

Botros checked his watch again. It was six minutes after nine. Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel of the sun baked minibus, he cranked up the air conditioning. An ambulance pulled onto the lot, offloading a casualty from the night before, a result of the resurgent violence. As the paramedics dragged the gurney out of the vehicle, Botros looked into his lap. His only responsibility was to the victims left alive.

A woman rounded the hospital into the lot, shifting towards the minibus with a dead, heavy pace. With her Iddah recently ended, she began meeting with Botros. He turned the engine to meet her halfway.

“Happy morning, Najwa.” He bit his tongue for still struggling with the Arabic.

“Good morning, Doctor.” She gazed at the concrete.

“Najwa, please, I want you to call me Botros.”

“Of course, Botros.”

“Have you seen anyone else?”

“I have not.”

“It is best that I go find them then.” Botros stepped out of the van with the engine running. He opened the passenger door, allowing Najwa to sit and cool herself. He trotted towards the hospital’s entrance.

Two of his patients sat in the waiting room, engaged in their daily rituals. Karrim sat against a window, with a copy of the day’s edition of *Azzaman*. Karrim was scanning more than reading, maybe searching for articles to find or for articles to avoid.

Mohammed sat several seats from Karrim to listen to his iPod while it charged. He stared at the device, running his fingers across every dent and knick on its aluminum frame.

“Are we ready to go?”

Mohammed rolled his head back to stare at Botros, pulling out his headphones to try and hear again.

“I guess I am.” Karrim folded his newspaper to rise from his seat. Mohammed followed suit.

“Where is Jabbar?”

“Damned if I know; I haven’t seen him.”

“Alright, I guess we will get him on our way.”

Botros and his accompaniment headed back to the van. Najwa observed the dusty scenery as Karrim and Mohammed clambered in the back. Botros slammed his door and drove to Jabbar’s home, pulling into his driveway.

He rapped on the door. It opened, barely, and Jabbar’s face appeared from within the gloom. “Hello, Doctor.”

“Hello, Jabbar. Did you forget that we were meeting at the hospital today?”

“No.”

“Did you forget that we are to go to the lake today?”

“No.”

“Is something the matter?”

“I feel ill.”

“Does this illness feel different than usual?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think a trip to the lake will help?”

“No.”

“I think it will, Jabbar. Everyone is eager for you to join us and have fun at the lake.”

“Maybe a different time, Doctor.” Jabbar began to close the door.

“Jabbar, please.”

The door clicked shut.

“Come with us to the lake.” The door sealed the cage, but Botros was unsure which side laid the prison. “Please, Jabbar. Come with us.”

The words rattled off the door’s frame.

Botros glanced at the parked minibus; it hummed back at him while its passengers watched.

“Jabbar, if you come with us to the lake, I promise you can skip the next week’s session. How does that sound?”

The threshold remained sealed.

“How about two sessions, Jabbar? One day at the lake instead of two in my office. We do not even have to talk at the lake today.”

The door kept still. Slowly, it creaked open, wider than before. Jabbar’s stomach bulged under a tight t-shirt. It had once belonged to his son. “Let me get a swim suit, Doctor.”

“Please, Botros, Jabbar. Botros.”

Jabbar nodded and receded into the black. Botros waited on the porch.

“Good of you to show up.” Karrim said as Jabbar opened the back door.

Botros glared at Karrim, but Jabbar was completely unaware. He simply stood beside the car staring in at Mohammed. They had never met each other before, and

maybe today was not the time for making acquaintances. Jabbar stood there staring at the boy, dumbstruck.

“You going to join us?” Karrim huffed.

Jabbar crept into the van and sat next to Mohammed, whose only salutation was “I like your shirt.”

At thirty-seven minutes after nine, it was finally time to leave for the lake. Botros wove back through the city, taking Route 10 westwards, over the Euphrates and out of town.

“I am glad everyone is coming to the lake. It is good to be able to leave Fallujah and enjoy the day.” He checked on his audience: Najwa had said nothing since entering the van. She meditated and nodded with her distant gaze. Karrim appeared immersed in his paper, but he was listening. Mohammed reclined in his seat with his headphones back on, but he lowered the volume whenever Botros spoke. Jabbar, like Najwa, looked forward, but he stared wide-eyed as if recovering from shellshock. Maybe he was being taken too far too quickly.

Lake Habbaniyah’s eastern waters reflected the glare of the ten thirty-two sun as Botros drove up. The minibus rolled out onto the sand to park along the shore among the other vehicles. The waters stretched towards the horizon indefinitely. Everyone disembarked.

“Enjoy your time here everyone, and let us not separate much. There are amenities and refreshments at the buildings over there. We will meet to leave at,” he checked his watch, “two thirty.”

“Can I go get something to eat?” Mohammed asked.

“Did you bring yourself some money?”

“Yeah.” Mohammed clutched a few dinars.

“Just making sure.” Botros smiled.

Mohammed ran towards the stalls, zooming past Jabbar, who gently tugged at the small t-shirt constricting his body. Karrim plopped on the shore in his slacks and polo and returned to his paper. Najwa waded into the water. Botros changed into his own swim trunks, which he wore beneath his clothes. He placed his clothes on the sand, resting his watch on top. He joined Najwa in the water, making sure to keep a professional distance.

“It is a nice day. What do you think, Najwa?”

“It’s a beautiful day to be outside.”

“Are you glad to be out of the city?”

She watched the water flow around her. “Yes.”

“Sometimes, it is good to be able to leave your home and go somewhere new.”

“Sometimes, I just don’t want to return.”

“I understand. It is hard to remain in a place that reminds you of so much. It might anger, sadden, or frustrate you, but it is still home. Men can only torture one place and its people so long before they are defeated. Eventually, people here will be healed.”

“What will happen to you, Doctor, when the people are healed?”

“Me?”

“Will you leave too?”

After an unintentionally long pause, Botros responded. “I don’t know.”

Mohammed got his snacks, Karrim continued to stare at his paper, and Najwa and Jabbar had intervals of wading out into the water and kicking sand on the shore. Botros

and Mohammed would join them, but Karrim planted himself on the sand, refusing to move, despite prods from the Doctor. Botros gave up, joining him instead. When Karrim wasn't busy memorizing his paper, he joined Botros to look out onto the water.

Botros lifted his watch from its nest to take the time: four minutes after one. He slipped it back on his wrist and retrieved his clothes, fashioning a pillow. He decided to lie on the sand to pass another half hour, but as soon as he had rested his head, a loud blare of synth and bass woke him. A car stopped on the road to drop off a passenger. The young man carried a backpack and skulked towards the stalls, keeping his hands in his pockets. Botros continued to lie and watch the man as the van pulled away.

Mohammed trotted back towards the stalls with his headphones on, and as he passed the man, he began to follow Mohammed. The man seemed to ask him something. Mohammed removed his headphones, stopped only long enough to hear the question, and shook his head in reply. The man continued to follow Mohammed, who tried to keep abreast and ignore him. The man gave Mohammed a shove. Botros's heart stirred, but he stayed still. Mohammed took the shove and continued to wave the man off and avoid him, but the man kept pace. With one good shove, Mohammed tumbled onto the ground.

Jabbar sprinted towards the scuffle, attracting Najwa and Karrim's attention. Botros sweated in the afternoon sun. Jabbar shouted at the man and pushed him off his feet. He knelt to help Mohammed up, and the man rose to his feet and began to shout at Jabbar, who returned with remarks equally as loud. The two men yelled and pushed at each other as Mohammed watched.

Botros ran to intervene, but before he could respond, Jabbar landed a blow on the man's jaw. The man held the spot with one hand and reached into his backpack with the

other. He spun his arm back around to train a pistol on Jabbar, who protected Mohammed with his body.

“Sir. Sir!” Botros rushed between the gunman and the others. He stretched his arms to cover his patients. The gun was leveled at him, but its owner simply stood and stared at his newest interloper. “What do you want, sir?”

“I want the boy’s music player!” He shook the gun at Mohammed’s head.

“It’s mine!”

“You can’t have it!” Jabbar barked.

“Sir, please, do not take his music player. Let him keep it.”

“Why? Do you have something better for me?”

Botros froze. He certainly didn’t have much of anything on him. “What do you want?”

“Your friend decided on hitting me-”

“After you pushed down the boy!”

“-so I think you owe me that music player. Or better.”

Botros glanced at his two patients. In the distance, Karrim watched the scene, keeping Najwa away. Botros’s arms were still splayed wide to defend Mohammed and Jabbar. The sun glinted at the end of his wrist.

“Take my watch.” He risked lowering his shield to peel the timepiece off his wrist.

“What?”

“The watch is gold. It is valuable. You can sell it and buy yourself a music player.”

He held it at arm’s length to coax the man.

“Why should I believe you?”

“Sir, I promise that you can buy yourself a music player with this watch.”

Botros stared over the top of the gun. It kept its aim on him.

“Give me the watch then.”

The man steadied the gun as he snatched the timepiece. He inched away from the group, weapon still fixed. When he cleared several feet, he sprinted towards the road, between the few lakeside buildings. The three walked back to the van, where Karrim and Najwa waited. The waves swept away Karrim’s newspaper, its news washed from the pages. Other swimmers had taken notice of the conflict and started to congregate.

“We should go.”

They loaded back into the van. Mohammed held his iPod, smiling. Jabbar glanced frequently at Mohammed and smiled too. Karrim appeared bored while Najwa inspected the minibus’s ceiling.

At an unknown time, the van returned to the Bahrain Hospital parking lot, where the group dispersed. Their sessions would start again within the week.