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THE LAST SUMMER OF THE PIGEONS

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Sample translation by Simon Pare

THE SKY IS RENT APART

The familiar scene with the pigeons is abruptly interrupted. The tightly packed, wheeling flock panics and separates, birds darting off in all directions. Three of my pigeons join other groups, two veer off westwards, and another trio disappears behind the roofs.

A deep, dull, menacing rumble is approaching. As I scan the sky, the sun is so dazzling that I have to screw up my eyes. Three helicopters come into view, scudding along like metal predators, rotor blades slicing through the air. The roar grows louder and louder before the aircraft slowly drift out of my sightline, as if the sky had swallowed them up.

My flock returns, its rhythms unsettled as it circles over our roof. I take the decoy out of the pigeon loft and attach it to the fence. One after another they land, heads twitching nervously. I lure them into the shed with a handful of grain. Two are missing, though: a pair called Rainbow and Dancer.

I scan the sky again. The other breeders are still out on the neighbouring rooftops, peering into the air, waiting for their tardy pigeons. A cloud of dust rises into the sky. It wasn't the helicopters. They didn't drop anything, nor did I hear an explosion.

The sky is eerily quiet. No beating wings, no pigeons, no sparrows. Nothing but black smoke. And where that fire is burning is where I have to go next. My father needs some help. Our shop has been told we have to convert our whole range to Islamic clothing.

The pigeons will have to find their own way home. They'll come back. They have to.

THE FLAMES OF CONFORMITY

Our shop is where the bustle of the bazaar meets the peace and quiet of the medina. The Al-Rahman mosque dominates the neighbourhood, its minaret a stone memorial to permanence. But even its steadfastness is in question today. My eyes sting from the smoke, its smell an acrid blend of burnt fabric and melted plastic. The main road through the bazaar is in uproar. Pickups and mule carts stand ready as shop owners hurriedly sort through their wares.

Just before I reach our shop, I catch sight of the fire and the crowd that has gathered there. Three men in plain, uniform-like robes with rifles slung over their shoulders are standing around the fire. Their postures are stiff, their faces stern, and they radiate an aura of absolute power. Cartons of cigarettes, posters and items of clothing are tossed into the flames. No one yells, no one objects. This is a drama whose first act is unfolding exactly as expected, a day when religious purity shall consume every un-Islamic colour and design.

I spot my father at the end of the street. He's sitting on a low stool outside our shop with his head bowed and his shoulders hunched forwards. His hands are resting on his knees. The sun falls on his face at a slant, etching sharp lines into skin that once glowed with warmth and pride. Now he looks pale.

'Where's your mother?' he asks without looking up.

'At Suad's. She's got a stomach ache. Maybe Mother will come later.'

'On her own?'

'Of course not.'

He gives an almost imperceptible nod, stands up and disappears into the shop. I remain outside, staring at our window display.

Where brightly coloured fabrics and elegant clothes once tempted passers-by inside, there are now mannequins shrouded in niqabs. These models look as if they're captives in some scary nightmare.

I wonder what would happen if these rigid plastic figures were to come alive. Would they rebel? A story is forming inside my head, a story that would thrill Uncle Ali if I told him about it. He might even encourage me to write it down.

In my mind's eye, I flesh out the characters. Under the cover of darkness, they abandon their frozen poses and sneak out of the shop. While the city sleeps, they cast off their niqabs, change into light, colourful, flowery clothes. Beneath the starry sky they stroll along the streets and revel for a moment in their newfound freedom. Not that their joy lasts long . . . They're spotted by the religious police. 'Stop!' shout the bearded men, training their guns on them, and a wild chase begins. Bullets thud into three of the mannequins, their movements freeze for good, and the men set them on fire. Flames lick at their bodies while two smaller mannequins escape by the skin of their teeth.

In my imagination, this is far from the end of the story. Years later, the two survivors return as adults. Lurking in the shadows, camouflaged and wielding machetes, they wait for an opportunity to exact revenge upon their oppressors.

'Noah!' my father calls.

'Yes?'

'What are you doing out there? I need your help.'

SKIN CENSORS

My job is to black out women's hair, faces and bare skin.

'Only the women's eyes can be visible,' my father explains, his hand pointing to a kit made up of a marker pen, scissors and tape. 'You do the right-hand shelves, and I'll take care of the left. When we've finished here, we'll see to the goods in the storeroom. You can throw the packaging for underwear, knickers and tops and things, on the floor. We'll get rid of it later.'

My father has never been much of a talker, but today he seems especially taciturn and worn out. His pale skin and tense demeanour make him look unusually fragile. Maybe it's the withdrawal symptoms my mother has told me about. Maybe he's paralysed by all this pressure.

He takes a packet from the shelf and blacks out the photo of a woman with a marker pen. Then he switches on the electric fan, directs it towards me, and resumes his work. The moving air fills the shop with a familiar fragrance – the oil with which my father perfumes the clothes.

'Their people came by twice last week,' he says. 'Morality police, religious police – who knows? Any bearded man with a gun and a caliphate armband is the law now.'

He tells me they gave him a list of instructions. The mannequins had to be dressed differently and the shelves redesigned. They also gave him some addresses for new goods – local textile factories specialising in Islamic clothing. A delivery came yesterday.

'Maybe I'll get better fabrics soon – silk and cotton from abroad.' His voice contains no optimism, only hopelessness.

I take down the large pictures of provocatively dressed women and let them slip through my fingers. They sail to the floor like withered leaves the wind has torn from the trees. I repair the wrappers with a bit of tape and put them back on the shelves. If there are only faces on the packaging, I draw over them with the black marker. It feels as if I'm deleting verses from an enchanting, blacklisted poem.

As I work away, it occurs to me that my father has made no preparations despite having had a whole week to do so. What was he waiting for? For salvation, to quote Uncle Ali? Or for a miracle? Did he think the new rules wouldn't be enforced? I've come here to give him a hand because without me he wouldn't cope.

Blacking out faces is a strange task. A grotesque one. Uncle Ali recently said that the mujahideen were more scared of female skin than of the US Marines. I think he's right. Of all the rules that adults have come up with, this is the maddest I've seen in my fourteen years on this earth.

'Eyes are allowed,' my father says when he notices I'm blacking out faces entirely.

'You a sharia expert now, Dad?'

He raises his head and looks at me. His gaze is stern, but tiredness takes the edge off his glare.

'Keep your voice down!' he says, with the flicker of a smile.

RAINBOW THE FAITHFUL

As I continue my censorship of any skin on the packaging, my thoughts turn to Rainbow and Dancer. I hope they've found their way home. They're the only pigeons tame enough for me to touch without them flying off in fright.

It happened around noon one day last winter. It had been pouring down non-stop for two whole days, but the rain had finally stopped, and a dull, colourless sky arched over the city. After being cooped up for so long, my pigeons were bursting with energy as they soared up into the air. I watched them go with huge relief, but then I caught sight of Dancer. His wingbeats faltered and he plummeted to the ground.

I rushed down from the roof to the street to find Dancer motionless on the cold cobbles. I picked him up carefully. There was a dark-red stain on his breast. The idea that some kid might have fired a slingshot at him tunnelled its way into my brain. The local lads are famed for their terrifying accuracy.

When Uncle Ali came home that afternoon, he inspected Dancer's wings, tummy and injury. 'Broken bone, maybe,' he mumbled, 'or just some internal bleeding. We'll see.'

Day after day I kept watch over Dancer, but he just lay there in his nesting box, his body almost as stiff as a plank.

Rainbow never left his side. She fed him tenderly, brought him water and cleaned his plumage, as if she were trying to comb the pain out of his feathers. Even when I waved the scarecrow flag to scatter the rest of the flock into the air, she ignored the threat and stayed with him.

This was her routine for the next two weeks. Rainbow tended Dancer, and little by little he began to respond. The first time he left the nesting box, she stuck to him like his shadow. While the others conquered the skies, she stayed close.

When I sent the birds out to fly in the third week, Dancer and Rainbow sat next to each other on the fence. Dancer hesitated as the others launched themselves into the air. And then, with a firm beat of his wings, he followed them with Rainbow hot on his heels. Together they circled the building separately from the rest of the flock. Their movements transmitted a silent promise.

Returning, they landed on the fence. Dancer sat up proudly, spread his tail feathers and cooed. Rainbow cocked her head and took up a perch just below him.

The two of them were still perching on the fence that evening, black silhouettes against the fiery setting sun. Rainbow clapped her wings together, and Dancer copied her. Together they lifted off and flew around the house in a gentle orbit. Their flying was a dance, a declaration of loyalty. For me there was a mystery in their affinity, something no human had ever displayed so clearly. I wept.

Now here I am, moving the marker back and forth across the black hair of the woman on the packaging – black on black. The same colour, and yet her authentic, God-given colour must go. Someone has a keen sense of irony: either God – or the mujahideen.

DEMONIC GIGGLING AT THE MOSQUE

Shortly before the muezzins strike up the call to midday prayer, my father ushers me out of the shop and locks the door behind us. Working is forbidden during prayer time and anyone not abiding by this rule risks arrest – or worse.

The large courtyard of the Al-Rahman mosque is filled to bursting, but the crowd moves calmly, almost rhythmically. Men push their way through to the taps to commence their ablutions. My father stands in line, and I do likewise.

Water pours in an unbroken stream, hands glide across faces, arms and feet – a fluid choreography. Father's movements are precise, disciplined, almost mechanical.

Hot air greets us in the prayer room, the fans merely spreading it evenly around the space. A gentle hum fills the room, the whispering of men standing in neat rows with bowed heads. They're reciting verses from the Quran and waiting for the call to prayer.

I squint in search of familiar faces in the crowd and spot my classmate Mohamed three rows in front of me. He's standing next to his father, Nurullah, and keeps glancing back at me. His facial

expression is familiar yet unsettling. That lopsided, knowing smile. He knows I don't know the words of the prayers.

I feel a sudden urge to burst out laughing, a tickling giggle as if a demon is tugging at my throat. I press my lips tightly together. Not here. Not now. The thought of Mohamed's knowing grin and my own uncertainty smoulder inside me like fire. Memories of the last time this happened flash through my mind: I had a laughing fit while attending a funeral. My father didn't speak to me for days afterwards. Here at the mosque, though, it would be more than embarrassing. It would be dangerous.

I lower my gaze and concentrate on my breathing. Then the imam's voice rings out over the loudspeaker: '*Allahu akbar*, God is Great.' Prayer begins. The words fill the room and descend upon us. I mumble the phrases I know and let my lips form the others they need to repeat, as my heartbeat slowly returns to normal.

I close my eyes, but Mohamed's grin will not leave me. Even in the darkness, it refuses to go away.

THE AL PACINO GANG

After prayers the men stream out through the mosque's wide-open gates. Shoulder to shoulder they proceed into the courtyard, like ants leaving their nest. My father greets people he knows and exchanges a few words with them before seeking out the shadows along one wall of the mosque with Mohamed's father, Nurullah, and a few other men. Soon they are deep in conversation. Mohamed and I retreat to a different shady corner.

The air is thick and oppressive. Mohamed wipes the sweat from his forehead. His black Che cap is askew.

'I hate this heat,' he says, fanning himself with his hand. 'How are you?'

'Two of my pigeons haven't returned. Because of the helicopters and the smoke.'

'Are you sad?'

'They'll be back, I know they will. Heard anything from Shirzad?'

'Not a word.'

'Nor have I.'

Shirzad was one of us, the third in our posse. We called ourselves the Al Pacino Gang, inspired by the scene in *The Godfather* where Al Pacino doesn't flinch when punched. We practised doing the same. We trained ourselves to ignore pain, slamming sticks down on our hands and acting as if it were nothing. In lessons we provoked the teachers until they called us to the front. We took our punishment with a grin, without wincing. Tough was our middle name. As tough as Al Pacino.

We quickly earned ourselves a reputation. Lads from other classes would whisper about us in the playground. They called us 'the donkeys' because of all the punishment we could take. Not that anyone was scared of us, though, because we didn't go around beating people up. Shirzad was the only one of us who was good at karate, leaping high into the air and aiming kicks at people as if it was a game.

Shirzad was our leader. He was unflappable – and different. He's Yazidi. Some people called him 'Stinkface' and invented absurd stories about his religion – for example, that Yazidis worshipped Satan or held rituals in toilets. Shirzad himself knew very little about his religion, and what he told us sounded like stuff out of a legend. 'Our god is the peacock who brings peace when all other gods have failed.'

His family came from the borderlands. They kept themselves to themselves in our city. Shirzad's father, though a Yazidi, had married a Muslim against the wishes of both families. The couple had run away and built a new life here. His father worked as a sales attendant in a jewellery store, his mother in a bank. Shirzad and his sister were driven to school every day by their father.

But there has been no sign of Shirzad's family since the mujahideen took control of the city. No one knows where they've gone. Maybe they got out in time. Maybe they didn't.

'I'm starting to miss school.'

'Me too,' Mohamed says, 'but I've heard the schools are going to open again soon.'

'I hope so.'

'And what will they teach us then?'

'Same as before, but with added religion. Islamic mathematics and veiled natural sciences.'

'How's that meant to work?'

'What's one angel plus one angel?'

'Three angels?'

'Wrong. A gang of angels.'

Mohamed shakes his head. 'You're an idiot.'

We laugh, but not for long. Our carefree mood is spoilt when Mohamed's father beckons to him.

'See you,' Mohamed says.

I stand there for a moment. Shirzad's absence is painful. It's as if someone had torn up our story in the middle of a sentence.