

THE PALACE OF THE WRETCHED

Abbas Khider

© 2020 Carl Hanser Verlag München

Translated by Simon Pare

© Carl Hanser Verlag München, all rights reserved

My guard has fallen into a deep sleep. I watched him as he closed his eyes, opened them, glanced at me and closed them again. His head tipped forwards. It looked as if a wave were washing the guy from waking into sleep and back again. He raised one shoulder and his body slanted to one side. He settled into a more comfortable position, draping one arm along the back of his chair and pressing his gun against his body with his right hand so the barrel propped him up. His left hand is now dangling in front of the legs of the chair. His mouth is gaping open, and he's snoring very softly.

He's still quite young, maybe a few years older than me. His moustache is black like the hair on his head; his face is free of wrinkles. Right now he looks peaceful, almost sweet. This morning he was anything but. He watched my every step like a sheepdog, dragging me along and shoving me through the hospital doors, barking the same order over and over again: 'Get a move on, you bonehead!'

The handcuff on my right wrist isn't particularly tight. My left hand is free and it's on that side that he's sleeping on his chair. What should I do? Should I wait until he's fast asleep and then . . .? Then what? Escape, but how? First I have to free my right hand. I could manage that. I'd wet it with

spit and pull it slowly out of the cuff. A few scratches, a bit of blood, no big deal. And then? I need to grab the gun and bash the guard over the head with the butt. Is that possible? It has to be, I think, or I'll spend the rest of my life in these eternal shadows.

This is my chance. I need to get it done and get out of here as fast as possible. To go where? In these grey-and-white-striped pyjamas. With this pale, cadmium-yellow face and this feeble, emaciated body? How am I supposed to make it out of the hospital? And even if I do make it, how am I meant to avoid the checks in the city without papers?

Then, the most important question: where should I go? To my parents'? To my sister's? Too dangerous. Those would be the first places the police would look. It would be suicidal. To friends? Which ones? I've betrayed them all. They're probably on the run, in prison or in the next world. Even if they were here and I was able to find them, which of them would be willing to hide me? None. Not a single one. Everyone in this land of underground jails is scared.

ONE

Harvesting air

None of us youngsters in my family was a tearaway. The only one who fitted that description was my grandfather. He had the unpleasant habit of hurling his opinion straight and unfiltered in people's faces. He couldn't care less if people took any notice of what he said, what they thought of him or how they felt afterwards. His scathing remarks and vicious comments made grown men cry and furious widows beat their carpets so violently they made holes in them. After every hate-filled tirade he would lie back happily and smugly on his mattress in the living room and stare fixedly at the ceiling or the wall.

Whenever his only son, my father, heard that my grandfather had insulted someone again, he would seek to apologise for the old man's 'inappropriate behaviour' to the injured party. Usually it is parents who take responsibility when their children are naughty, but it was the other way round in our family. My father inevitably put it down to advancing age, but even as a child Grandfather had been a noisy brat and his sheer unpredictability drove his family and the entire neighbourhood to despair. Eighty years later, anecdotes about his wailing were still doing the rounds in our village. People said that even wild dogs would howl with pain and Grandfather had singlehandedly driven the British out of the tribal areas, which had then united to form a single country — Iraq. Some claimed that my grandfather's tongue was as venomous and mordant as the fangs of the black cobra that lurked in Iraq's bushes, crevices and caves.

Grandfather genuinely had a reputation as a snake in the grass. As soon as people heard his hiss, they had to run. Unfortunately, it was impossible simply to decapitate my grandfather with a sabre and thereby knock the

problem on the end. He was a frail, wispy man who stooped under the weight of his years. His face was as creased as the ancient blanket he wore around his pointy shoulders. Listening to stories about his childhood, I could hardly imagine that he'd been young once. I'd always known him with wrinkles and grey hair. When I heard the radio playing the Lebanese singer Fairuz's ballad in which she describes Beirut as having an 'old sailor's face', I always thought it a good portrayal of Grandfather.

We listened to her songs on the radio; she was as much a part of every morning as the first rays of sunlight or washing your face. In other areas crowing cockerels woke people up, but in our neighbourhood it was Fairuz's lark-like singing. The state radio's morning programme always began with verses from the Qur'an — fifteen long minutes before Fairuz at last sang for half an hour until it was once more time for inescapable news about our president. Her voice was so magical that they made room for it between the words of Allah and the words of Saddam.

Grandfather loved her songs more than anything else. As soon as the owner of the village teahouse caught sight of him, he would put on a Fairuz cassette. He did so not because he liked his regular customer much, but because if old blighter could listen to the Lebanese beauty, he would generally sit there in blissful silence. She had the same hypnotic effect on him as a snake charmer's flute on his animals. 'When Fairuz holds forth, Marzoq holds his tongue,' my mother once joked. 'She's the only one who can do that.'

Grandfather Marzoq was as stiff as my sister's wooden dolls and always leant on his stick or a companion for support. He walked as slowly and unsteadily as a child that has only just learnt to walk. He spent most of his time resting on the ground outside his house or in the teahouse. Otherwise he would sit on his mattress in the living room and was overjoyed if my

sister and I wanted to play with him. To his grandchildren he was a hero. Qamer and I truly believed he was the best grandfather in the world. Of course we knew no others. However obnoxious his general attitude, with us he was as docile as a lamb. We frolicked around him, pulling on his long beard or his enormous earlobes and pounding his tummy. He tired quickly, though, and couldn't keep up with our boisterous antics for long. Occasionally he would even suddenly fall asleep during quiet games. His head would slump forwards on to his chest and his jaw would fall open, exposing the stumps of what had once been teeth. He would smack his lips several times, his eyeballs would move back and forth under his eyelids and he would start to breathe deeply. A few minutes earlier he had been drawing pictures in the sand with us, telling us exciting stories or fencing at me with his stick, but then from one moment to the next he seemed to withdraw into himself.

However, his favourite activity was undoubtedly talking. Once he started, it was as if his aim was to empty himself of every word in the Arabic language. He could effortlessly turn a minor anecdote into the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. We would prick up our ears, and again and again his voice would sweep us away into magical fairytale worlds. We loved these legends, but my father detested them.

The two of them barely ever spoke. Father was fed up of patching up the rifts the old man made in the fabric of the village — and Grandfather was responsible for a lot of splits. As a result they had drifted further and further apart. Father didn't like the fact that we spent so much time with Grandfather. He probably saw it as a betrayal that Grandfather acted so differently towards us than he had towards our father when he was a child. He must have seen the clenched fist more often than he felt a palm caressing his cheek. Instead of games of football, he had been treated to kicks when he was naughty. What is more, Father had been terrified that the party's

informers in the village would denounce his father to the police if Grandfather wagged his careless tongue once too often. After all, hardly a day passed without Grandfather making some snide remark about our president and the government. Fortunately, most people in our village thought Grandfather was a fool and didn't take him seriously. Father was happy if Grandfather Marzoq was asleep or sitting in the teahouse, quietly listening to Fairuz's songs.

The rest of the family often found the silence between the two of them unbearable. The atmosphere was always tense. Every Friday they would sit together on the floor without a word, eating their favourite meal — grilled fish with bread made from rice flour. Father would pick out the bones and put the fish on Grandfather's plate without looking at him or saying anything. They hadn't talked for years.

That all changed when Grandfather fell ill. It was in the seventh year of the Iran-Iraq war. Our tribal chief whose house was right on the border with Iran came to our village and our house with some relatives of ours. As the eldest member of the tribe, Grandfather Marzoq was to give his opinion and offer some advice.

Father was extremely anxious that morning. The men hadn't announced their visit. They had simply turned up.

'Zahraa, please make tea for these men!' my father said to my mother in the kitchen.

'Should I prepare lunch for them too? How many are there?'

'Just four men.'

'Fine.'

Now Father whispered, 'They'd probably get a more sensible answer if they asked our children rather than my father.'

‘Don’t say such things! He may be difficult but he has a great deal of experience. Marzoq is wiser than you think, and the tribal elders know it.’

Not long afterwards, all the men gathered in the living room. They sat in a circle on the floor around my grandfather. I was crouching outside the open door, pretending to play with some pebbles but in fact eavesdropping on their conversation. I knew three of the men — they were my parents’ cousins. The fourth man was our tribal leader. He looked much younger than the other men and had a thin black moustache. A noble-looking brown turban was wrapped around his head, short-cropped hair poking out on the sides, and his white *dishdasha*, the traditional male robe in our culture, was made of pure silk. He was sitting opposite my grandfather. On the carpet in front of him lay a packet of Rothmans cigarettes and a box of matches. Beside them were a small glass of black tea and an overflowing ashtray. He was nervously smoking one cigarette after the other and twirling a *misbaha* of precious stones in his free hand.

‘The security services want a list of all the young men in the tribe who have run away from the frontline.’

There was frosty silence now.

After a short pause the tribal leader addressed the men. ‘This isn’t the first time we’ve found ourselves in a hopeless situation like this. As we all know, the past few years have taken a high toll in blood. It’s different this time. There is no amnesty for deserters now. Give their names and we’ll be sentencing them to certain death. I could live with the boys being simply sent back to war — at least they would have some chance of surviving. But they’ll be executed.’

Once more silence fell over the room.

My sister had joined me. The two of us were squatting among the men’s shoes and sandals, trying to make sense of what they were saying. I couldn’t

keep up with the whole conversation, but I sensed their worry and disquiet. The adults' faces all bore the same grim expression I had only ever seen on days of mourning when people grieved for the dead.

The men continued to stare into their tea glasses or at the carpet, as if the answer were to be found there. The tribal leader now turned to Grandfather Marzoq for help.

'Abu Hussein, you are the eldest. Do you not have some advice? After seven years of war we are all weary. Maybe we will be lucky and the regime's officials will no longer be so conscientious. What should we do?'

Grandfather said nothing for a few seconds, as if collecting his thoughts. His weak, cloudy eyes scanned the circle with a strangely remote gaze. Until now he had been examining the weave of the carpet, but now he looked up and stared at the ceiling.

'Once upon a time there was a powerful sultan . . .' he began.

'Allah be with us!' my father grumbled audibly, rolling his eyes, but there was no reaction. Grandfather also ignored his son. As so often he simply pretended he hadn't heard anything and carried on talking.

'This sultan punished his people because a few brave souls had risen up against him. The ruler sent his soldiers to arrest them and then forced these men and women to live outdoors for a week like beasts and work for him. He ordered them to harvest air. Anyone who refused was immediately beheaded. The others were taken to an empty square outside the palace, and each had a small sickle pressed into his or her hand. They all had to wear baskets on their backs. The prisoners went along with the sultan's terrible game. They waved their sickles in the air as if they were cutting grain the fields, groped at the air and acted as if they were gathering an invisible substance in their receptacles. For seven long days the men and women were forced to work

outside, with no exceptions, without any breaks. On the final day, the sultan appeared to inspect his work.'

The four men had leant forward excitedly, hanging on Grandfather's every word. Only my father languidly scraped the dirt from under his fingernails and exhaled loudly every now and then as if he found listening as strenuous as the captives in the story found harvesting air.

'Among the people the sultan saw a naked woman who, like the others, was carrying a small sickle and harvesting air. She showed absolutely no shame, as if she were alone. The sultan approached her. When she caught sight of him, she attempted to cover herself with her hands. "Oh no, a man!" she said. The sultan was bemused and asked, "There are many people here. You are not ashamed in front of them, but in front of me you are?" "People?" she replied and, turning, glared contemptuously at the crowd. "You mean these scarecrows who couldn't strike fear into a sparrow? These are not people, most worshipful sultan. These are merely shadows of people, holding sickles and doing nothing useful apart from harvesting air. You, my lord, are the only real person in this whole land, for you have made everyone else harvest air." '

Grandfather now fell silent and left a long pause to let what he had said sink in.

'One day,' Grandfather resumed, 'our own children will no longer respect us. They will laugh at us. We are making ourselves a laughing stock for our descendants. A hundred years from now, people will call us "Saddam's doormats". Once we were a proud nation. Now look at you: a bunch of frightened crybabies, harvesting air for all eternity. If we go along with all of this, it will only become worse and worse. This Saddam, spawn of the devil's belly button, is making fools of us. Death is better than cowering in his eternal dungeon.'

‘That’s easy for you to say. You have one foot in the grave,’ the tribal leader objected. He looked quite angry.

Grandfather lifted his robe to show a jagged, blood-red scar on his stomach. ‘An English soldier did that to me. Stuck his bayonet in my gut. I fought him off with my bare hands, pressing down his rifle until he got tired and I could smash his throat with my fist. In spite of my wound. I watched that English soldier die. We were outnumbered and poorly armed, but we were proud and fearless. We welcomed death because it showed we were resisting instead of letting ourselves be kicked like dogs. Today it is a matter of self-defence too. Just as we once chased out the English, so we can chase out Saddam and the Ba’athists. With his megalomaniac war against our neighbours, the bastard has gone too far. Pointless slaughter with no possible victor. Now he comes for our remaining children like death itself, and we sit here like rabbits in a hutch, debating a question to which we have long known the answer. There is no alternative — the future of our tribe is bleak enough already. The next generation is dying at the front, and here we are executed as traitors on the spot or have our faces driven into the sand by Saddam’s boot until we choke to death. Anyone who refuses to fight is a coward!’

The tribal leader leapt to his feet and it seemed as if he were about to spit in Grandfather Marzoq’s face.

‘You old fool, what hope do we have? If it really came down to it, you wouldn’t fight, we would. How easy it is to play the general from the comfort of your rocking chair! Your son was never at the frontline; he’s doing his military service locally. You don’t understand the tribe’s concerns for our children, nor do you understand what it means to take up arms and the potential consequences for our tribe and our families. It would be suicide.’

For a few minutes it was chaos, and soon afterwards the men left the room. My father tried to stop them and bring everything back under control, but he failed. Having overheard much of what had happened from the kitchen, my mother also ran after the tribal leader and her cousins, but she couldn't persuade them to at least stay and taste her lunch.

When none of the guests remained, my father went back into the living room to Grandfather Marzoq and began to yell at him. We could only hear Father's voice, as if he was talking to himself.

'Are you trying to ruin my life and embarrass me in front of our tribe? You cannot portray the tribal leader and your nephews as scaredy-cats and bring up old war stories from the year dot! This is no simple matter, no simple decision. It must be taken wisely.'

This was the first time in ages that my father had spoken to my grandfather, but there was not a peep from Grandfather Marzoq. He didn't answer and pursed his lips.

The men from the tribe never did come back to see us before Grandfather died, which was the following year when the war with Iran ended.

Grandfather suffered greatly during his last days. He couldn't move or go to the toilet on his own any more. He even spat out the food my mother pushed into his mouth. In spite of his wrinkles, the old man suddenly became a helpless baby, howling with pain. One after the other, his organs began to give out.

Grandfather was able to spend the final minutes of his life with his son. It was his last, feeble wish to be alone with his child one more time. We have no idea what they said to each other because Father never talked about it. We just saw him come out of the living room, his head bowed, to join us in the kitchen. He was weeping. Mother immediately got up and put her arms

around him, then my sister joined in and so did I, and we were a bunch of snivelling wrecks. My family.

Qamer and I weren't allowed to bid farewell to our grandfather or see his corpse. My sister, as the elder, was supposed to ensure I didn't enter the wake room. She was to keep watch over the door and not peek inside herself. Our parents left the house to arrange everything for the funeral and in the meanwhile Qamer stood like a sentry outside the door. I was not allowed past her.

'Children aren't allowed to look at dead bodies.'

'Grandpa isn't a dead body though. He's Grandpa.'

'No, Shams, no.'

'Please!'

'I said no!'

Grabbing my arm roughly, she pulled me back. There was nothing I could do. I went outside to wait for my parents. From time to time I went to see if my sister was still there. She dutifully blocked my path to the dead man, legs wide apart, arms crossed on her chest. She didn't budge an inch, but after a while her feet turned inwards and she stood there pigeon-toed. She was grimacing and clutching her abdomen with her hands.

'Damn it,' she cried before dashing off to the bathroom. No soon had she shut the door than I walked into the living room.

Grandfather was lying on his mattress under several sheets. I moved closer, completely fearless. Pulling back the sheet back, I studied his face. His skin was very pale and his cheeks were even more sunken than usual. His eyes were closed. He looked peaceful, content even. I gave him a quick peck on the cheek, which was quite hard and almost leathery. When I accidentally brushed his nose, however, it was really soft and squishy. Maybe that's what

happens. Maybe your nose goes soft when you die, I thought, and put the sheets back over Grandfather's face.