me when I opened my eyes. I waved my hand in front of my face to see if I could see it. It prompted my mind back to the cell where I had spent my first night at the County jail in downtown Charlotte.

The dark cell had been so small, the air in it stale; more like a place for the dead than the living. A place only for bare life to subsist. The bed had smelled of mothballs, which for some reason caused me to gag. I had wanted to rush to the cell door, smash my face into the plexiglass window of the cell, and wail like a weeping child, slobbering all over the glass and my face, until the cell door swung open.

I was intrigued by the increasing frequency of my recollections from my time in the US recently, especially those revolving around my incarceration. That period of my life would always be a part of my psyche, but the degree to which I was retrieving some of the more remarkable, harrowing episodes of that period in my past perplexed me. I checked the clock; two hours to go before dawn prayer. I grabbed my laptop and went

through my bookmarked crime watch websites, the radiant glow of the screen illuminating my face. Browsing from one website to the next, there were nothing but detailed reports with gory photos of victims mauled by the claws of crime in the city: the covered body of a young woman raped and murdered on the outskirts, her *abaya* shimmering with sand and blood under the flash of the reporter's camera; bodies of Ethiopians and police officers scattered in a street after a senselessly bloody shootout, police vehicles riddled with bullets; a male teenager stabbed twice in the chest as the latest casualty in an overlong string of gangland slayings. The souls of so many victims would remain unavenged and the souls of so many predators would suffer no punishment. So many cries would dwindle away unheard and so many pleas would remain unanswered. Countless tears would be shed.

The call for dawn prayer was sounded from every single minaret in the suburb, urging the pious to abandon their earthly inclinations and congregate in supplication and exaltation of the Divine. I washed and clothed myself in my *thobe* before I headed out. The two lampposts next to the gate looked like tall grey wraiths with bright lanterns hanging from their hands. One of the lanterns flickered as though in acknowledgment of my presence as I walked past, sending a shiver down my spine. Halfway to the mosque, I noticed an unfamiliar white truck parked next to a plot of land that had been used by construction workers to dump rubble and debris on. The closer I got to the truck the more familiar it looked. I could tell someone was sitting in the reclined driver's seat. When I walked past the vehicle I saw that a man was in fact seated there. Mouth agape, he looked vacantly at the ceiling of his truck, possibly staring at the headliner, or maybe his eyes were sealed shut. I could vaguely make out the dark contours of a round object seesawing up and down on the truck driver's lap. Then, it abruptly stopped, raised itself a

little higher, and swept the thick strands of hair off its face as it strained to see if something moved in the dead silence of the street.

Only then did the unfamiliar become starkly familiar. My neighbour's son wiped his mouth and I kept walking towards the mosque as if nothing had happened. I heard muffled hushes in the wake of my walk past the truck but I didn't pause to look back. There were no construction workers with sweaty backs and putrid feet to worry about at this time of day, but there was something far worse on my mind now, much more reprehensible; something that was going to deprive me of the presence of mind necessary to pray properly.

Throughout dawn prayer, while other attendees were offering their supplications to God and asking him for health, wealth, or acceptance into Heaven in the afterlife, I had one thing that I wanted an answer for: what compelled a teenager at such a tender age to be in such a sexually compromising position; to orally gratify a man who looked to be in his late thirties this late at night in a truck by the side of the street. Was he going through some sort of sexual exploration to which some adolescents are inclined? And if so, why not experiment with someone his own age? Why this seedy truck driver who was twice his age? It seemed like the boy was being sexually abused; he was being violated against his will.

It seemed so bestial, so inhumane, to infringe on the will of another; to coerce someone to do something so intimate and so private. To defile the sexual experience and derogate it from the epitome of human pleasure to the epitome of bondage; to force one's body to function against their mind. It was the ultimate violation. I had some idea of the nature of this violation. I had experienced it during my time at Mecklenburg.

On my arrival, I had been ordered by the guards, along with the old homeless man who had kept dozing off in the holding cell, to disrobe and get into the showers. The homeless man had slipped off his clothes so fast and without a shred of self-consciousness, as if he were a four year-old child instructed by his mother to get ready for his shower. He had looked ragged and worn, his arms surprisingly wiry like those of a retired boxer, with bulging veins under the skin of his defined bicep and deltoid muscles. He appeared to be electrified by the cold water of the shower as he shivered and rubbed parts of his body with rapid motions before scuttling out of the showers.

I had waited for the homeless man to finish his shower before I began to disrobe.

“Hey! All the way to your bare ass!” shouted one of the guards when I left my boxer shorts on. With my hands on my private parts and my head down in disgrace, I shuffled to the shower. The water had been too cold for me and before I had my hand on the faucet, the guard in the showers ordered me to take my hand off the faucet. I stood there, with my back to the guard, under the cold torrent of the shower, looking at the metallic faucet, hugging myself, thinking of everything and nothing at the same time.

Then the guard said something to which I had been completely oblivious.

“Turn around now, please,” the guard repeated until he caught my attention with another bullying bark. I had turned, my hands covering my genitals again.

“Get your hands up!” he said with another imperious bark to which I promptly acquiesced. There I had stood in front of a man, without a single stitch of fabric on my stark-naked body; I had never thought that having an invalid student visa would bring

me this close to being in Dachau, Manzanar, or Abu Ghraib. I had never felt so vulnerably exposed in my life; so utterly stripped of dignity.

I walked home after dawn prayer concluded - another act of spirituality turned to an exercise in futility as I mechanically went through the motions - and the handful of men who made it to the mosque began to disperse through the many streets in the suburb. The truck was nowhere to be seen. A few minutes later, when I turned the corner of my street, I saw the teenager sitting on the doorsteps of his house, his arms enfolding his knees and his head slumped in his lap, crying. He raised his head when he heard my steps and wiped the tears off his face before stepping inside. Whatever sneaking suspicions I had of the truck driver's paedophilia were all but confirmed and for a brief second, I wish I hadn't known that my neighbour was being sodomised on a regular basis and right in our midst. Then I suffered the realisation that this was the exact sentiment of my neighbour's son at this instant. Three days later, on my way home from work, after enduring another day of tedium and Jalal's insufferable taunting, I saw my neighbour's kid walking home from school. As I drove past, we exchanged broken looks of shame and helplessness.

What a twisted world we lived in, where the ruthlessly strong preyed on the weak and those who abided by the law were quashed by those who didn't. Right then and there, in the sweltering heat of my parked car, I realised that the closest one could ever get to justice would be through his own unilateral means and by his own hands. Right then and there, I resolved to buy a gun.

That same day, a Yemeni arms trafficker who maintained his cover by posing as a salesman at a hunting store informed me that I required a firearms license when I told him that I was looking for something more than a hunting rifle. He then walked towards a fellow salesman who looked like he also hailed from Yemen. They kept sneaking glances at me while I perused the collection of rifles the store had on sale, examining my gait and demeanour and muttering between themselves. The two were probably discussing the possibility that I was an undercover cop posing as a civilian to flush out illegal firearm procurers. The situation reminded me of the time when in the US, after I passed the English proficiency test and became eligible to enrol for classes at the university.

One of the more affable teachers at the English Institute had offered to help me through the many online forms I had had to fill up. Midway through the registration process, she excused herself and asked permission to take my file with her. Her face had suddenly grown paler and adopted a dour expression. I had sat in the computer lab waiting for her to return and when she did, the director of the institute accompanied her. They stood in the doorway of the lab murmuring and stealing looks at me. She then walked back to me and with a stern face and eyes that betrayed her suspicion, asked why I wanted to study nuclear physics.

“Nuclear physics? I don’t want to major in nuclear physics,” I had answered.

“Well, that’s what it says in your preliminary registration form.”

“No, no. That must be a mistake. I want to study medical physics.”

“Oh! Well, okay!” she exclaimed, all her wariness dissipating into the air. “Never mind, John. Everything is alright now,” she had said to the head director, filled with relief.

Even after all the time we had spent together in class, she couldn’t fully trust me; she still thought that I could be a terrorist. All that friendliness had faded away when she thought that this Saudi Muslim student, not a year after 9/11, wanted to major in nuclear physics.

After a period of browsing through hunting rifles and wandering in the store, the salesman came up to me and in hushed tones instructed me to meet him in the empty parking lot behind the marketplace at midnight. Two hours after closing time, I was parked exactly where he told me to be. I turned the headlights off and I sat there waiting for the smuggler to show up. My sedan was the only vehicle in the parking lot and the spaciousness of the vicinity made me feel like I was parked in a graveyard. It was entirely empty; the ideal locale for an illegal exchange. The marketplace was formerly a prospering centre of commerce in the past decade, where one would be lucky to find an empty space during business hours. Now, during the day, the parking lots at the front would never reach half of their full capacity, let alone the ones at the back.

I had once been in this floundering marketplace, waiting inside a car for my mother to come out of furniture shops. I had been bored and restless until I turned on the radio. On my favourite station, news had broken that the World Trade Center had been attacked by two jetliners and that a similar attack had taken place in Washington D.C.. The whole world seemed to be in a state of suspicious denial and I had tried to imagine the havoc and carnage that New Yorkers must’ve tried to escape. I couldn’t

believe my ears, even when news of influential heads of states condemning the attacks and conveying their heartfelt sympathies to the survivors and the victims' families along with the government of the United States rippled through the airwaves. Even the leaders of rogue states and those who had been known to have antagonistic sentiments towards the US could not help but vilify the alleged culprits. I had wanted to drive home immediately and as fast I could to see with my eyes what my ears couldn't fathom.

Mom had wanted me to drive to another market but I told her that we had to rush home immediately. My mother - may God rest her soul - had never cared for politics and had made little of this momentous news, saying that "it is not our business what happens in the world, so far away from us." She had tried to feign interest a little later, asking me if the culprits had been identified. I had an inkling that repercussions of such an attack would be global and that a region in the Middle East would be the first to feel the mighty scourge of the only superpower in the world.

Never in my life before that day had I so strived to be in front of the TV set in time for the Channel One nine o'clock news. I was seated half a metre away from the TV set, the bright, colourful glare of the screen saturating my vision. The anchorman on the Arabic, government-sanctioned channel conventionally began the show with news reels of official visits and royal receptions of world dignitaries before reporting on Palestine and the Israeli conflict, both of which had become tediously repetitive and of little significance to the everyman. But that night he began the programme with news of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in Washington. This signified and forewarned me that these attacks were going to have a substantial, prolonged impact on our lives, and, in retrospect, my future.

I had heard that some in the Middle East had rejoiced and celebrated in the streets, dancing and distributing candy to children; that they felt America had gotten her comeuppance and that the attacks had been in a perverse way, an act of justice for all the catastrophes America had wrought upon Arabs and Muslims. As well as for her continued and unwavering support for Israel. Even though this news had never been confirmed, I had thought that anyone who would celebrate the deaths of innocent people in a terrorist attack - no matter where or how justified it would seem considering the overall circumstances - would be disgracefully mistaken and no better than those who had committed such crimes.

I had rebuked the terrorist attacks and those behind them for the amount of bloodshed, for the astounding number of innocent victims burned and buried in the rubble of the Twin Towers, for the disastrous consequences that were about to befall Arabs and Muslims first and foremost, but I had rebuked them mostly for jeopardising my own dream of moving to the land of the free. I had just graduated from high school two months before 9/11 and had been filling out enrolment applications for universities in the US. I had feared that my dream of following in the steps of my youngest uncle to graduate from an American college would be forfeit. My anxiety was ultimately unfounded, as I received a letter two months subsequent to 9/11 from the University of South Carolina that had begun with: “we are pleased to inform you that...”. My wish had been granted. Whenever I remembered my time in the US, I wondered if it might have been better for me if this wish hadn’t been granted.

My mind returned to the present. In the parking lot, the backdoor of a car swung open, and a man surfaced with a lumpy satchel under his arm. He waved his right hand when he neared my car, then he opened the door and sat in the passenger seat.

“What exactly are you looking for?” he enquired.

“I want a gun; one that is accurate and easy to use,” I answered with concision.

“I’ve got just the one. That’s a Desert Eagle.”

“How many bullets does it have in its magazine?” I asked, revealing my lack of knowledge.

“Nine .357 Magnum bullets. .357 is the bullet diameter,” implicating that he knew, that I knew nothing about guns.

“A strong one, this pistol. Renowned for its stopping power,” I wanted to ask him what that meant but I didn’t.

“It’s quite heavy. And I’d imagine this one would cause a ruckus when fired.”

“All guns do that, bro. Here’s one that is a bit lighter. This is a Marakov. Although it’s older, it’s much lighter than the Desert Eagle and very straight-forward.”

As I held it in my hand, I felt by its weight and density that it was manufactured long before I was born. I thought that this smuggler could be trying to swindle me into buying a piece of junk, now that he was aware of my ignorance when it came to firearms. I asked him what else he had.

“Trust me, it works, and it’s cheaper. You can bring it back if it doesn’t,” seemingly desperate to offload this pistol from his inventory. I said I wanted something more reliable.

“That’s a Beretta M9; heavier than the Marakov but quite new and more reliable. That’s the pistol the US army uses in Afghanistan and Iraq. When it comes to war, leave it to the Americans to know what’s reliable and what’s not,” he smirkingly remarked. With my hand wrapped around the grip of that Beretta, I tested its balance and straightened my arm while aiming at nothing in particular outside my car. I said that I liked it and asked him to name his price. He said that twenty hundred riyals would be

enough to cover the pistol and two boxes of bullets. Without haggling, I paid the dealer and went home.

The rest of the night passed as usual: I stood vigil at home. I knew that what I was going to do required planning. I was aware of the gravity of my intent, and the consequences if I pursued every step of my plan. I made a mental list of all the things I needed to get. The first on that list were bottles and cans, lots of bottles and cans. The second item was a shovel.

I took the day off as I spent the morning rummaging through the empty plot of land closest to home. I filled up a bag of recycling and drove out to the desert to practice my shooting. It wasn't the first time I had fired a gun, but it had been some time since my dad had let me practice with his. The first magazine was emptied without a single bullet hitting a bottle. My shooting improved markedly in the second round, along with my confidence.

I got home late in the afternoon; Danah and Haneen were at the dinner table, about to have lunch. Danah jumped to her feet and ran towards me with open arms; I was slow to react to her exuberant demonstration of affection and she ended up hugging my midsection with her tiny hands around the back of my thighs. I tussled her black hair and she looked up at me with piercingly enquiring eyes, sensing something was amiss. She seemed disappointed as she probably hoped that I would hoist her up in the air before giving her a proper hug and kiss. Haneen marched to the kitchen without even looking at me and came back with a plate of white rice and chicken that she had set aside for me, after having given up hope of my being at home for lunch. I had no appetite, but wanted to show my wife that I still cared, and appreciated her domestic efforts. I sat

down and began to force-feed myself. Even though there was nothing wrong with the rice, I knew Haneen could do better. The first couple of bites went down easily, and for a moment I forgot that I had forced myself to sit down and share this meal with my family. Then I remembered what I had planned, and I couldn't help but put down the spoon.

I sat there watching Danah play with her food and Haneen eat from her plate, with a fixed gaze on her meal, unwavering from her plate. The thought that this lunch could be the final meal I would ever share with them if anything went awry nauseated me. I walked to the toilet and let the cold faucet water run over my hands. Staring at my face in the mirror, I revisited the line of thought I had before I left the dinner table and realised that even if everything went as planned, all the variables in the equation would change things forever; nothing would ever be the same. *There is no going back if I execute this plan.* This was the last thing I said to myself before I threw up.

I was too anxious even for a short nap. I also noticed that I went to the toilet more often; perhaps because the only thing I could hold down in my stomach was water. I stayed in the master bedroom surfing crime watch websites and repetitively running through my strategy, until Haneen came in at midnight. I interpreted this as the signal for me to go downstairs and begin my watch, which could very well be my last.

The time was 4:10 am. I was in my sedan around fifty metres away from the suspect's house; the gun tucked neatly between the driver's seat and the centre console. My grip around the steering wheel felt loose and clammy; I could see my hands slowly slipping down and further away from each other. The first call to dawn prayer had already been sounded and only a couple of men issued forth from their homes towards

the mosque. Then this man, the one, emerged from the door of his villa, swivelled and double locked it; the keys jingling audibly in his jittery hands. He then began striding towards the mosque. He was wearing a *thobe* and a red-checked *kufya* wrapped around his head; his black bushy beard visibly protruding. I turned on the ignition, shifted the gear to drive, eased the car slowly and deftly out of the sidewalk parking, and drove towards the mosque with my right foot off the accelerator pedal and the headlight signals on low beam, waiting for him to cross the street and hoping no one would interrupt this highly anticipated moment.

He was less than fifteen metres away from me when he was about to cross and I revved the engine a little. The grunting sound of the engine captured his attention. He was five metres closer when he resumed walking towards the mosque. I flashed my headlights and he turned and stood, waiting for me to drive past, mistaking the flashing lights as a cautioning indicator for him not to cross the street. When he was standing right next to the passenger door, I hit the brakes, rolled down the window, and greeted him. When he ducked to see my face, I had the gun aimed right at his chest. He crouched in a feline manner and tried to make a run for it, but all he could was grunt before I plugged two bullets in his chest. The ringing clank of the bullet cartridges hitting the asphalt like little bells, the click of the trigger before the second shot, and the guttural yelps of the perpetrator were all muffled by the resounding boom of the gunshots.

I opened the trunk - now furnished with a thick blue tarpaulin - and dragged his body hurriedly to the back of my car; my ears ringing deafeningly. As I stood next to the open trunk of my car, trying to catch my breath, I took a glimpse at the perpetrator. A portrait of peril as a young man; this menace to society looked so frail, so limp, so utterly harmless that for an instance I felt guilty for what I had just done, for a minuscule,

fleeting moment, and wondered if this was how Cain felt after killing his brother. Blood was gushing profusely out of the bullet holes and a pair of amorphous red blotches were growing in size over the white canvas of his *thobe* like sprouting asymmetrical scarlet roses competing with each other for sunlight.

I hunched over his head, shoved my hands deep under his armpits with my fingers around his chest, and heaved him up. I was surprised by how gaunt he was: his chest was scant of muscle and I could feel his ribs protruding against his skin under the pressure of my fingers. I could've taken him down right there and then that night when he had attempted to run me over, if I hadn't been afraid that he would overpower me.

I stood now between his body and the open trunk with my straining arms hoisting his limpid figure up, his flailing arms directing my attention to the two scarlet roses that began seeping down and onto the street. The blood streamed in thin trickles around the gravel in the pavement. My left hand felt wet and sticky, clammy than my right, and I could feel his aberrantly pulsating heart, its pulse growing weaker and weaker with every passing second, a homing beacon that was soon to cease its distress signal. With great difficulty, I dumped the corpse face down into the trunk, wrapping the blue tarp haphazardly around it, then got into the driver's seat and sped out of the neighbourhood. In the rearview mirror, I could see what seemed to be the plump frame of Basha trudging his way to the mosque. I wondered if he recognised my car.

I took the relatively desolate north highway and kept driving - under the speed limit so as not to arouse any suspicions - until I reached the northern limits of the city. Aside from a caravan of freight trucks making the rounds between warehouses and retail stores, and the graveyard shift commuters who zipped past me in what felt like light

speed, there was no one else. With my clammy hands at ten and two, my back rigid and pushing against the seat, and my seat belt laterally crossing my torso, I was the model driver for forty-five minutes. When the great expanse of the capital with all of its malls and skyscrapers lay south of me, I freed myself from the constricting confines of the seat belt and diverged from the interstate highway into the desert. The balance between the artificial, orange-hued luminosity of the city and the darkness of the sky seemed to tip the horizon the further I drove into the desert. A row of sand dunes stood far in the distance, clad in darkness, like the vanguards of a terrifying army warding me off their realm.

I delved as far away from prying eyes as I could while trying to avoid getting my sedan stuck in sand, navigating my way painstakingly towards firmer ground. I pulled over when I found a spot surrounded by dunes and at a reasonable distance away from camping sites and grazing livestock. I got back into my car and started driving back to town when I remembered that the second item on my list hadn't been obtained: the shovel. I bought one from the first camping equipment store I saw and I chucked it casually into the backseat before I headed out into the desert again, diligently searching for the route that would take me to that ideal and imminent resting place of one deadly psycho: Ibrahim Al-Yassary.

The sky was turning to a paler shade of blue and the stars that would have been visible an hour ago had vanished from the panoramic view of the windshield. It was as if the night sky itself was indignant and reproachful, and had turned its back to me. I was running out of time and lost. The dark blue sky had grown even paler. I drove faster, searching for that spot, and with every turn round a sand dune my hopes of reaching it soared before they plummeted. I grew desperate and began to panic. Then, my sedan

inexplicably slowed down before it reached a complete stop, even though my foot was on the gas pedal and I could hear the engine purring loudly. I got out of my car to find the rear tires engulfed by sand. I grabbed my shovel and began digging around them but even after I removed all the sand around the tires, I still couldn't drive the car out of the sandpit, as the rotational motion of the tires thrust the sand back, re-lodging them.

It was dangerously close to sunrise now. In sheer panic, I began to dig a hole several metres behind the car. I dug as deep as I could, but no hole was deep enough for what I wanted to conceal in it. Also, it seemed that whenever I heaped a shovelful of sand aside, more of it would fall back into the hole, maintaining the silky surface of the terrain. Even the very terrain of this land was resistant to change; obstructing my actions in condemnation. I was sweating and panting as I dug nervously into that seemingly ever-shrinking pit. It seemed as futile as pouring water out of a sinking boat with a hole-riddled bucket. Time was speedily passing by, and I didn't realise it until the sun was peeking at me between two gargantuan sand dunes that looked like a mammoth pair of seated headless camels.

The body, shrouded in a stiff, crimson-bloodied *thobe*, thudded as it hit the bottom of that sandy grave, then it began to submerge under the swarms of minuscule grains of sand, shimmering under the sunlight. I sat on my knees as I shovelled and heaped sand with my arms into that shallow pit. My lower back muscles were tightening, and it felt as though an anaconda were squeezing my midriff. I swept another thick coat of sweat off my forehead and squinted. In the distance, I saw a camel herder trudging towards me. Strangely, instead of panicking, I lowered my gaze back to the grave as I - by way of evening its surface with the ground, tapped firmly on it with my shovel. I grabbed a full gallon of water that I had forgotten to take out of my car since our last family

camping trip, and emptied its contents on the grave. I thought the water would hold the sand together and make for a firmer patch of sand, congealing the soil on top of the grave into a more compact seal. I could also disguise it as the designated spot for water usage in a make believe one-man camp if the camel herder's curiosity was piqued.

After that, I stood next to my sedan, looking helpless with a smile on my face that invited assistance. But that smile was concealed behind my *kufiya* as I wrapped it tightly around my face and head; leaving only an aperture around my eyes, so as to make it impossible for him to identify me if he ended up discovering the true intent of this "camping trip".

"Got stuck last night, huh?" said the Sudanese herder, stating the obvious.

"Yeah, maybe with a nudge or two, you can help me out of here."

"But you shouldn't drive in this direction any farther. This route will only get trickier the deeper you go. I think you should drive back to the highway and look for another route in."

I concurred with his advice, albeit for a wholly different reason. He dug around the rear tires and shoved two small planks of wood he had in his makeshift backpack underneath the rear tires before giving me the order to drive in reverse. I waved my right hand as a "thank you" for his help as I backtracked to the highway. I drove home, feeling emancipated and unburdened as I inhaled and exhaled deeply. My lungs were replenished by the crisp, unpolluted early morning air as it coursed through my throat. I thought I wouldn't have felt this way if what I had done was wrong. This uplifting and reinvigorating sensation was recompense for the night's deed and nothing justified my conduct more, than that long unheard siren-call in my head, beckoning me to bed. As I entered my house my eyelids became too heavy for me to keep unfurled.

Early in the evening that day, I woke up on my stomach splayed on the sofa in the living room, where I thought I should lie down and wait for Haneen and Danah to wake. The lights were dimmed - Haneen must've found me asleep and thought it best to stay with Danah upstairs so I wouldn't be disturbed. Grains of sand filled the valleys of fabric in the sofa's surface, under the weight and contours of my half-conscious body. The dry traces of a salivary river that ran out on the sofa were still visible. The warm, playful, tantalising chatter of Haneen and Danah upstairs was audible. I wished I could instantly be transported to them, without disrupting their perfect harmony. I longed to just see their eyes, see through their eyes, hear their voices, smell their scent, touch their skin, kiss their lips, without them being able to acknowledge my existence or reciprocate my affection.

I used to play a game with Danah where I would try to kiss her eyes, literally kiss her olive-black eyes, and I would embrace her in my lap and insist she keep her eyes open so I could kiss them. But every time I got my lips close to one of her eyes, she would instinctively shut them and sweetly giggle while shrugging her shoulders and I would end up planting kisses on her eyelids and eyebrows, and she would keep giggling and look at me invitingly, to ask her again to keep her eyes open so I could kiss them.

I felt refreshed. I had finally experienced respite, after months of anguish, anxiety and aggravation. My formerly tormented mind was at ease, and I rediscovered that I had an appetite, first and foremost for food. I rummaged the kitchen for whatever leftovers that were in the oven before I raided the refrigerator.

“Had enough sleep?” Haneen asked. She must've heard the clatter of plates and pots in the kitchen. “I thought you'd even sleep through the night. You haven't slept like

that ever since that suspect was released. Feeling better?” she enquired, with great relief in her voice.

“Now that you are here, darling, definitely!” I answered with a wide smile and a mouth full of food.

“Well, whatever you were doing last night, keep doing it if that’s what it’s going to take for you to sleep like just now.” She must’ve been too delighted to express any curiosity about where I had been the night before. I knew she’d change her mind if she had known what I actually had done last night.

It was close to sunset when I walked outside and checked the trunk of my car. There were coagulating pools of fetid blood on the blue tarpaulin. I tried to fold the tarp over, but some of the pools of congealed blood fractured into liquid streams and spilled over into the black interior of the trunk. I continued folding the tarp over then I shoved it into a black bag and flung it inside the house. The stench was so unbearably pervasive that I had to wrap my *kufiya* around my face while I drove the car to the nearest carwash. I told the Indian employee that sheep’s blood had spilled inside the trunk and asked him, in an imperious tone, to do his best to clean up the mess. I then kept watch not far away from the car as he got on with his job.

I became absorbed while keeping watch in the memory of what I had done and how it had all unfolded. I was savouring every single moment of it and revelled in my meticulous wariness, the precision with which I had exacted justice. Then it struck me that even though the camel herder didn’t get a good look at me, he could still see my car’s number plate, which meant it all could be tracked to me. Anxiety was rearing its head again.

I began to think that I could sell the car and be done with it, but that would've solved nothing because the car, if identified as the murderer's vehicle, could still be traced to me in the car's ownership log. I then knew that I had to get rid of the car without having any legal records that would indicate the time and date of the sale. I thought I could burn the car somewhere in the desert, but the blaze and smoke of the fire would certainly attract attention. I decided to drive my car off a ridge, into a deep canyon infamous for being the destination of choice for numerous car-jacking aficionados, and for its accumulation of rainfall during the winter season. Then my next move would be to file a grand theft auto report at the police station. The cloud of panic hovering in my mind's horizon diminished as I felt a cool breeze uplifting my spirit; I knew what I had to do and how it felt to have a purpose.

The Indian worker did such a meticulous job that I felt sorry that the car was soon to become the latest addition to a heap of junk and rusting metal at the bottom of the canyon. I arrived at the canyon an hour after leaving the carwash, but I had to wait for a couple of hours by the side of the highway for traffic to subside before I took the gravelly route to the canyon's ridge. I parked my car just off the ridge late after midnight. The grandeur of the canyon from that panoramic vantage point consumed me with competing emotions of serenity and nihilism, but the scene grew to be repulsively chilling. From the edge of that cliff, the upper strata of rocky canyon were illuminated by the highway lampposts and the dense clump of pollution that smothered the city. Yet, the deeper one gazed at the bottom of the rocky canyon, the darker it was, like a deep gruesome wound encrusted with layers of scar tissue of varying shades of blood ranging from pale pink at the fringes, to rusty black at the centre of the wound. I couldn't see what lay in the bowels of that canyon but I knew there was more than enough space for my sedan.

I sat in the driver's seat for a while examining the soundness of this move. Though I knew it had to be done, it felt wrong to dispose of my car in this manner. In fact, it felt wrong to dispose of my car in any manner. I felt like I was betraying a loyal companion, a brother-in-arms. I stepped out of the car; the gear on neutral and the hand brake on, and grabbed a huge rock. Then, as a precautionary measure, I wiped the steering wheel, the gear, the door latch, and every other part of the car that I thought had my fingerprints on it. I placed the rock on the gas pedal, took off the hand brake, and put the gear in drive before I gazed at my car while it drifted gently and slowly towards the edge of the cliff, the engine humming softly; little rocks and pebbles crushed under the immensity of its weight.

The vehicle got stuck after the front tires rolled off the ridge. It looked like a crouching dog that was being dragged against its will. The front tires kept spinning in the air; the engine still humming. The momentum was there yet the car was going nowhere. With the rear half of the car on the edge of the cliff and the other half teetering over it; my car was fixed, in limbo, between its bright past and its dark future. For a moment, I felt as if I were back at the funeral of that old neighbour. Then with great effort, I pushed the rear half over the cliff. The humming of the engine persisted for a second then was abruptly interrupted by the clamour of the car clattering and crashing against the boulders and scree of the canyon. It echoed like the low pitched jingling of an oversized set of keys in the pocket of a giant before it tumbled to the bottom of the deep gorge. My eyesight couldn't penetrate the darkness of the pit but I could picture a white hunk of metal damaged and twisted beyond recognition on the hillside of a heap of older totalled cars at the canyon's base. As my car plummeted and clanged against the edges of the cliff, I was bathed in a cool liberating sensation that started at my face and fingers

and dissipated at my underarms, before it was - just like that mangled piece of evidence resting at the bottom of the canyon - lost forever.

The possibility of someone hearing the jarring racket of the crash didn't worry me, because I thought that even if someone were to hear such a loud noise, it was too dark and too far for anyone to see me flee the crime scene. I was worried though, that the car might explode upon its final collision into a huge, beckoning ball of fire. Thankfully, that didn't happen. It took me fifteen minutes to walk back to the highway. I felt the urgency to jog but had to restrain myself as I thought this would attract attention. I stood by the highway waiting for a cab to drive by. As I stood by the roadside, a rush of panic engulfed me and I wanted to run, or at least cross the road; I wanted to do anything but stand still and sweaty next to the gravelly route leading to the cliff. I walked on the sidewalk and kept turning around and checking the incoming traffic behind me for any available taxis.

After a couple of minutes, a metropolitan bus stopped when I hailed the driver. It was filled with cheap foreign labourers and, aside from the driver, I was the only Saudi on board. The metal skeletons of some of the chairs were visible and the windows were tinged with dirt and soot. The passengers looked weary and with the exception of a handful couples at the back of the bus; they kept to themselves. I followed suit.

The last time I had been on a bus this size was when I had been transferred to a new prison designated for illegal immigrants in Alabama. I was woken at two in the morning and ordered to march to the discharge section of the jail. I had to spend the rest of the night in a large cell filled with Latin Americans before the guards shackled every single one of us with handcuffs and chains around our hips and feet. I desperately

needed to urinate but in a cell overflowing with inmates, my timidity made me think I could endure it until we made it to our next destination. After the bus had begun its progress, the guards told us that we were on our way to Alabama and that it would take four hours to get there. That was when I started to panic.

I held it for as long as I could before I had asked the guard to stop the bus so I could urinate.

“There is a toilet back there,” he signalled with his head to the back of the bus. I stood there, my knees trembling, the bus bumping up and down against the surface of the interstate, unable to avert my eyes from the rusty shackles around my unsteady hands and hips. I just couldn’t go. My bladder was on the cusp of exploding. I then walked back to the guard and told him that I needed to move my bowels in an attempt to get him to remove the shackles. I wanted to momentarily experience the frail illusion of peace and privacy whilst urinating sitting down.

“Not my problem. Find a way.”

“How can I find a way? I can’t even take my pants down.”

“I am not taking off these shackles. Back to your seat!”

I returned to my seat wondering how long I could take it, my bladder so full that I felt immense internal pressure. I imagined a stream of urine incontinently passed; my pants soaked in it, the shackles around my ankles dripping with it, the edge of the seat drenched, and the bus filled with the rancid scent of piss. I had imagined that the ill-tempered guard would be enraged by this. I partially wanted to consummate this faux pas, solely to make this trip as uncomfortable for him as it was for me. I had spent the rest of the time on the way to Alabama with my eyes closed, breathing slowly and praying to God not to disgrace me in front of strangers.

Calm and collected at present, sitting in the reception hall of the police station close to my suburb, I wondered how often these memories from my time in the Mecklenburg County Jail had sprung into my mind lately. It was natural to return to the memory of the admission centre of a county jail when sitting in the reception hall of another jail, but to recall the episodes of that experience when on a bus or lying in bed next to my wife called for interior investigation, if not worry. But before I could speculate on the reasons of why memories of my time in jail in the US had been on the forefront of my mind, a deputy called me into the office of the captain on shift that night. He sat next to me with a black ledger open and the captain asked me about the last time I had driven the car. I lied and they either genuinely or feigned to believe me. It wouldn't have made a difference either way; the captain, the deputy writing the report and I, all knew my "stolen" car would never be found. I asked for a document stating that I had indeed reported the theft of my car. The officer in charge of this fictional case did not even bother to assuage my concern, or even falsely promise that the culprits would be arrested and my car retrieved. We both knew that this would not happen, and for once we both were comfortable with how this bureaucracy functioned.

I arrived home just after dawn. I instantly grabbed the black bag, tied it shut, and set it on fire in the empty plot of land nearby. The bloody blue tarp inside the plastic bag collapsed in slim ashen-edged black layers. The smoke was so black, like that of burning tires, or the heart of the man who was shrouded in the tarp the night before last. I gazed into the fire, inhaling the smoky elation imbuing the air; another piece of the bloody puzzle burned into oblivion.

When I walked inside the house, I found Haneen still awake and sitting on the sofa; head between her hands, the black streams of her hair cascading between her fingers and obscuring her forehead. When she raised her face so her eyes could meet mine, I saw a face ravaged by agitation and doubt.

“Where have you been?” she enquired without a single trace of relief laced in the tone of her voice.

“The car was stolen. I was at the police station.”

“I saw what was in the black bag outside in the corner. What did you do?”

I stood there, staring directly into her eyes. I knew there was nothing I could say to her to ease her mind; nothing I could say to eradicate her suspicions. What was done was done; what was seen was seen, and there was nothing to be said. I kept my mouth shut, walked to the couch, and just lay there staring at the ceiling. She now stood with her arms crossed, glaring at me, awaiting an answer while holding her defensive slender creamy-white arms up across her bust, a pair of shields with which to parry away my incoming barrage of lies. There was a glint in her eyes when she lost hope of hearing a plausible explanation from me. I thought at that moment any rationale would suffice, any explanation would be welcome and firmly embraced, even a clearly fictitious one. Her shields were down. But I denied her even that.

After Haneen left the living room, I thought of how funny it was that sometimes to lie would be better than to say nothing; I thought that at least lying would exhibit some effort on the liar’s part to preserve what he feared to lose. But that was not going to happen here; I had lost Haneen long before that night.

I lay on the couch before slipping into sleep. When I woke in the afternoon, the living room was flooded with sunshine. I thought I heard the ebullient giggle of Danah reverberating upstairs, beckoning me to come, but she wasn't there when I walked into her room. Her room looked tidy, as if Haneen had just finished cleaning it up and placing every single doll in its designated place. I noticed that a couple of dolls - Danah's favourites - were missing and I assumed that she must've taken them to our master bedroom. But when I checked there, Danah and Haneen were nowhere to be seen. A surge of trepidation was aroused in me. Then I noticed the absence of two suitcases that used to be in our wardrobe. Triggered by that absence, a downward spiralling vortex materialised in my spine as its axis dragged all my internal organs into its void. I had lost everything, everything but my righteous retribution. I grabbed my laptop, walked disconsolately back to the couch, turned on the TV, and lay there until I dozed off again.

A fortnight after Haneen had left, the TV in the living room was still on. The TV was always on. All windows in the house were closed shut, the fridge empty, soiled *thobes* flung over chair backs, and particles of dust layered all the shelves and tables in the house. I hadn't been reflecting on my detainment in the US as often since Haneen had left, or perhaps because the perpetrator had met his deserved end at my hands. I couldn't ascertain which was the legitimate reason behind the decline of my reflections, but there was no doubt in my mind that the death of that psycho was a major factor. Or, it could have been the sense of devastating loss.

I still thought of the Ethiopian gangs running wild in the southern suburbs of the capital, I still thought of my neighbour's kid and the paedophile truck driver, but not the

deranged man who came so close to running over my Danah. He had posed more of an imminent threat to myself and those I cared about. And he was no longer a threat.

Before and after the perpetrator's attempted fatal assault, menace pervaded every environment; behind every street corner and below every step. But perhaps my amplified acknowledgment of its presence, my heightened attention to its murky existence, was exacerbated by its manifestation in the form of a deranged man hell-bent on running over my family, and in the escalating occurrences of my jail-time recollections. I could be wrong and this reasoning could be just a vain attempt to decipher this phenomenon to myself and to validate my actions, but this was the best theory I was capable of concocting.

Slouched over my laptop, one particular crime report on one of the crime watch websites caught my eye. It talked about a man who was arrested for attempting to run over a crowd in a nearby neighbourhood. The report said the perpetrator failed to escape the scene of the crime after the engine of his SUV sustained critical damage, as he had missed his targets and collided into a parked car instead. The crowd took him down before the cops made it to the scene and arrested the criminal who was subsequently revealed to be wanted for many charges of attempted vehicular manslaughter.

I didn't have anything to eat that morning, yet I still felt like I was about to throw up. I felt like the whole room was spinning around me so fast that the different colours of all the pieces of furniture; some bright and some pastel, were merging into the background colour of the walls; the numerous dirty white *thobes* hovering in the air and circling closer to me like mocking white wraiths.

I read the report several times trying to find clues hinting at the possibility that this man was not the one who tried to run Danah and I over. I couldn't believe that I was wrong all along; that I had taken down the wrong guy; that perhaps my vigilante actions had been a miscarriage of justice. Was there a savage beast that lay deep within me; dormant in the shadows of my dark heart, waiting for a small pebble to come loose from a stone wall and fall, echoing deep in the catacombs of my consciousness, awakening this beast in the process? To suggest that I may have murdered and buried an innocent person was beyond my comprehension, let alone my capacity to articulate. I couldn't accept this. There had to be another explanation.

Then it came to me - it was possible that there was more than one perpetrator trying to seriously injure or even kill people with their vehicles. Just because this one was caught did not mean he was the only one, and it certainly did not mean that the corpse buried deep out in the desert belonged to an innocent man. I knew that the man behind the wheels that eventful night was the sick animal I had shot. I couldn't prove it and neither could the cops but I was certain it was him. I had eradicated a legitimate threat to society, a pernicious element that caused serious harm to the innocent; a deranged man who saw no objection in running over children and adults. Only thanks to the lethargic and careless nature of incompetent law enforcers was he allowed to roam the streets, hunting for prey. Although he hadn't actually killed anyone during his rampages, it was an inevitability. It was clear that he was going to. I had only done what those "men of the law" should have done. The only distinction between the police and I were an olive-green uniform, gaudy yellow stripes and a gold badge, meaningless and trivial in the broader scheme, if those who don such a wardrobe are bereft of their sanctioned purpose.

On my way outside I found the garage door was blocked. The entire road had turned into a street party with teenagers and young men standing outside my neighbour's house kicking cigarette butts and greeting others into the house. Initially fazed by the scene, a man in his thirties walked briskly towards me with car keys in hand and apologised for blocking my garage with his car. I told him there was no need for an apology and asked him what was going on. He said that my neighbour's son had died the night before and that this was his funeral. I instinctively offered him my condolences and prayed to God to forgive the young boy.

“Car accident?” I asked, the shock rendering me incapable of formulating a full question.

“No. He was found dead in his room.”

For some reason, I felt that an essential part of the story was intentionally left missing, provoking my curiosity. I drove my new SUV towards the mosque for afternoon prayer. Soon after I entered, multitudes of mourners swarmed the mosque and for the first time in a long while, Saudis constituted the majority of the congregants in that tiny sweat sock-scented place of worship.

I joined the flock of mourners in their march back to my neighbour's house. The teenager's father, whom I had met only once or twice since moving into the area, was absent - probably in Europe or China on one of his endless business trips - and in his stead at the centre of the hall, stood the kid's paternal grandfather and senior uncle from his mother's side. In a hall buzzing with mourners repeating the same words of condolence and prayer, I felt as I followed suit, that the recurrence of these condolences must've diminished their authenticity. I felt the words, as they issued from my lips, were received as equally empty and insincere.

I fled the guest hall right after I shook the hand of the last relative sitting next to the door. I was in no mood to suffer through the unease of yet another funeral. I was still inquisitive about how the teen's death had occurred. There were three young men smoking across the street from my neighbour's house in the shade next to my garage door, talking about the deceased. They were about to move away from the door but I told them to make themselves comfortable before I unlocked the gate. I didn't go inside. Instead, I stood behind the walls eavesdropping on these idle youths' surmises.

"My sister says his mom found him hanging from the ceiling fan in his bedroom when she walked in to wake him up for school," reported the first.

"Imagine the shock on her face, his poor mom, to find her son hanging from the ceiling fan with a pool of urine under him. She must've passed out."

"Why did he do it though? Was he mentally sick or something?" asked the first.

"I knew him at school. He wasn't crazy or anything. He always looked depressed and kept to himself, but he wasn't crazy."

"I heard rumours that he was seen by some of his schoolmates having sex with some guy. I've heard that he was blackmailed by this guy into having sex with him and that this pimp even peddled him to his other sick friends," said the second.

"Why didn't he go to the school counsellor to talk about this? Why didn't he go to the cops?"

"Would you, if you were being blackmailed? He probably couldn't live with the shame of it all. Maybe whatever that guy was holding against him was too incriminating. Maybe it was all too much for him and he thought that death was the easiest way out of this scandal."

Cigarette butts were flicked to the ground after the sound of raspy long drags. Voicing disapproval of the way they were discarded, the butts made the faintest taps as they hit the black asphalt of the street and the gravelly swish of their feet were the young smokers' response to the sound, as the picayune, fiery white stubs were crushed into extinction under the grinding soles of heartless sandals.

A vivid cinematic stream, picturing the kid coming out of that sexual predator's truck at dawn that night, walking alone to school with his head held down, or being sexually molested inside the truck by that paedophile, overwhelmed me. He wasn't even fifteen when he fell prey to a human bereft of moral code; a deviant who had no qualms about coercing a teenager into being his sex toy. He probably was in possession of damaging photographs or a videotape of the kid in sexually compromising positions and threatened to go public. Of course the teen couldn't bring himself to tell his parents about it and risk defaming his family name. He knew what kind of society he inhabited. A society where victims of sexual assault are ostracised if they dare to come forward, leaving them with only one course of socially acceptable action: to silently choke to death on their anguish and their misplaced feelings of guilt. The blood of that kid was not only on the paedophile's hands.

The second and final call to sunset prayer jolted me out of my rumination as the fading remnants of daylight began their retreat towards the horizon. Mourners were still coming and going at my neighbour's house. Small clusters of young men and teenagers were still standing around the street before they were led by elderly and middle-aged standard-bearers towards the mosque. I drove in great haste, indifferent to the pedestrians marching on the edges of the street towards the musty mosque.

Before I set foot inside this place of worship, I remembered that I needed to perform my ablutions. I had always dreaded using public restrooms because they were always in a disgusting condition: poorly maintained, excessively overused. To me, one could only come out of them dirtier and psychologically less prepared to pray than prior to entering them. The restrooms of this mosque were no exception. The white ceramic walls were covered with gunk and soot and the white-tiled floor was a collation of countless brown blotches with accumulations of sand surrounding them, concealing the off-white grout between the white tiles under a layer of rusty mud.

With the hem of my *thobe* in my hand and at hip level, I navigated my way around the little bogs towards the stalls; the sound of thousands of indiscernible stray sand crystals crushed against the floor tiles was audibly jarring. The first couple of stalls were occupied and with only the tip of my finger I tentatively pushed the door of the third stall open. Water was dripping from the hose that hung haphazardly on its hook, faecal matter smeared the insides of the squat toilet seat; a parting gift from the last person to use that stall. Ventilation fans whirred laboriously.

The stall reminded me of the shower stalls in Pod C at the Mecklenburg County Jail. A couple days after my admission, I had come to realise the naïveté of my thinking that release from captivity would be obtained in a matter of days. I had begun to smell as bad as that old homeless man with whom I had been processed. Thanks to pop culture, I was familiar with the horrific rape-related prison clichés prior to my incarceration. The presence of a correctional officer inside the Pod around-the-clock and the fact that the showers were partitioned with painted planks both failed to ease my anxiety. To make matters worse, I had gotten the impression that the jail's policy concerning rape and sexual misconduct had not exactly been one of zero tolerance; that inmates sexually

assaulting others had been one of the very few transgressions that correctional officers were willing to overlook.

Officially, sexual assault was a serious breach of the inmate codes of conduct, a punishable offence if proven. Unofficially, however, it had been considered an inevitable occurrence; frowned upon yet tolerated by correctional officers; a way for stronger inmates to vent their sexual frustration and project a façade of dominance. And why would the correctional officers care if the stronger inmates sexually abused the weaker? To them, the inmates were regarded as subhuman, despite the differing degrees of the seriousness of their crimes, regardless of their guilt. All inmates were equal under the correctional facility's distribution of apathy and maltreatment; all inmates underwent their fair share of abuse.

As a Saudi detainee on whom Homeland Department agents were running a security check to verify if I had any ties to clandestine terrorist groups; I was aware certain officers would not frown, but experience great relish, if an inmate had exacted vengeance on an alleged terrorist by means of forcible sexual penetration. I had thought of ways to diminish the risk involved in taking a shower, precautions to make me feel more secure. My first safeguard had been to take showers with underwear on, as if that flimsy piece of fabric were a middle-aged chastity belt that no man, no matter how powerful, could tear away from my body.

The second precaution had been less absurd and based on valid observations. After studying the number of the inmates using the showers during the three fixed recreation periods afforded to all inmates at Mecklenburg, I had reached the conclusion that the chances of getting sexually assaulted were at their lowest during the midday

recreation period. The increased number of correctional officers present inside the Pod during that time of day made it harder for inmates to commit an offence of any kind without being caught, as well as the dearth of inmates using the showers during this period. Almost half of the inmates - particularly the elderly and the middle-aged - at Pod C had cultivated the habit of showering during the first recreation period early in the morning. The young adults - those who had never held a job in their lives prior to their incarceration and spent recreation periods working out and playing basketball - would hit the showers during the evening recreation period prior to lights out.

Even though these two preventative measures had seemed to actually work, all the showers I had taken during my sixty-five day-long stint had felt like a chore, performed efficiently and methodically. There was no moment of respite, no opportunity to uninhibitedly let my guard down; to disconnect from the reality around me and close my eyes, allowing my cognitive faculties to run amuck in the uncharted jungles of my mind. These were the mental rituals I traditionally associated with my ablutions, as well as searching for picturesque memories, amusing reflections and recollections of people who had once cared about me, in the hope of revitalisation, despite the distressing and demoralising nature of my surroundings.

At the mosque, water was streaming profusely from the faucet and small splashes were splattering off my hands and landing on the outer rim of the sink, when I heard the chatter of kids outside. My stare was rigidly set on what was in front of me but my mind was elsewhere. I was so engrossed in my bleak reminiscences that I completely missed sunset prayer.

I didn't feel like driving home afterwards and had an inexplicable urge to drive to the burial sight of the deranged criminal out in the desert. For some reason, I wanted to go there and see if his sandy grave was still as I had left it. I wanted to drive to that unmarked burial site; sit by it, keep watch over it; hold a kind of vigil until I could fall asleep. I imagined myself excavating the site and exhuming whatever remained of him. Would I find a breaded skeleton dressed in a rusty *thobe*, with long fingernails and skin as ashy and dark as that of a mummy? Or would I find nothing at all? Neither possibility invigorated me, and the fact that it was close to impossible to locate the burial site caused me great chagrin.

I drove around the neighbourhood, exploring every nook and cranny, tracking and backtracking, like a lab rat in a maze, only I wasn't looking for anything in particular. I drove past my house a couple of times. Mourners were still coming and going from my neighbour's house, a seeming beehive. The sickening image of the teen at one of the lowest points of his life sprang to mind and I felt guilt for not interfering, for not preventing the abuse my neighbour's son was subjected to when I had the chance. I could've talked to his father, I could've talked to him, I could've confronted that sick paedophile extortionist, but I didn't. I let it all happen, right in front of my eyes, right on my watch. For sixty-five days, I had been constantly tormented by the thought of being a victim of sexual assault when imprisoned, and now when it had happened to someone across the street from me, to my neighbour, I hadn't batted an eyelid. Then I had the audacity to attend his funeral. I was as complicit in this teen's death as his family was. In fact, I was even more so; at least his parents were unaware of what their only son had been going through.

I, on the other hand, knew. My silence implicated me as an accomplice in the pedophile's heinous crimes against this boy. I was equally guilty. I felt as if I had just swallowed my own heart. I was choking on a masticated wet lump of arteries and muscle as it slithered through my oesophagus under the weight of my shame, and it plumped down to the bottom of my stomach, burning and dissolving in a bath of acid.

I parked by the mosque after the loudspeakers of the mosque's minaret, like ears on a hand puppet, issued the first call for nightfall prayer. I sat inside the mosque, waiting for the second call and turning around towards the door every time I heard the shuffle of sandals and the creak of the door latch. Soon enough, as I was surrounded by elderly men in the first row - some standing but most sitting on white plastic chairs - the imam who stood in a dedicated row before the congregation called for the initiation of nightfall prayer. The first row of congregants - consisting of geriatrics and Pakistani construction site custodians - looked solemn, their gazes fixed on where their foreheads would land once in the prostration position.

In Islamic religious traditions, those in the first row are to be granted a greater reward from God for being in the vanguard of the congregation. The empty space in front of them reduces the chance of distraction from the sanctity of the moment by things of this world, animate or otherwise. Even though I was one of the attendees in this first row, there was someone standing in front of me, disrupting my enervated concentration, which was all I was capable of mustering, and it wasn't the imam. It was the pale phantom of a teenager, with a crooked neck suspended midair by an invisible rope. I could see his svelte shins, hairless and wheaten, his eyes, bloodshot and accusing.

I zoned out again, with only my body going through the physical motions of the prayer, while my mind was ravaged by tortured contemplations of what had happened and hypothetical scenarios of what should've happened. After nightfall prayer was over, I sat for a brief moment, in censure and atonement for my loss of concentration during prayer. Then I jolted out of the mosque in a storm of unbeknownst purpose, and into my car. I went through yet another aimless round of exploration in the suburb, driving slowly past other members of the congregation on their way home; a remarkably large group of the congregation were heading down the road back to my neighbour's house.

The first day of funeral services for my neighbour's son was about to come to an end. Swarms of women were leaving the house and leaping into the parked cars of their male kin, a frenzied traffic of vehicles and pedestrians; a failed evacuation drill that was to be repeated over the next couple of days with no hope of a better result, or emotional catharsis. The same tired expressions of commiseration would be reiterated, the vehicular congestion would again take place, but the victimised teen would still be dead.

The traffic in front of the house came to a standstill and I decided to take a detour around the intersection and into the labyrinthine neighbourhood. I was lost after a few right and left turns and I had to slow to a halt at a T-junction and determine which way to turn. Outside one of the houses on the left end of the T-intersection, stood a small crowd of rowdy teenagers surrounding three adults who - standing on the staircase - towered over all who walked past that house. I squinted, trying to make out the three adults. And there he was, leaning against the right doorstep's iron cast railing, the wretched paedophile responsible for the death and misery of that young boy. He stood there, with an air of insouciance, between the other two adults and above the rest, the alpha male of a rapacious pack of hyenas.

I instinctively turned left and drove as slowly as I could without raising the pack's suspicions in an attempt to ensure that it was him. I rolled down the passenger window and wrapped the edge of my *keufiya* around my face as I drove closer and closer to the pack. I couldn't help but hit the brakes when I drove right next to them; I had to make sure that I was staring into the face of the same man whose eyes had met mine that dark dawn when he was dropping off my neighbour's son. For a brief moment, I stared at him and was overwhelmed with a peculiar sense of distasteful familiarity when he stared back. I hit the gas pedal and left that rambunctious pack utterly silenced. I slowed down again with I reached another T-junction; I could hear them burst in laughter again when one of the teenagers sauntered to the middle of the street and shouted, "What a psycho!"

The sick exploitative man must've heard of the kid's passing, he must've known that the teenager he sexually abused had committed suicide; yet his face manifested no remorse. My scrutinising stare was countered with his cold-eyed glare, void of any apology. My neighbour's son passed away in the spring of his life, after enduring months of abuse and only after losing all hope of escaping a predatory clasp, he decided to seize control over his life in the only way possible. He chose his only way out; the only one that would at least leave his social standing as a member of a reputable family intact. He must've known what people were going to say about him; he must've envisaged the fallacious rumours that were going to spread like wildfire about his precarious mental health and his fictitious struggle with depression. He must've not cared. As a young vulnerable teenager, to be known as the son of an honourable house who lost his mind and committed suicide was easier than to be regarded as the epicene victim of sexual abuse who brought dishonour to his family. The fictional narrativisation of his death would be far more complex than the simple truth of what had really happened, but that

was how the kid wanted it to be, at least for the sake of his family. Death was the only viable option when life provided him with none.

To the sexual predator, however, it must've made no difference what the boy would choose to do. He knew he held all the cards; he knew he could easily prey on other boys, whenever he grew bored of my neighbour's son. It was chilling to think that some other boy would soon take this dead teenager's place inside the paedophile's white truck; another boy whose blood would be on my hands as well if I didn't intervene, if I didn't seek retribution for my neighbour's son. My blood curdled considering the rapacity of this sexual predator and the anguish and despair he would cyclically inflict on a continuous series of young adults, that could potentially, have no end.

I thought I could drive home, retrieve my gun, and drive back to where the paedophile was and shoot him. Then I thought that I could just drive around the block back to that first T-intersection, then speed up in the direction of the paedophile with the hope that the pack of teenagers and the other two adults would leap out of my way, and ram the paedophile right into the wall before I fled the scene. Avenging my neighbour's son and putting an end to this parasite's sex crimes would be easy. Justice would be served and it would be righteous.