

Al Arabian Novel Factory

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Benyamin

Translated by Shahnaz Habib

 juggernaut

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
Part One: Bab Al Madinah	1
Part Two: Rub'al-Khali	43
Part Three: The Believers in the Pupa	77
Part Four: The City Without Doves	107
Part Five: Pirated Copy	149
Part Six: Monocle God	179
Part Seven: Silver Owl	203
Part Eight: The City of Jihadis	245
Part Nine: Mera Jeevan	307
<i>Epilogue</i>	353

Preface

This is the story of an Arab city. It does not represent a particular city or a particular people. I have merged together many histories, characters, incidents and places to create a city that has no name. Everything in this story is real and fictional. You may find some similarities here – think of them as universalities rather than resemblances. This story is not intended to hurt anyone. It is a humble attempt to open a window into contemporary Arab life.

'Modern man likes to pretend that his thinking is wide-awake. But this wide-awake thinking has led us into the mazes of a nightmare in which the torture chambers are endlessly repeated in the mirrors of reason. When we emerge, perhaps we will realize that we have been dreaming with our eyes open, and that the dreams of reason are intolerable. And then, perhaps we will begin to dream once more, with our eyes closed.'

Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*

Part One

Bab Al Madinah

Sunday in Toronto

Walk aimlessly or get naked. These are the best ways to communicate with your inner genius. And if both happen simultaneously, then you get twice the effect. As far as our chief editor James Hogan was concerned, this was an article of faith. And, of course, articles of faith do not exist for us to simply put our faith in them. James Hogan believed in living them.

Every day at six-thirty, he would leave the office and walk for half an hour to reach the two-room flat he had lived in for twenty-two years. After showering, he would watch television for an hour. Then he would pour 30 ml – and 30 ml meant 30 ml, not a drop more or less – of alcohol into a glass, top it off with three cubes of ice and enter his writing room. It was time to put his article of faith into practice. In his writing room, James Hogan would strip naked and start walking. And not just any old walking. It was a mad, frenzied walk, during which he would think of ideas for the next issue. Occasionally, he would pause in front of the mirror to consider his naked form, then get back to walking.

Were it not for social norms he would have walked naked in our office as well, he often told us. ‘Try it out sometime when you have a big problem to solve, you will definitely find a solution,’ he advised us.

During these naked marches, he often came up with some scoop idea or a controversial angle for an interview or debate. Any of the junior editors on staff could expect a call from him then. It was an unwritten rule that as long as the world had not ended, our phones should be switched on and ready to take his call between the hours of eight and ten every evening. James Hogan would call to talk about an idea that needed following up the next day. Or, if the topic was important enough, he would invite the editor to his flat right away. If an idea was not shared in the heat of its conception, James Hogan told us, it would lose its intensity.

James Hogan was single. There were no girlfriends or boyfriends in the picture either. No children, adopted or otherwise. He had zero social life and he did not visit clubs or pubs. Golf, tennis, chess – he did not play any of these. Not even card games. It was doubtful he thought of anything other than what to publish in his magazine. ‘My brain space is completely dedicated to news. Like a genie trapped inside a bottle, I am trapped inside the vortex of news. Ideas. Scoops. Stories. My mind is always thirsting for them. I want to make our magazine one of the best in the world – I think about nothing else and I will go to any length for that.’ This was Hogan’s self-diagnosis. And perhaps this is why, under his editorship, the graph of the magazine’s growth was shooting up like a rocket.

Often his calls came at that time when one had left behind the cares of work and was relaxing at home. But, of course, we were happy to abandon the evening and go running to his flat. We knew that Hogan would be waiting for us with a horizon of possibilities. If we missed the opportunity, the loss was not his, it was ours. There were many who had ascended the ladder of fame by using an idea of his. His ideas had sent many a reporter on a dizzying flight of achievement. To be assigned an idea by James Hogan was akin, within our magazine, to being offered the Pulitzer.

I received a call like that from him the other day. For a long time, I had been spared his calls because a new crop of reporters, their heads teeming with journalistic ambitions, had joined the magazine. They were ready to leap in whenever there was a new scoop. But this was something different. He wanted none but me. It was with barely contained excitement that I went to his flat.

He greeted me in his front room with a towel around his waist.

‘How many children do you have?’ he asked without any context.

‘Two,’ I replied, a little surprised.

‘How many wives? How many mistresses? How many girlfriends?’ came the next questions.

‘Three multiplied by one equals one,’ I replied in the same vein.

‘What other family do you have in Toronto?’

‘Very few.’

‘How long can you stay away from all these people and live on your own?’

I had no idea where he was going with this. ‘Only a very short time,’ I replied after a pause.

‘I am going to conduct an experiment on you,’ he said dramatically.

‘What do you mean by “experiment”?’

‘You are going to leave your wife and children and friends and travel to a faraway place. Ready?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I replied.

‘You are the only person in our organization I can trust with this job. I have been thinking about this for a few days. Do you know something amazing, Pratap? There are almost two million people from your country living abroad. I don’t think any other people from any other country could do this. Surely your genes must contain your people’s survival skills. That’s why I went over every face in our organization and finally decided on you.’ Hogan took a sip of his drink.

‘James, I have no idea what you are getting at. Can you please come to the point?’ I said sharply.

Only once in my life had I addressed James as ‘sir’. That was on the day I had joined, and on that same day, he forbade it forever. ‘When one person calls another “sir”, they turn into servant and master. A servant does not have a mind of his own. And without a strong, independent mind, how will he or she come up with new ideas? I don’t need servants here. You can call me by my name.’ Since then I have always called him James.

‘We have been offered an amazing opportunity to break

new ground and do the kind of work we have never done before. An internationally acclaimed writer has picked us to do the research for his next book. As you may know, every bestselling novelist in the world works with a team. This team helps the novelist study the topic. They research the history and geography and sociology of whatever he or she wants to write about. They gather the maps and documents and old newspaper cuttings. Gone are the days when a writer sat in a closed room and imagined his or her way into a novel over the course of decades. Every novel published today is a factory product. There might be a famous name in bold on the cover of the book, but in truth, several people have worked hard to produce it. Even your own Mahabharata was written “not by one Vyasa, but many Vyasas”. Now this novelist wants to outsource some of the research for his next novel because his own team is busy. It’s a million-dollar offer that fell into my lap at the Frankfurt Book Fair, thanks to an agent. I cannot bear to lose it. Now tell me, will you do it?’

‘Who is this novelist?’ I was dying to know.

‘I don’t know. The agent will not reveal the name. But some day we’ll know when his or her book is published.’

‘And what’s the topic?’

‘Contemporary life in the Middle East. I know a thousand writers have written about this. And now the thousand and oneth person is going to write it again. Let him write it. That’s none of our business. You are going to travel through seventeen countries, from Egypt to Iran. You are going to record what you see and experience. You are going to interview ordinary people, wealthy people, politicians. You are going to

send all this information back to the writer. You have three years to do all this.'

'Yeah, right, what a great idea. Seventeen countries where terrorism is dancing a victory dance. And I on my own. James, what made you think this was a good idea? You might as well have sent me to some war zone as an embedded reporter,' I said angrily.

'You won't be alone. I am going to recruit two assistants for you. And someone from the novelist's study team will be guiding you in the beginning. You won't need to spend more than two months in each country. It will be a new experience, why not try it?'

'I need to think about this. It is difficult to decide so quickly.'

'Take two or three days to think it over. But your answer should be yes. I have already recommended you to the management as the right person for this job.'

'I am going to ignore that. There's a ninety per cent chance that my answer will be no,' I said.

'See, Pratap, all they are asking for, to begin with, is a sample study. If they like it, they will give us the contract. If not, their own team will do the job. So many people had their eye on this job, but I snatched it for us. This is now a matter of my reputation. You can choose whichever city you like for the sample study.'

'Whichever city I like?' I asked. Suddenly, a new hope sneaked its way into my heart.

'Yes. You get to choose the first country.' James Hogan took another sip of his drink.

'I will go then,' I said.

'I am not forcing this on you. Go home and talk to your family. I want you to come back and say yes to me after thinking over this fully. That's the kind of yes I like.'

'I don't need to think any more. I will go,' I said again. James looked wonderingly at me. I had changed my mind as swiftly as the backdrop in a play. He patted me on the back as I left, still looking surprised.

We all have our reasons for the places we choose to go to. I, too, had my reasons for wanting to visit this ancient port city.

Checkpoint

As soon as I accepted James Hogan's offer, I searched my memory for the names of friends who lived in that city. Bijumon, who was my classmate at Mar Thoma School. My roommate at Delhi University, a Hyderabadi we called 5S Varma (Shri Satya Sai Sundara Sridhara Varma). Another Delhi classmate Daisy John. Shahjahan who used to work at the American embassy in those days – I used to regularly run into him at the three-legged bench in Chennai Manikyam's tea shop. I could count more than a dozen acquaintances and friends who had ended up in that city. But I didn't write to any of them about my arrival. I decided I would first get there, settle in and then contact them one by one. But two days before I left, I could not resist messaging Bijumon on Facebook. 'No one must know. I am coming to the city of

harbours.’ After all, in case there was some emergency, it was good to have at least one confirmed friend in the City. Bijumon called me that very night. We were talking to each other after many years. After high school, he joined a technical school, and not much later, migrated to the City, whereas I moved to Delhi University with my Delhi dreams. I became a journalist there and spent some time at *Indian Express* as a subeditor. Then I got married and moved to Canada with my wife Shanti, a dentist. Since the third month of my arrival in Canada, I have been with James Hogan at *Toronto Sunday*. In all this time, I have not spoken to Biju or seen him. Our vacations in Kerala have never coincided. Yet, our conversation was full of his delight at my visit. During my life in Canada, I had begun to forget how intense a friendship can be. Toronto is a city of formalities. Over the last ten years, I had learned that even family relationships could devolve into mere bureaucracy. Biju’s call reminded me that the breezy balminess of a good friendship is still alive in a few places on earth. He insisted on coming to the airport to meet me. I said no. We had already appointed a local project administrator, Abdullah Janahi, who had offered to pick me up at the airport. Why bother Biju unnecessarily? He hung up only after I agreed to have lunch at his place on my first day in the City.

I am an acrophobic. Even after all these years of flying, whenever the plane rises into the sky, a chill snakes up my spine. I have always avoided flying alone. I simply don’t fly anywhere unless accompanied by my wife or friends or co-workers. Yet, coming here, for the first time in my life I flew

all by myself. My longing to get to the City had turned into a fever by now.

From Toronto to New York City, I flew with American Airlines. My flight arrived on time. But in New York, there was a three-hour delay for the Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul. By the time I arrived in Istanbul, I had missed the connecting flight to the City. There was a long wait for the next connection. All in all, by the time I arrived, it had been thirty hours since I left Toronto.

I knew there was no point in looking for Abdullah Janahi at the airport. Couldn't reach him by phone either. But, as my father would say, as long as you have a tongue in your mouth and an address in mind, you can get to any corner of the world. I got into a taxi and showed the driver my new address.

'That's just twenty minutes away. Get in,' said the driver.

As he hauled my luggage into the trunk, he reminded me, in perfect English, that the fare would be twice what it showed on the meter. On the window of the taxi though, there was a sticker saying, 'Insist on the meter. No meter = your trip is free. It is the law.'

'So what is this then?' I pointed to the sticker. He laughed mockingly.

'That's old stuff. If you want to ride my taxi right now, you will have to pay double the fare. I am making it clear now, so don't argue when we get there.' His voice was harsh.

I was silent for a minute.

'Decide quickly. If you don't want to pay, take your luggage out. I have other things to do.' By now he was positively rude.

I made one last attempt to argue with him. But he wouldn't yield an inch. Only after I agreed to pay double the fare did he condescend to put the car into gear.

At the exit gate of the airport, there was a giant billboard: 'Welcome. City of Joy!'

There was less traffic on the road than I expected. I noticed several concrete barricades and checkpoints along the way, all intended to slow down vehicles. Like crocodiles sunning themselves on the shore, police cars were parked along the sidewalks, their blue lights flashing. The walls were stained and dirty; they looked as if they had been scrawled over with graffiti, painted over, scrawled over again, painted over again. Broken flagpoles, ragged banners, torn-down photos and ruined vehicles. There were tankers and armoured cars at the signals and masked soldiers sat atop them. Near them were more billboards like the one I had seen at the airport.

'So is it true there were attacks against tourists in the City recently?' I asked the taxi driver, without any preface.

'Who said that? It is true that we had some problems here recently. Let me assure you though, not one foreigner was harmed. This is a very safe city for tourists. You will lack nothing here.' He eyed me through the rear-view mirror.

After a bit, the car slowed down to a crawl. There was a long line of cars ahead of us at a checkpoint. Soldiers were examining each car. They opened doors and trunks and pulled out people from some cars. Since we had stopped right at a curve, I could see what was happening ahead of us very well once I put my head out of the window. One car had strayed out of the line behind us and somehow elbowed its way through

the traffic. A soldier yelled at its driver and made him return all the way to the back of the line.

The car in front of us was ancient. The soldier gestured at the young man driving to lower the window and peered inside. Then he asked the man to step out. The man parked the car to one side and came out. The soldier took the man's phone and started looking through it. He pointed at something and started asking questions. The man's response and the soldier thrashing him with his gun – both happened at the same time. Honestly, I think I may have felt that beating even more than he did. All the way up from my calf to my thigh, I felt the sudden sting. 'Ayyo!' I screamed in pain. My driver shushed me. The man had fallen to his knees. The soldier thrashed him two more times before asking him to stand up. The man struggled to his feet. The soldier gave him his phone. As the man started to walk away with it, the soldier stopped him and ordered him to throw the phone on the road. The man hesitated but when the soldier threatened him again, he did it. He threw his phone on the road and watched it shatter into pieces. As he turned to leave, the soldier called him back and made some new demand. The man held up his hand and started singing something loudly. I think it was the national anthem. He was made to sing three or four times before he was allowed to leave. All this while, the rest of the vehicles in the line idled patiently. We were next. My heart fluttered. What kind of questions would the soldier have in store for us? But he merely peered in. The driver said something and the soldier waved us on. There was no examination to pass. And so after that long wait, our car was finally off. Though

he tried not to, the driver could not avoid driving over the ruined phone on the road.

I had seen enough to understand the situation in the City. I realized there would be no need to hunt down experiences here, as James Hogan had tasked me with. They would come in search of me.

Biju Ambalamuttam

The taxi took me to an apartment community in one of the poshest neighbourhoods in the City. With supreme indifference and without taking his eyes off of a Tom and Jerry cartoon show on his television, the security guard confirmed that an apartment had been booked for me but the keys were with Abdullah Janahi. I tried his number again but no one picked up. The least he could have done on the day I was arriving was to pick up the phone, I thought to myself. So this was the kind of irresponsibility I would have to live with during my time here.

I called Bijumon. 'Where are you?' he asked.

'Basma Residence. Opposite Ramy International Hotel. Port Road.'

'Be there in ten minutes,' he replied. I was waiting for him at the reception when someone came rushing in. It was none other than Abdullah Janahi. He had gone to the mosque for Friday prayers and that is why his phone was switched off. After seeing my missed calls he had rushed to the airport, and then having missed me there, he had come here as fast as

he could, he told me as he apologized. Bijumon arrived just as we were bringing the luggage in, and he gladly joined us.

My new home was a beautiful, spacious flat on the seventh floor of a recently built twelve-storey apartment building, complete with a swimming pool, gym, health club, massage centre and a balcony facing the waterfront. The port was not far and from the balcony we could see the ships harboured there, the huge cranes rising from the shore, and the seagulls that spotted the blue sky like black kites.

‘Why don’t you rest now? We can talk in detail tomorrow,’ Abdullah said, giving me a SIM card and some dinars before leaving. ‘Call me if you need anything at all.’ I revised my opinion of his sense of responsibility.

I was feeling jet-lagged but I freshened up and went out with Biju. I had promised to have lunch with him. He had a brand-new Mitsubishi Pajero. It had been twenty years since he had arrived in the City, and it had transformed him. He had moved here after his marriage to a nurse and had spent the first couple of years working as an electrician in a small company. Then, with a local as a sponsor, he started his own company. It was doing very well now, with more than a hundred employees. But what surprised me was not any of this – it was that he had become a writer and a cultural worker. The Malayali Samajam had elected him as the secretary no less than three times. Under the pseudonym Biju Ambalamuttam, he had published a collection of poetry (*The Coconut Trees of Chingavanam*) and an anthology of short stories (*When the Butterfly Chased the Elephant*). He had been awarded the Young Kerala Literary Prize and the International Malayali

Fraternity Award for Poetry. Now he had his eye on the Sahitya Akademi Award. Whenever politicians or writers visited the City from Kerala, he hosted them. All the way to his house, he talked non-stop about Malayalam literature and its new generation of writers and its latest literary movements.

This was the same Bijumon who had never, not even because he had lost his way, stepped into a library during his student days. He had never fallen in step with a political procession, not even by accident. His name had never appeared on the sign-up sheet of any cultural organization. Yet here he was, not just a writer, but a leading light of the literary culture. I felt a bit ashamed of myself. I, who had crawled over every inch of our local library, had not read a book in five years. The place you live in will remake you in its own image. I felt curious about this city that had remoulded Biju so magnificently. It would be interesting for me and my project to meet his friends and acquaintances in the City.

Biju's wife Liji had cooked a feast: boiled kappa, fried beef, chammanthi, moru and fried kozhuva. I briefly remembered the salt biscuits and tea that we served our guests at my house in Canada. In all these years, we had not even bothered to change the brand of the biscuits.

'When we didn't hear from you yesterday, I wondered if you were pulling a prank on us,' Liji said. I told her the tragic tale of my travels.

'The food is on the table. Please help yourself. I have to rush to catch the afternoon shift,' Liji said on her way out to the hospital. We opened a bottle of Jack Daniel and started playing the 'Do You Remember' game. For hours we were

immersed in nostalgia. And then Biju asked, 'Do you know where she is . . . your old friend?'

Did he know? I couldn't help wonder. I shook my head as if I had absolutely no idea.

'I saw her once in Kerala at someone's funeral. But we couldn't talk. What was her name again?'

'Jasmine,' I uttered the name and turned into an adolescent again.

I had told Biju all about James Hogan and his crazy ideas to wake up one's genius. But I didn't tell Biju that Jasmine was the reason I had decided on this city, without a second thought, when James asked me to pick a place, any place.

The City

Abdullah came early the next morning and offered to take me to see a few prospective office spaces. I told him that it would be better to wait till the rest of the team arrived. Then they could have a say in it as well.

'What kind of business do you want to start?' he asked. That's when I realized he had no idea why we were in the City. As per the instructions I had been given, I told him that we were there to conduct a market study of the banking sector.

Until recently the City was a Switzerland for the nouveau riche. It was impossible to count the piles of money that had gathered in the banks here. 'It's very different now. You will see for yourself. After all, that's why you are here,' Abdullah Janahi said, half passive, half sad.

Before embarking on this journey, I had briefly chatted with the writer who had hired us. Hiding behind the profile name 'SoulofStories', he/she gave me a few instructions. We should seek 'real life' and not history. Speak to lots of ordinary people. Don't tell anyone about the novel. At the end of our conversation, SoulofStories asked me, 'So why did you pick this city?'

I wanted to reply with one word. Jasmine. Instead I said that even though the City was a conflict zone, it had been named the City of Joy. I wanted to know why. I think SoulofStories was satisfied by my answer. There were no more questions.

The first thing I did that day was rent a car with some help from Abdullah. Figuring out a way to move around freely is the first freedom to aim for in a new place. At the car rental agency, I was surprised to see many Malayalis. At the apartment building, too, the receptionist, the cleaning staff, the watchman, the pool operator – they were all Malayalis. The department stores I had visited yesterday with Bijumon were also full of Malayalis. And now a Malayali called Reji was in front of me at the car rental agency. Bijumon had mentioned that there were three lakh Malayalis in the City.

Reji was pushing me towards the big cars. The rental fees were half of what they used to be and the cars came equipped with a GPS, he pointed out, making the City much more navigable. But I didn't want to sit behind a wheel doing what a machine ordered me to do. I wanted the streets of the City for myself. I wanted to get lost. I wanted to go down the

wrong street and return and wonder where to go next. That's travelling. I don't like streets with all the right answers. After all, I have been a student in James Hogan's classroom. Surely, I am obliged to be a little eccentric myself. I finally rented a cheap car of Japanese make.

It was time to turn to the task of getting to know the City and its people. Why not start now?

'So how is business?' I asked Reji.

'Very bad. No one comes here any more. You should have seen the old days. Tourists everywhere! In a single weekend, I would rent two–three hundred cars.' Reji's voice betrayed his distress. 'I don't know how much longer I can go on like this. It's been seven months since I got my salary. I forget the last time I sent any money home. Lots of debt. Haven't paid rent in a while and the landlord keeps asking for it every day. Our boss said whoever wants to leave can leave. And legally speaking, if you don't get paid for more than three months, you have no obligations to your employer. But I am hoping things will get better.'

'But why? Why not look for another job?' I asked.

'What can I say? Is money everything? I have been here for fifteen years. I was here for the golden age of the City. I enjoyed every bit of it. And now that the City has fallen on bad times, I just have to stick with it. Of course, I came here to make money. But I also made this city my home. I have friends here. I have obligations here. I feel committed to seeing the City through. What's the point of thinking only about money? What's the point of a life like that?'

I had no answer to that question. I drove into the City with that question, and other answerless questions, ringing in my head.

Shooting Star

Love is like a shooting star. It takes twelve years to complete a single orbit. In between it might disappear from view, it might get submerged in memory. But if it is true love, it will certainly return. In all the books I had read, love – whether lost or unrequited or forgotten – returned to haunt the lover in twelve years. If it didn't, the books told me, it was not true love after all. I learned soon enough that this was not just a romantic superstition. It was in the twelfth year – not the eleventh or thirteenth – that my own forgotten love returned with a vengeance.

The first sign was a message on Facebook: 'h-r-u?' I had to gaze at the profile picture for a long minute before I recognized the face behind that greeting. I hadn't realized time could redraw the contours of some faces so much. I saw a beloved face rising out of that stranger's profile picture. And my heart, like a deep-sea fish, dove into the past.

Till then I had thought of her as another woman entombed in an ordinary marriage. I never expected a resurrection. But it was as if she had rolled away the rock under which she was buried and stepped out of her tomb. Perhaps I had always known she would emerge from her tomb. Love has the power to move mountains.

How do you put twelve years into words? We talked to each other frantically. We updated each other on the new characters in our lives. We marked life events with the blandness of dates. We exchanged pictures and notes. Slowly we came back to the present. Only then did we catch our breaths. After that, we would occasionally send each other a 'hello' or 'how are you' on Facebook, greetings at festival times, a quick friendly note from time to time. What more could two people trapped in faraway cities do? I had never expected that life would bring me to her city so suddenly, so deliberately. And yet that which I did not even dare to dream of had happened.

I decided that the unexpected should not simply be unexpected, it should also be unintentional. That was the promise between Shanti and me. Though I told her, 'James Hogan insisted. Impossible to refuse,' etc., she was convinced that the reason I had agreed to take the assignment was Jasmine and nothing else. After all, she had known me several years. She also knew it would be impossible for her to change my mind. But she put forth a condition.

'Pratap, Jasmine must never know that you are coming to the City. You must wander through her city without her knowledge. You must find her through trial and error. You must not seek her help or anyone else's. Then one day you must appear in front of her suddenly. Your appearance will be so unexpected that she will faint in surprise. If you don't find her on your own, you must return to me without ever seeing her. Agreed?'

She had me there. It was as if in the middle of making

love, just as I was approaching the peak, she had stopped me and walked away. Jasmine had returned to my life like a rainbird announcing the end of a long drought. My Jasmine dream had given me a surge of energy. My pulse raced at the thought of seeing her. I felt weak with longing. Like a volcano about to explode, I yearned to tell Jasmine that I was coming to her. Three or four times I had logged into Facebook and written a message, 'I am coming to the City,' but had not sent it. Shanti had trapped me in a hole. In the name of the ten years of our marriage, I had to say yes. Of course, I could easily break this arbitrary agreement. How would Shanti know? I could make up a story about an accidental encounter. But I would be betraying myself, and what could be more humiliating. Beyond the promise I had given Shanti, this was my challenge to myself. I would find Jasmine without anyone's help.

After renting the car, I went around the streets of the City. I simply wanted to meet the City, introduce myself to it. I drove down long avenues and narrow galis. I roamed through shops and malls. I mapped the City's landmarks: Tripoli Hotel, Sana Fabrics, Baghdad Avenue, Teheran Carpets, Cairo Perfumes, Muscat Mall, Amman Tower. None of them seemed unfamiliar to me. In the last three years, I had roamed the City in my mind, holding Jasmine's hand in mine. In reality, all I knew was that she lived in some corner of the City and worked for an insurance company. But still, I kept an eye out for her, fully expecting that she would appear in front of me miraculously. From a Facebook photo of hers, I remembered the balcony in front of her flat, the peach paint

on its walls, the shape of its bars, the flowerpot on one side. From an email of hers, I knew that her flat faced a mosque with tall minarets. There was an almond tree near the bus stop where she waited for her bus. Whenever I saw an apartment building with balconies, or an almond tree, wherever I saw the minarets of a mosque, I looked around eagerly.

Jasmine, I am near you. I am in the City, breathing the same air you breathe. I want to see you. That is the only reason I am here. When I remember you are somewhere here, I am filled with greed. I am tempted to tell you I am here. I could easily spoil the surprise by sending you a message. But what would be the fun in that. We may have to wait a few more days, but I want to find you on my own, without any help, even from you. That is my real task here. Wait for me, Jasmine. Our reunion is not far away now.

That night I sent her a message: 'Jasmine, do you believe in miracles? If not, start believing . . .'

Vargas Llosa

Edwin arrived three days later. I went to receive him at the airport, partly because I had nothing else to do and partly because I did not have much faith in Abdullah Janahi's welcome methods. Edwin was coming from London, where he was part of the official research team of the anonymous writer who had hired our firm. Barely twenty-five years old, he seemed to be a high-octane character. We had only exchanged a few emails and had Skype chats by then. But he greeted me as if I were an old friend.

He told me that he was a relatively new member of the research team. Prior to this, he had helped research the life of horsemen in a village called Semeru Loang, near the volcanic Mount Bramo in Indonesia, and before that, he had travelled to Rwanda to research the life of General Augustin Bizimungu, who was responsible for the 1994 genocide. 'They were both unforgettable experiences,' he said, 'experiences that taught me the meaning of life and death. I was about to head to Italy to conduct research for a new novel set in Italian churches, when this opportunity came up. I have always wanted to see the Mesopotamian desert and the Arabian peninsula, so I happily jumped ship.'

There was a woman accompanying Edwin, and as we were walking to the parking lot with the luggage he introduced her to me, 'This is Asmo Andros, from Budapest. She lives close by. We can drop her off at her villa on the way, can't we?'

'Of course,' I replied.

Asmo's villa was in an island colony called Palm Gardens, near the airport. It was clearly a wealthy community and we were subjected to a very thorough security check at the gate. As we were driving past sea-facing villas, Asmo pointed towards another island. 'That's His Majesty's holiday palace. He visits once a year or so.'

'Oh no . . . Poor His Majesty. That little hovel over there is what the Arabs call a palace?' Edwin sniggered. 'Even an ordinary billionaire in my country would live in a much better house. And we don't even have any oil; we merely steal the oil from this country. When these royal types come to our country and see our houses, they must feel very ashamed of their so-called palaces.'

I thought of some of those splendid Indian palaces. Even a zamindar in India would live in more glory than some of these Middle Eastern royals.

As she got out of the car, Asmo gave me her visiting card and told me to call her if I needed any help. I wrote down my local phone number and gave her my *Toronto Sunday* business card. Edwin got a kiss. I could sense him getting aroused as he enjoyed their prolonged farewell.

‘We met on the flight,’ he said on the way to our apartment. I was astonished. I thought he had come to the City with his long-time girlfriend.

‘On the way here, Asmo was sitting next to me. At first she ignored me. She was reading her book very seriously as if she was a professor. When I said hello, she gave me a grim hi and went back to her book. How dare she? What is this book she is reading when she could be flirting with a blue-eyed stud like me? So I checked out her book, and it was *In Praise of the Stepmother* by Mario Vargas Llosa. I have read some of his other books but not that one, so I had no idea what it was about. I should have known something was up because after reading each sentence, the grim professor lady would give me a searching glance and laugh to herself. Then she would go back to reading. I decided it must be one of those books that make fun of men.

‘At some point she fell asleep, and I picked up the book from her lap and took a look at what she was reading. I couldn’t believe my eyes. She was reading about sex! It described, in full detail, a woman going wild with pleasure. Now I understood those glances, that laughter. When she woke up, I deliberately

picked up the book and started reading. She began laughing. That's how we introduced ourselves to each other.

'Her family is from Lebanon. When she was thirteen and the Lebanese civil war was at its height, they moved to Budapest. But she works here now as personal assistant to the CEO of a famous bank. She was just returning from a visit to her family in Budapest.

'When I told her that I was part of the research team of an internationally renowned writer, she got very curious. And excited. After that, she would not stop talking about writers and books. Has anyone actually met Dan Brown? Have I visited Agatha Christie's Greenway House? Why did Gabriel García Márquez punch Mario Vargas Llosa? Can someone please try and recover Sylvia Plath's lost novel? Had I been to the Hay Festival? What was my theory about Edgar Allan Poe's mysterious death? Who is the most hated character in world literature: Iago or Brutus? Whom did I prefer: Roberto Bolaño or María Amparo Escandón? Was Virginia Woolf a lesbian? Is it true that J.K. Rowling was writing the new Harry Potter? Where was Salman Rushdie hiding? Had I ever had the good fortune to visit Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence?

'This is what passes for small talk between book lovers. I replied as best I could. At some point, we were holding hands. It was like a meeting of souls. When you find someone of the same wavelength, it takes only moments to know, Mr Pratap. So you see, I am doubly fortunate to be stepping into this city . . .'

Fairy Tale

For Edwin the Middle East was a place of bloody legends and tales of terror. He thirsted to know what this region was really like, how it was moving forward despite its storied past.

‘People on our team were scared of this project,’ he said. ‘That’s why it had to be outsourced. I was the only one who was disappointed about that decision. So I jumped at the opportunity to come here when *Toronto Sunday* asked for someone to do some initial project guidance. Everyone in my team pestered me with questions: You turned down the trip to Italy to go where? What city have you chosen for the first study? What’s so special about this city? When I showed them where the City was on the world map, Kelly John, who has a bit of a soft corner for me, fainted. With Saudi Arabia on one side and Iran on the other, I was not surprised by her reaction. But I was not scared, I was excited. I have always been curious about the City, how it rose out of dust like an enchanted land in a fairy tale.

‘It was not just a journalist’s interest or a European’s jealousy. I, too, have an old connection to the City. My great-grandfather George Martin Lease spent a lot of his youth here. In fact, you could say he is responsible for the City’s remarkable growth and its current misfortunes. You must have heard of Major Frank Holmes, who found the first oil reserves in this region and came to be known as “the father of oil”. My great-grandfather was his best friend and a member of his prospecting team. They were both geologists. They met and bonded while working in the British Army’s

supply section during the First World War. Both of them dreamed of oil. When they came to Iraq during the war, they were both convinced that there were oil deposits in the soil. They were standing on this Middle Eastern soil when Frank Holmes turned to my great-grandfather and said, "I smell oil." After the war, they both left the army and turned to oil prospecting. Holmes had some experience looking for gold in South Africa and my great-grandfather had spent time in the coal mines of India. That was it. They wandered all over the Mesopotamian desert and the Persian peninsula sniffing for oil. They couldn't find any sponsors for their crazy ideas. They were discouraged. Mocked, in fact. Imagine, oil in this savage land. But they were not quitters. Their instinct told them there was a deep reservoir of oil somewhere underneath all that desert soil. Finally, they got some support from Eastern and General Syndicate Limited. Soon after that, they were able to find the oil and prove they were not just two crazy old men. They had started in 1925 and it was in 1931 that they found the oil. In the summer of 1932, oil started gushing out of the first oil well in the Middle East. That changed the course of this region's history. My great-grandfather returned to London, happy with his discovery. He died of cholera soon after and disappeared from the history of oil. But Holmes lived till 1947. He was honoured for his discovery. And that, my friend, is why they call him "the father of oil".

Even four generations later, my family talks proudly of George Martin Lease and his oil days. In our living room, we still display his photos, and a photocopy of the original agreement between his company and the rulers of this land.

‘The moment the children of our family could piece words together, they would start trying to read that agreement. We read it like a fairy tale. We would recite that agreement the way other kids sang “Johnny Johnny Yes Papa”. Look, even now I don’t have to stop to remember it.’

Sitting on the balcony of my room enjoying a beer, Edwin recited.

‘Agreement between Sheikh Al Khalifah of the one part, hereafter called “the Sheikh” and Eastern and General Syndicate Limited of the other part, hereafter called “the Company”. The Sheikh grants to the Company an exclusive exploration licence for a period not exceeding two years, from the date of this agreement hereby the Company shall be entitled throughout the whole of the territory under his control to explore and search the surface of such territories to a depth not exceeding twenty feet for natural gas, petroleum asphalt and ozokerite, and enjoy the privileges set out in the first schedule to this agreement; and he undertakes on behalf of himself and his successors to grant to the Company further exclusive licence and privileges, if the Company’s actions meet with the Sheikh’s satisfaction, as guided by the advice of the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf. Dated the Second of December 1925.’

Two Young Men

There were two more members in our team, but their arrival kept getting delayed. Their tickets had to be rebooked several

times. 'Visas are not a problem for you Canadians and Europeans,' Abdullah Janahi explained. 'But the two people we are waiting for are Asians. They have to jump through hoops to get their visas.' I remembered how I walked out of the airport after five minutes of visa processing while labourers from Asian countries were being shoved into long lines as if they were cattle. Wherever it goes, the First World passport opens doors.

We could not wait for them indefinitely. It was time to start work. Edwin and I picked one of the four office spaces that Abdullah Janahi took us to. Though a bit small, it was near our apartment. It was also furnished. The rent made us hesitate, but as soon as Abdullah Janahi heard that we liked it, he went ahead and rented it, without even discussing with us. The next day, he got us phone and Internet connections.

I had no idea where to start. It's not as if we could simply waylay people on the street. How would we figure out which one of the thousands of people passing us carried interesting stories within them? Besides, would anyone we approach want to bare their souls to strangers? Could the stories we gathered from newspapers and official documents be anything other than superficial? How far could a writer go with such research? Though Edwin was supposedly there to give us guidance, I couldn't bring myself to ask a much younger man for advice. But we would often go out together to see the City. He was still enthralled at the idea of being in an Arab city. Each and every thing he saw fuelled his enchantment. The man on the cycle with birdcages strapped behind him;

the Bengali migrant roasting peanuts by the side of the road; little Arab urchins who tailed us, offering to sell us the latest cell phones at rock-bottom prices; donkey carts with oil tanks in them; women dressed from head to toe in black, posing for photos; the middle-aged man who spread out his prayer rug on the sidewalk and started praying – everything moved him to wonder.

Whenever he saw an Arab in traditional robes, he would jump out of the car and stare as if he were in a dream. He thought of Arabs as characters in some folk tale. 'I see bygone eras in their faces, Pratap.' That was his half-stupid, half-innocent explanation.

One day he went running into a random shop and asked, 'Where can I see a sheikh?'

A Malayali who happened to be at the shop said, 'Oh, we keep a pet sheikh somewhere around here in a cage. But right now he's out grazing.' Not comprehending, Edwin stood there like an idiot while laughter exploded in the shop. He would have cried if he knew why they were laughing. When he persisted, the shopkeeper pointed to a local cafe nearby, saying sheikhs often visited it. Edwin insisted that we go and sit in the cafe. Luckily no sheikhs passed that way, or I would have witnessed more of his melodrama.

Some days I would wander around the City on my own. I would visit shopping malls and galis. I was not so much searching for authentic life experiences in the City as I was hoping to run into Jasmine. I longed to see her in the street. During those wanderings, I met a couple more acquaintances

from my home town. I didn't even know they lived here. They were surprised to see me as well. But the person I desired never appeared in front of me.

I was seeing the City, of course, but I was not experiencing it. Like any other city, it seemed to wake up, go through the motions of the day, and go to sleep. The usual crowds, the usual rush hour. There were no signs of the protests that had recently taken place. To think about the fear this city had evoked when I had mentioned my travel plans. 'Be careful, Pratap. It is a place where bombs go off constantly.' Shanti was crying when she bid me farewell. 'Anyone can get shot anywhere at any time of the day. If you find it difficult, don't think twice. Come back.' Some of my co-workers even offered me their condolences, 'We didn't realize James Hogan disliked you this much.' Like every other city with a curfew, this city too had certain inconveniences. That was all. Barely enough to fill a three-column newspaper article. My best bet was to meet Jasmine as soon as possible and return.

Another day when Edwin and I were driving around, he started taking photos of buildings and billboards and cars and mosques and minarets. He wanted to capture as much of the City as possible. When our car stopped at a signal, two young Arab men got out of the car in front and approached us. 'Are you taking photos of us?' they asked. They didn't believe us when we told them we were not. They asked to see the pictures. By then the signal had changed and the vehicles behind us were honking at us. The young men went running back to their car and started following us. We tried to lose them, but they were persistent. Finally we parked at a bus

stop. They came running towards us again. We got ready to be beaten up, but they started pleading with us instead, 'Please delete those photos. We are innocent.' When we got out of the car, they fell at our feet and started crying loudly. At first I thought they were mocking us. But when I realized they were in earnest, I asked them why they were so scared. They were convinced that we were plain-clothes investigators and had followed them around to gather incriminating evidence. Only after we showed them every single photo on Edwin's camera did they believe us and let go of our feet.

I did not understand then why those young men were so terrified of something as simple as a photograph.

Socialism

That weekend I went to the Malayali Samajam of the City with Bijumon. It was an elegant building with huge grounds. A tennis match was being played in the court. The library was full of readers. Biju introduced me to various officials in the many offices. Some of them were anxious to hear about the possibility of migrating to Canada. I told them that there was always room for economic refugees in Canada, as long as they were ready to live in slavery. There were no more questions after that.

A seminar on 'Globalization and a Changing World' was taking place at the same time. It began with thanking His Majesty for the opportunity to organize the seminar. This was followed by fierce speeches about how globalization was

taking the form of neo-colonialism, the dictatorial tendencies of world leaders and the importance of popular resistance against anti-democratic rulers. I, too, was invited to speak, but I declined. I heard someone mutter, 'What can a Canadian say about colonialism? He is probably all for globalization.' I did not respond to that. I had only pity for those who made political resistance speeches after thanking His Majesty.

By the time we left, it was almost midnight. Bijumon, his friend Raju Narayan and I got into my car and went in search of food.

Raju used to be a very active member of the communist party of Kerala. Five years ago, when he was working at the district level of the party, he had taken leave of absence for five years to come to the City. 'I had some debts and I needed to repay them. And afterwards I just did not return. That's how it goes in this city,' he said. 'It doesn't let go of you. The way I look at it is when human life achieves a certain standard, that's socialism right there. At the minimum, socialism has been achieved in my own life; I paid my debts and now I have some savings in the bank. So why should I return to my old life?' I couldn't really understand what Raju was saying.

On the way to the restaurant, we got caught in traffic. Several police vehicles were buzzing around in front of us, their lights flashing. Other vehicles with blaring alarms were trying to get around the traffic by driving up the sidewalk. At first I thought there must have been an accident. Though Biju and Raju asked me not to, I got out of the car, unable to tamp down my newshound curiosity. A few vehicles up,

I saw a fire on the street. Maybe a car had caught fire? But when I got up close, I saw that tyres had been set on fire and were blocking the road. Police were trying to put out the fire. At the same time, lit torches were being hurled at them from behind a nearby wall. The police were fighting back with tear-gas bombs. I felt my eyes tearing up. I ran back to the car.

Biju and Raju laughed at me. ‘Told you,’ they mocked. ‘Then we thought, why not let the Canadian learn the hard way.’

Within ten–fifteen minutes, the fires had been put out and the traffic started moving again.

‘This is a regular Arab custom,’ the communist leaned in from the back seat to inform me. ‘This is how they celebrate weekends. Some fire on the streets, some tear-gas bombs. Maybe a few bullets to go around. Most weekends a couple of them will get slaughtered. The next day they will get a grand burial. That’s how they live. Don’t give it another thought.’

‘Have you ever tried to understand what the real issues are?’ I asked Raju, swallowing my anger.

‘What’s there to understand?’ Raju asked, genuinely surprised. ‘They are just a bunch of rowdies and religious fanatics. They destroyed this country. You have no idea, Mr Pratap, how peacefully and happily us foreigners lived here under His Majesty’s rule. There was no country more beautiful. It was like the Garden of Eden. And His Majesty saw us as his own subjects. We had every freedom we could possibly want. We had churches and temples and gurdwaras and schools and bars and our own Malayali Samajam where we elected our own administration. In fact, Mr Pratap, the

communist party of Kerala has a branch committee here. Every year we donated lakhs of rupees to the party fund in Kerala. No one stopped us or questioned us. I don't think we would have had this much freedom in a communist country. And still these locals wouldn't stop moaning about how they had no freedom. They kept crying for democracy. I don't understand what more they could possibly want.'

Raju was getting more and more excited as he spoke.

'Do you know why we are telling you all this? Short-term visitors like you see all this noise in the streets and get scared and report that terrible things are happening here.' Bijumon took up the conversation now. 'And that's exactly what they want – to ruin the country's reputation. And then destroy the economy. There is an international agenda behind all this. If this were happening back in India, they would all be dead. His Majesty is too good for this world, that's why they are still alive.'

That night we ate chicken tikka and lamb chops and beef kebabs and hummus in a Lebanese restaurant. But I could not stomach it. When I returned to the apartment, I threw it all up. Alongside all that roasted meat, there were some undigested words as well in my puddle of vomit.

Flash Mob

The remaining two members of our team arrived over the next couple of days. Vinod Chopra from Mumbai reached first.

When I heard that he had resigned from his job at Reuters to come here, I wondered if like me and my long-lost love or Edwin and his romantic notions, he too had some other motive. Compared to a job at Reuters, what we offered was peanuts.

‘No, nothing like that. I just wanted a change of scene. I don’t work anywhere for more than three years. By then I get tired of the organization and the organization gets tired of me. After that I have to leave, never mind how tempting the offer is. That’s what happened in Reuters too. I caught the whiff of a rumour that they were planning to transfer me to some rural office. Before that axe fell, I fled from there. In all honesty, I hate Indian villages. All the problems in the country – terrorism, religious fundamentalism, caste, superstition – start in the villages and in those huge joint families. If it were up to me, I would burn down every village. I love cities, where you can breathe the fresh air of democracy and secularism. Now that I am here, I can breathe safe again. What a great city. I am looking forward to living here and breathing its fresh air!’ That was Vinod Chopra.

Next came Riyaz Malik. The oldest among us, he was from Sindh in Pakistan. Till he got here, he was the bureau chief of the *Pakistan Chronicle* in Karachi for fifteen years. He also had some experience as a lexicographer at the Urdu Institute. ‘There is a huge Pakistani population in this country, which is one of the reasons I got this job, along with the fact that I can handle Arabic. And, of course, it’s a nice dollar salary and the opportunity to work in a foreign company, with a chance

to meet some friends who live in the City. Nothing more. Not even the desire to live and report from a war zone. I don't have to leave Pakistan for that. Just walking up and down a street in Waziristan or Peshawar would give me enough material for four novels.'

I don't know if it was Abdullah Janahi's decision or an instruction from *Toronto Sunday*, but there was a certain discrimination in our living arrangements. This caused a rift between us right at the beginning. They gave Edwin a flat, while the rest of us had to share another flat. Riyaz Malik and I did not make a big deal of this. We had a spacious three-bedroom flat with plenty of personal space for each of us. But Vinod kicked up a fuss. His contract did not specify that he had to share his accommodation; he yelled at Abdullah Janahi, saying he wanted his own flat. Riyaz and I felt it was justified. He had come here from the world-famous Reuters. Edwin was a mere copywriter. Abdullah Janahi said that Edwin got his own flat because he was the news coordinator. Vinod retorted that it was racism. As *Toronto Sunday's* ambassador in the City, I had to get involved. I calmed Vinod down by telling him we would discuss this with the head office.

The next day Vinod asked me for a ride. Since his Indian driving licence was not valid in the City, he was not able to rent a car. I went with him to visit a friend of his, Priyanka Agarwal, who worked as a radio jockey at a radio station. She lived alone in a flat in the city centre. They knew each other from Mumbai, and they talked a lot about those days. I enjoyed the time I spent with them. Though they were talking

to each other, they included me in the conversation. What Vinod had to say to Priyanka, he would say to me as well, and when Priyanka had something to say to Vinod, she would involve me. I never felt like I was the third wheel.

On the way back, Vinod told me how he had met Priyanka. It seemed everyone had an interesting story about how they met their friend in the City. 'I first met Priyanka at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. I was living in Delhi and had come to Mumbai to report on an international business conference. I was waiting for the train when suddenly a young woman came running into the station and started dancing. Was it some film shoot? A crowd gathered around the woman to watch and I joined them. Suddenly another woman joined her from the crowd. Then two young men, then four more, then ten. Soon all of us on that platform were dancing. There were some people like me, a bit hesitant. But our neighbours got us dancing too. You know those Mexican waves you see in football stadiums? I had never seen people move in such synchrony, without any practice. It was an example of how easy it is to manipulate a crowd. You could start a riot that easily. Or you could start a dance party. Imagine the magnetic pull of a crowd if it could get a serious journalist like me dancing.

'My partner in that flash mob was a young woman, maybe twenty years old. We were holding hands, but we did not even notice each other. We were simply two souls without bodies, swaying to the music. Only when people started leaving after the dance did we come to our senses and pull back, and finally looked at each other.

‘I have a very special skill. I know how to tell someone’s character from the shape and appearance of their toenails. When I was a student, I got obsessed with Ayurveda and the Puranas, so I joined a Siddha Ashram and started studying Samudrika Lakshanam. Bodies have their own language and you can understand a lot from looking at the head, face, forehead, eyes, lips, feet and nails. I focused on the nails. It’s very easy to study someone’s nails. The nail of your big toe can reveal a lot about your luck, health, good and bad qualities. But you have to study it scientifically.

‘Since then I have studied every woman who has crossed me, as long as she was not wearing socks and shoes. They have no idea I am reading their souls. And Priyanka’s nails had something I had not seen in the thousands of nails I had read till then. Though she appeared tranquil on the outside, she carried a storm of lust inside her. I was amazed at how strong her desire was. For years I had longed to see a nail like that.

‘I could not let her simply disappear in Mumbai. I introduced myself. Within ten minutes of conversation, I had broken the ice and we were drinking coffee together. I used that half an hour to win her over with my words, and we went to a hotel. Three or four times after that, we shared a bed when I visited Mumbai. When Priyanka became an obsession, I moved to Mumbai. But by then she had moved to the City. I could not abandon her. No, I am not in love with her. Love is bullshit. I have fucked several other women, before and after Priyanka. But no one has ravaged my body the way she has. She is a beast in bed. So when I couldn’t get her in Mumbai, I had to follow her where she went. If I

hadn't got this opportunity to come here, I would probably have come here on a labour visa! So you see, I am not here to fulfil some white writer's fantasy book dream. I am here for sex. I want women. And I know that the City is like a safety valve for this conservative Muslim region. You can find export quality women from at least 120 countries in the hotels here. I want to taste at least fifty of them. Food and sex are my twin passions. Of course, one could spend one's life obsessing over art and literature. But there's a limit to those experiences. They are all external. You can't help tiring of them. There are only two experiences you can sense deep inside your body: food and sex. We will never tire of those two.

'I didn't tell you all this earlier because I immediately disliked those two bewakoofs,' Vinod continued. 'That Edwin is a racist white pig. His ancestors were thieving dogs who stole from our country. Have you looked closely at his face? He still has that entitlement. If you give him an inch, he will colonize us again. That's why I made a fuss about a new flat for myself. Not because I find it inconvenient to live with you. And that other guy, Riyaz Malik – you made a bad choice there. He is a thief and a fanatic. He will drag us into danger. Pratap, have you noticed his fingernails? As per the Samudrika Lakshanam, bud-shaped fingernails show a manipulative, deceptive personality. We have to be very careful, Pratap. We are two Indians. We must stand by each other. Don't tell anyone what I have told you . . .'

Vinod had created waves of suspicion in my mind. The tides started pulling them in.