

## **In Search of Honor**

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Fatima stirred the Shawrabat 'Adas and placed the lid over the pot to seal the flavor. Her husband's cousin looked at her from under his thick, dark eyebrows as if saying, "Can't you cook more quietly?" though he said nothing, just maintained that half-lidded stare with his chin still tilted into his morning newspaper. She knew better than to comment. Kareem knew everyone it seemed, and to anger such a man could cause trouble for more than just her.

Kareem moved his teacup towards the edge of the table and pointed with his chin. He was single, despite his age and education and connections. He worked with a group of bullies he had hand-picked from within the ranks of the traffic enforcement division of the Baghdad Police Force, a group, like him, famous for harassing citizens and pocketing bribes. Such tactics were common in Baghdad, just as they were before the war, only the palms accepting the bribes had changed. What a waste, Fatima thought, looking at him—a law degree and he settled for extorting money from scared drivers. Of course, after the years of sanctions and now the years of war, who could blame him for making money where he could? And how many Shiite men practiced law while the Baathists ruled? Why, look at her husband, she thought, an engineer reduced to signing up for the Iraqi National Police, practically exchanging a death warrant for a pay check. As much as she wanted to say to Kareem, "I am not your wife," she obediently filled his cup in silence, as was her place, and left him to read *Al-Rafidayn*. She read the date on the newspaper—September 22, 2005—and sighed, wondering how much longer this war would continue.

Her mother-in-law did not stir from the dark corner she occupied. Fatima never knew if the woman slept in her silence or watched the world without comment. Perhaps the old woman was onto something, she thought, for to sleep through this life held its attractions.

Her husband seemed to work all the time in his new position and often he failed to come home at night. On such nights she lay awake with worry, hearing gunfire and sirens. Often she heard explosions and thought she would soon be among the women required to report at the morgue to identify their husbands among the photographs of dead and mutilated bodies that lined bulletin boards and filled ever more volumes of oft-fingered photo albums. The closer he worked with the Americans, the more certain she became that he would be killed. And here they were practically newlyweds, married just under two years. How often she reminisced about the revelry and noise of their wedding party, for it seemed such juxtaposition to the everyday terror of this endless war, the happiness of its celebration a respite from dreary uncertainty, the laughter of friends and the music a welcome departure from the ordinary fear. At the wedding the only seemingly familiar sound came from young men firing their weapons into the air. To marry in a time of war. She wondered if such a marriage was unnatural. Or was it the most natural compulsion, to want someone else with one, to love in the face of death.

Her husband wanted babies too. That, she promised herself, she would not do. To bring a child into this madness was simply an act of cruelty. So, secretly, despite the risks of being caught, she maintained her contacts with college friends at the clinic where she had interned and monthly she purchased birth control pills through a third party her friends arranged. The cost was high, eating away at a collection her progressive family had provided her in secret before her marriage, another thing of dire consequence were it found out. It seemed like blood money now, so many of her family members were dead, including her father and two of her brothers. Others, like her mother, had fled to Syria with her youngest siblings. She knew nothing more of their fate now, these years of war gone by, heard no more even of wishes passed in chains of mouth to ear whispered messages from those who still managed to travel out of the country. No, she would bear no children until the killing ended. Sometimes though, she feared the only end to the killing would come when there were no more left to die.

Fatima feared the market. Markets were frequent targets for car bombs and suicide bombers wearing backpacks or carrying satchels. High numbers of casualties brought visibility. Visibility for what cause she no longer knew. Just as she feared for her

husband, for police stations were regular and significant targets, she knew each trip to the market meant a greater possibility of violence. When she felt fear like static energy in the air as she walked to the market, her fear for her husband grew more vivid. Harun's station house had been bombed just the month before and often the same station would be attacked again and again and would be so long as there were visible targets, men in uniform who thereby seemed representative of some authority even though nearly every man served some agent or power of his own choosing and nearly all simply served for the paycheck. Those who enlisted in a belief in freedom were among the first to die, and those who survived either grew so weary they turned their backs or so entrenched in bureaucracy they couldn't recall those beliefs any longer. Indeed her husband seemed the most unlikely sort of policeman, an educated liberal more at home in coffee shops exchanging stories with friends, a bookish man, prone to deep thinking and slow to action, a man who wanted no more than a garden with date trees and a shaded place to sit and read. But now he was a policeman with the National Police Force and therefore a target, a job he took because they needed the money and, perhaps, to touch some of this new Shiite power that came with positions of authority. Of course he quickly learned that there was no real authority in a corrupt and infantile system, no respect aside from the power of violence.

She walked towards the market aware mostly of so many men present on the streets, standing within doorways or clustered in stores and cafes, so many men without steady work when there was so much to do, as the rubble and clutter of the buildings and streets indicated. They lived in a mixed neighborhood, one much like where she had grown up, a neighborhood relatively peaceful in comparison to most of the city, one the Americans and the rickety Iraqi government officially deemed safe, yet still there had been bombings and IEDs. It was a place where the police and the Americans had cleared a house but the debris remained—burned out car bodies, broken bricks and rubble on the sidewalk before a mutilated building, gaps in its walls where one could see deep beyond the tightly-lined street.

The noise of voices transacting business grew as she neared the fringes of the market. Vendors set up makeshift tables at its edges, hocking useless junk: plastic sunglasses and used electronics and absurd household items scavenged from

abandoned buildings. Some clearly only traded in goods liberated from residences where a family had fled their home. Fatima had to weave through a maze of such materials to reach the center of the market where the grocery vendors occupied the same stalls many of their ancestors had.

She skirted a tangle of parked bicycles. A group of boys circled near the back of market stall that served kabobs, the spicy smell of the cooking meat permeating the air. The boys cheered and jeered, apparently watching two men fight. She stepped quickly away from the commotion. Just then someone called her name. She saw no one familiar in the faces around her and pushed on although she was certain she had heard her name called a second time. She turned again and saw no one, so she continued walking until she reached the big building at the center of the market where most of the grocery vendors were located. The whole time there she felt as if she were being watched. She scanned for suspicious looking men. She imagined she heard the percussion of a bomb exploding when others in the crowd jostled her or brushed her arm. She could not stop thinking about the hundreds of people across the city who were kidnapped each month. Almost always they were found dead, their bodies, often beheaded, dumped in alleys or in the river or at the edges of the city amongst warehouses and business parks. Just last spring her best friend's husband had been taken. The kidnapers asked for \$20,000, and like all their friends, she and Harun had contributed what they could. The body was found three days later.

She had lived in this neighborhood for nearly two years, ever since her marriage. Before the war with the Americans it had been a nice middle class neighborhood, and while still safer than most, no one had money these days and the neighborhood reflected its inhabitant's struggles like a face pock-marked by acne. Here in the marketplace she knew that among the people around her there were likely friends present, yet, like her, these days most people made their purchases quickly, without the camaraderie of conversation, and hurried back home. More women had begun to wear full veils and nearly all wore hijabs at least, and now, she thought, it seemed as if the headscarves were more often pulled across their faces. More and more women wore jilbabs nearly all the time and Fatima longed for her school days as a girl, those days of prosperity from oil money, the days of secularism, her innocent time in school and

descending into books. She longed for that time even if the presence of the secular also meant familiarity with the Baathists in their pressed green uniforms always watching. This had been a progressive neighborhood like the one she had grown up in, a place where many women were professionals and where Sunnis and Shiites either got along or at least largely ignored one another, a place where the Baathist propaganda was present but largely ignored unless officials were looking.

Now it often seemed a neighborhood full of strangers. At night or any time the power suddenly kicked off—they were lucky to have power for six hours a day now—the place felt entirely transformed and nearly all stayed home, perhaps not feeling safe but certainly feeling in familiar confines at least. At home they were among the family men, and many of them, like Kareem, had connections that helped create a veil of security.

She bought what little she could afford, some stringy lamb, some rice, a bit of fruit—someone, she thought, must be getting rich off these fruit prices—and hurried out of the market with her purchases.

Two blocks from her home, she passed a house where the husband had been kidnapped while at work nearly a week ago. The sounds of women wailing carried into the street from within the house, and she knew the kidnapping had been resolved in the way most were. This is the sound of Iraq, she thought, as she hurried down the block. At the corner where she turned to go on home, two battered sedans loaded with men were parked, and subconsciously she pulled her hijab lower into her eyes as she passed.

That night her husband did not return home from work until nearly midnight after having been at work since six that morning. She lathered him with hugs and kisses as if he had returned from a long journey.

“Quit this work,” she pleaded. “It is too dangerous. What am I to do if I lose you?”

“What are we to eat if I do not work?” He had worked on the design team for an engine manufacturer before sanctions had closed the company after the first war with the Americans, and they had never imagined their lives could become so impoverished.

“We should try and go to Jordan or Syria,” she said, her daily plea.

“Fatima, you know that is impossible now,” he said in the tone he used all day at work telling people the facts of disappointing or unwelcome news. “Isn’t there something to eat? I haven’t had a morsel all evening.”

“We must escape, Harun.”

“Fatima, enough.”

She turned away and began fixing him a plate of cold meat and some cheese.

Harun had come home the night before with a shawl that he said they should use as a baby gift for one of his good friends. His friend’s wife had just given birth to their second boy. Fatima wondered if the shawl hadn’t been “liberated” from a Sunni home. At such moments, filled with such questions, she wondered if she still knew her husband. Certainly she could not allow herself to imagine what he witnessed daily at work or some of the things he no doubt participated in. He refused to speak of his days, only saying, “One day things will be different.”

“When?” she thought, as she sat watching him eat his plate of cold food. Some Shiites spoke of freedom and peace. She wondered if any of them would be alive to see if such words had more value than the breath it took to utter them.

The next morning, Harun already gone to work nearly an hour before, Fatima stepped into the alley behind the house with a bag of trash. She didn’t know what to do with such things any more. Garbage pick-up had ended in most parts of the city within days of the initial American bombing and remained unpredictable in the years since. Piles grew in every alley and on most street corners. When the garbage trucks did come, often they were accompanied by police, sometimes even by American soldiers, and the people of the neighborhood feared the garbage trucks would mask a raid on a suspected home. The stench in the alley was awful, the heat baking the refuse. The entire city seemed infused with the stench of rancid garbage, the smell of despair and fracture. She pulled her hijab tight to her nose and mouth before dropping her bag of trash at the edge of a pile.

Wishing to hurry inside, she turned into the arms of two men who seized her at the elbows. Their faces were covered almost entirely with scarves, and she saw only their blank eyes. “Don’t make a sound or I will kill you,” the one on her left said. As if

escorting someone of great position, each with a hand cupped under an elbow, they nearly carried her down the alley and to an awaiting car. The men placed her in the back seat and sat on either side of her.

“Tie this over your eyes,” the driver said, passing back a strip of thick cloth.

“Do not fight. Do not make a sound,” the man who sat on her left said, “or you die.”

“I am dead already,” Fatima said.

“We’ll see about that.”

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The ransom note arrived at Fatima’s home within an hour of her disappearance. It read simply: “Harun Nashaat must resign his commission or his wife will be sacrificed.” One of Fatima’s nephews, a boy of twelve, first found the note attached to their door. He brought the note to Kareem, who immediately summoned co-workers to locate his cousin and bring him home.

Harun arrived within the hour. Kareem removed the rest of the family from the kitchen where he told his cousin the news and showed him the note. “She is lost,” Harun cried, falling to his knees. “I have killed her. My wife, my wife.”

Harun remained on his knees on the kitchen floor. Kareem slid a chair to where his cousin kneeled and sat down as if exhausted. Their heads were at the same level now. Both wore their respective uniforms, Harun’s the blue of the Iraqi National Police replete with the dark armored vest so heavy and unbearably hot, Kareem in the loose, tattered green that seemed too reminiscent of the old Baath Party garb were it not for the worn knees and stained sleeves.

“Their demands are clear and simple. Comply and I am sure she will be returned,” Kareem said. “Have faith.”

“You know as well as I that those who are taken never come back.”

“Nonsense. Why just last month, the banker, Al Kharzraji was set free in less than two days. And that professor, the economist from the University—I’ve forgotten his name—he was freed without incident. They just want things. It makes them think they can win their pathetic battle. All they have known is to cause fear. It is how they think they can get what they want. Give it to them and they will leave you be.”

“How many have shown up dead, Kareem? How many?”

“You should be glad they don’t want money.”

“Hmmp. Money would mean nothing.”

“You have no money, remember. Comply. Resign your position and Fatima will come home.”

“She is lost, cousin.”

“Pray for her safety and comply.”

Harun made certain that his resignation was as visible as possible, asking his colleagues to spread the news. He went so far to burn his uniform in the street in front of the house. Early the following morning he arrived at the Baghdad morgue. Already there was a queue of other anxious relatives, many reciting prayers that they would not find their loved one’s picture among the photos of the recently deceased. He was still in line, staring at his dusty shoes in despair when a nephew came running to him, breathless. “Fatima is home. She is home,” he heaved, gulping air.

“What?”

“Fatima is home. A car dropped her a block away. I ran straight here to tell you.”

“She is all right? She is not harmed?”

“She looks the same as before.”

Harun fell to his knees in prayer of thanks. Tears stained his cheeks.

Fatima ran to Harun before he reached the front door. The two collapsed in an embrace in front of the house, kissing one another over and over, both crying and laughing simultaneously.

“My love,” Harun said. “I thought I would never see you again.”

“I have come home to you. I am home,” Fatima said again and again. “I was so afraid, Harun, so certain my life was over.”

“Shh. You are safe now.”

“I am,” she said, incredulously. “I am home with my husband. Thank you.”

“You are well?” Harun asked.



Fatima nodded her head in affirmation. The two cried anew and lathered one another again in kisses.

“She is well?” Kareem asked Harun later that day. All of the women in the family had gathered and cooked whatever food they had in their cupboards or could afford at the market in a celebration of Fatima’s return. The two men sat removed from the others under a tattered pavilion at the back of the house.

“Yes, thank Allah,” Harun said.

“They did her no harm?”

“No. We are blessed.”

“You should say your prayers,” Kareem said. “This country would be wise to return to older ways, to days of more praying. I think many have forgotten their place in this world,” he said and poured himself more tea.

The family party held the night of Fatima’s return was like a wedding celebration. Couples danced. Someone convinced Harun to sing and he crooned a love ballad he hadn’t thought about since he was a teenager—a song both he and Fatima had known well in their youth. Food appeared that they had rarely seen in years. But if the party was like a wedding feast, then Fatima looked more like a reluctant bridesmaid in an uncomfortable dress than a bride. She smiled and embraced friends and family members but she seemed always glancing behind and more comfortable clearing away the dishes than celebrating. Meanwhile, the majority of the guests, for the span of four hours, seemed to accept her freedom as an opportunity to forget was and loss and exponential uncertainty, and all but a few of the older men who huddled together in a corner talking close to one another’s ears, danced for more than an hour after the electricity went out, danced by the light of a fire and candles. Only Harun’s old mother remained still, hunched in her robes in a shadow, either asleep or silently judging the revelers from her dark corner.

In the days following the party, Harun thought Fatima looked tired or sad. Often he stepped into the kitchen and saw her seated at the table or standing at the counter with her hands raised before her as if frozen, a paring knife held idle in mid air or an

empty glass suspended before her as if she'd forgotten what she had planned to fill it with. Each day Harun left and moved about the city looking up old contacts who might know of available work.

One afternoon he returned to the house after another fruitless search and found Fatima alone in the bedroom they shared with many of their nieces and nephews. She was seated on the bed looking vacantly at an empty wall. "I will find work, Fatima," Harun said. "Things will get better. You will see."

Fatima did not respond.

"Have you eaten?" he asked. "You look as if you have lost weight."

"I'm not hungry."

"You must eat. You will get sick if you don't care for yourself."

"I'm fine," she said, offering him a small smile.

"We should go visit friends tonight. Or perhaps I will go to the market with you in the morning. You should get out of this house."

Again Fatima did not reply.

"Fatima," he said sharply. "I am worried about you. You do not seem yourself."

"There is nothing for you to worry about," she said and rose and left the room.

Two days later Kareem sat at the little kitchen table drinking tea when Harun entered the room. Kareem seemed as if he was waiting for something. Harun was surprised that his cousin was not yet at work.

Kareem watched Harun silently for a time even after Harun sat down at the table. When Kareem spoke, he simply asked, "You are going to visit more of your friends today to ask about work?"

"Yes," Harun said, a look of failure crossing his face. "And then I will go to the old cement plant too. There are rumors that the Americans there are hiring more workers."

Kareem made a spitting sound in disgust. "They could turn all the sand in Iraq into concrete and still the streets would be impassible."

"There should be so much work that no man would be without," Harun agreed.

"Indeed there should be. But instead people go begging. These are strange times."

“It is a country long full of strange times,” Harun said. “I will do whatever I can to help bring in money,” he reassured.

“I know you will. I have no worries about that. I wish you luck. A man like you should be managing other men, not begging for labor. Don’t fret. What is mine is yours also.”

“We thank you, Cousin.”

“I must say, however, that this business with Fatima has placed a hardship on the family.”

“It was business with me.”

Kareem ignored him. “Is she all right? She does not seem herself.”

“She has been through a great shock. It will take some time for her to get her bearings once again.”

“Did they harm her?”

“She will not say. She only says how happy she is to be home again,” Harun said, and then he added, “Home among her family,” with emphasis.

“Have you thought about the possibility, forgive me for saying so, that they violated her during her imprisonment?”

“I have thought on it.”

“It is a shame,” Kareem said.

“Shame” became a word that Kareem used with great frequency over the next week. He moved from asking about Fatima to commenting on how women should not be placed in positions where they might bring shame on their families. Kareem began to counsel his brother’s children each evening, reading to them from the Qur’an and lecturing them about behavior and morality. Such lessons were not his usual custom. He seemed to make sure that either Fatima or Harun were present when he provided his little lectures or lessons. At the end of the week he invited a neighborhood Imam to dinner. The Imam said that the only good thing about the war was that more people were being brought back to their religious roots and that once Iraq was purified, people would again live in patterns of honor. “Under Saddam,” he said, and then looked to each side nervously out of engrained habit like most Shiites, “we forgot the ways of our

fathers. Even the call to prayers became an empty gesture for some.” Kareem nodded approvingly.

After dinner, Kareem gathered his brother and Harun and the Imam and they retired outside while the women cleared the kitchen. The children were sent away to the main room to play. The Imam leaned his head close to Harun and said, “I was so sorry to hear of your wife’s difficulties.”

“Difficulties” seemed a strange word to Harun. He merely muttered his thanks for the Imam’s concern. The Imam had been an important figure in this neighborhood since his childhood, a man they had all grown up respecting, and he felt honored that he had taken the time to share a meal with them. He always felt as if he were still a boy when in the Imam’s presence, even though as an adult he often found the man too conservative for his taste.

“Kareem has rightfully spoken to me,” the Imam said, “out of concern for the family’s honor and out of concern for you. Your wife’s kidnapping, sadly, placed her in a compromising position. Who knows the morals of men?”

“They are filthy hogs,” Kareem spat, interrupting.

“Precisely,” the Imam said, nodding. “And like hogs they are controlled by the interests of evil. Such men dishonor manhood and they dishonor the teachings of the Prophet. Such are the men who cause such terror in all our lives now. Look at the ways of this place now—killings, kidnappings, rape. Bombings. Innocent children killed. Some attack those who befriend the Americans while others corrupt themselves in serving the Americans as if they were whores. It is a fractured place full of misled villains. These are the works of little men seeking power after years of taking orders from those they thought powerful. They cower in fear when they are not causing others harm. Sadly, their dishonor taints all those they touch.”

“It is so,” Kareem agreed.

“Again, I am sorry for your circumstances,” the Imam said, patting Harun’s knee.

The four men sat in the barren garden, their chairs pulled so close to one another that their knees touched.

“What are you thinking?” Kareem asked his brother, who had sat silently smoking. It was in the brother’s house they all resided now. He had taken each of them

in without comment and without hesitation even though his own family was large, five children of his own and three more orphaned when his sister was killed in the massacres after the Shiite revolt in Basra following the first American War. He did not speak immediately, blowing out a mouthful of smoke before clearing his throat.

“I have been thinking of something from the past,” he said. “It is something Kareem and I do not speak about often. But I will share this story. Indeed it is a story we might not know were it not for an uncle who had a loose tongue when he was drunk. He told us this story at our sister’s wedding of all places. He was sloppily drunk but earnest. I have since found reasons to believe what he said was true. You see, he told us our father was supposed to marry a girl from his home village when he was still quite young. It had been arranged for ages. They had grown up together, and the family was very proud to call this woman their son’s wife one day. I have spoken to my father and he told me the details of the story. As he tells it, this was a beautiful girl, and she was from a respected, honorable family. It was a good match. He thought himself very lucky. They were married and he thought he was destined to a full and satisfied life with her. But when he took her to the marriage bed, she did not bleed. The two families, together, stoned her at learning of her offence, of course. Her dishonor stains the family still. It ashamed our father. I don’t think he would have ever told us of the past had we not been of marrying age ourselves. We all know chastity is the means for a young woman to honor her family and her future husband, just as obedience and fidelity are the means for the married woman to demonstrate her honor. We all know this.”

“It is so,” the Imam readily agreed. “A soiled woman is like meat that has been tainted. If you do not cut the rotten flesh away, then the whole carcass will go to ruin.”

Kareem nodded his agreement with the analogy. “It has always been so,” he said.

Harun said nothing, but he leaned away from the men and drew back into the crossed and hatched shadows cast by the wood of the pavilion, seeking the dark comfort there.

Harun had long ago run out of real prospects of finding work. Each of his friends made sincere promises to help but in truth few of them were working either or worked

jobs below their skill and education. He still went to the marketplaces and work stations set up by the government to join the men who gathered hoping a truck might arrive and its driver accept men for day labor. Otherwise he spent a great deal of time wandering any part of the city that was not facing immediate or regular violence despite placing himself at risk doing so. In particular he began to visit places where he and Fatima had frequented before the war, restaurants and cafes and shopping districts that were largely closed now or had re-opened under different owners. So many neighborhoods had changed faces almost completely. Often he walked to the neighborhood where he and Fatima and his mother had lived before fleeing to his uncle's house. Though it pained him to see the evidence of strangers living in the house where he and Fatima had been so happy, sometimes it seemed as if he felt her old spirit there more keenly than when he sat in her presence now, as if he could hear her voice there, that voice she so seldom used now. How he missed their quiet conversations. How he longed to hear her hum or sing again.

It was Kareem who completed the punishment.

He knew Harun best, after all, and both he and his brother were old enough and respected enough to be viewed as spokesmen for the family. He wielded the knife deftly, swiftly, showing mercy, he thought. He did not wish Fatima to suffer. He sliced her carotid artery with such speed he didn't think she felt much pain. While he would never choose such a woman himself, he had liked Fatima a great deal, had thought her a good match for his cousin since both were rather progressive and youthful. That he had liked her probably would have surprised Fatima. There was something about her, some animal energy, and he would never admit aloud that he had admired her, had enjoyed watching her about the house. Indeed, it was more than finding her attractive, she had a life-force that moved him. Although, had she been his wife, he would have maintained a firmer hand, reminded her more often of her proper place. With a woman like that, he supposed, you would have to keep her at home all the time or else such a fate as had befallen her could prove inevitable.

He carried her body to the street as a show to his neighbors that his family still understood honor. He had already arranged for the gravediggers to come for her.

It was as if Harun had died too and another now inhabited his body. Vacant and downcast eyes searched the ground and corners of rooms for a life now missing. He stopped trying to find work. This man who once dressed so immaculately now wore soiled clothes and seldom bathed. The men of the house told the children to keep their distance from Harun, acknowledging he was not well.

One evening, watching Harun at a distance in the little barren yard, Kareem turned to his sister-in-law and said, "See how quickly and savagely the bitterness of her dishonor sets in. It is like gangrene. Despite our actions some of the rot has taken its toll."

His sister-in-law accepted his statement in silence. Kareem sensed the wariness in her silence and said, "She should have learned how to comport herself from you and perhaps none of this would have happened."

His sister-in-law nodded and excused herself to look after the children.

Kareem watched his cousin for a while longer. Perhaps, he thought, Harun acted this way in embarrassment, wishing he had shown the strength to resolve the problem himself. He watched a while longer and then left the patio in search of the living. How he wished this war were over and it would be safe to sit outside at a café and laugh and joke with friends, to live again in a pattern that was simple and predictable.

Harun's mother sat in a dark shadow in a corner of the kitchen where she passed nearly all of her time. Kareem never knew whether she was asleep or if she watched all the comings and goings of the house in silence. Kareem wanted to tell her to leave, for she seemed as dead to the world as her son had become, but one did not treat old women in such a way. He studied her dark form. She appeared no more than a lump of black robes seated on the chair they had moved from the house she had shared with her dead husband and her children. She tucked her feet beneath the chair as if afraid of the blood that had stained the floor. Kareem wished he had completed this business outside rather than here in the kitchen. It was an error he regretted.

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Harun had no grave to visit, just an industrial bare-dirt section of the cemetery to walk. The desolation of the place saddened him even more, matching his emptiness

and despair. He felt guilt for knowing that the kidnapping was directed at him, that it was he who should be dead, and he felt a different guilt for knowing he had been too weak to complete what all the ancient wisdom said was the only course of honorable action regarding Fatima. He no longer felt a man at all, and these feelings of inadequacy were only accelerated when he was among his cousins.

The cemetery held no solace and his cousin's home had become a kind of prison. There was no work. Even the men who arrived at street corners in decrepit pickups looking for day laborers seemed to pass over him as if he were marked by a visible stain.

In the past two days he had begun to walk for miles on end through the cluttered and debris-strewn streets, the very act of moving about creating significant danger. Yesterday he walked some six miles to the neighborhood where he and Fatima had lived before the war. Then it had been a tolerant place, a mixed neighborhood bordered by Sunni enclaves, a neighborhood where people largely got along and minded their own business. Shortly after the Americans invaded, Harun and Fatima, like their neighbors, were run out of their home by Sunnis, some loyal to Saddam, more simply trying to congregate as if prescient to the Shiite actions to come. Sharing this instinct that there was strength in numbers, they had settled in his cousin's house, which had meant sharing a room with Harun's mother and often with several of the youngest children occupying the house.

The day before he stood again in front of the house he and Fatima had shared. There were happy memories in the modest house. It seemed the only place he could still sense Fatima's spirit and, knowing he was unwelcome in the neighborhood now felt no different than he felt anywhere else. He had stood before the house for nearly an hour before children and an old woman shooed him away, threatening action by fathers and sons. Exiting the neighborhood, he passed a man who had once been his neighbor, a man who, like him, looked bedraggled and without destination, and as he passed, the man growled the words, "Get lost, Shiia cur."

On this, the second day of wandering, he was again walking without destination, moving generally in the direction of his old neighborhood when he encountered a checkpoint set up at an intersection. There were four American Humvees joined by one



Iraqi National Police pickup truck, and they were stopping vehicles and pedestrians alike. His cousins had heard an explosion from this vicinity the night before and had fallen into their familiar habit of trying to identify its location. He joined the queue despite having no business in the area. A dozen or more women stood in line without speaking, their faces shrouded in headscarves or veils. He made no eye contact with them as was the custom. Some of the men complained in whispers about the lines and presence of the Americans, but they stopped talking abruptly and looked away if a soldier passed near or looked directly at them.

When his turn arrived, Harun handed the soldier his identification card and spoke to him politely in English.

“What is your business in this district?”

“I used to live near here.”

“Well, you don’t now according to this. Besides, this identification card is old,” the soldier said. “It is no longer valid.”

“It is all I have, sir.”

“Well, you need to go to a police station or a ministry office and have a new one issued. I can’t let you pass here with this ID.”

“I had an official ID, sir, a military one, but I had to surrender it when I resigned my position.”

“What position?”

Harun nodded toward the Iraqi Police truck. Its occupants were not in sight. “Iraqi National Police, sir.”

“Why did you resign?”

“My wife, sir. She was killed.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that. But I have to follow procedures. I’m sure you understand. I cannot let anyone pass here without a valid ID and clear business in this district.”

“I just want to walk freely in my own city.”

“No can do.”

“Please, you must let me pass. I am looking for my wife.”

The soldier altered the grip on his weapon and jutted his chin at his buddy seated at the 50 atop the Humvee. "You said your wife was dead."

"She is. You don't understand. I am responsible for her death. I can't find the life we led before. I ...I'm sorry, you see I am lost."

"You need to turn around and go home, partner."

"I have no home," Harun said.

"Corporal," the soldier shouted to another checking the identification of a bicyclist. "I need a hand here."

"Please," Harun said. "Just let me pass. I am an engineer. I know nothing of this business of war. I am a simple man who loved my wife. I am an honorable man."

The two soldiers grabbed Harun by his elbows and moved him to the rear of their vehicle.

"Please," Harun pleaded.

"Shut up already," the first soldier said.

"You can't begin to understand," Harun shouted.

"Be quiet or we'll place you under arrest."

Harun struggled to release himself from their grasp. The soldiers pushed him against the Humvee and one place a forearm against his chest.

"I know this man," an Iraqi Policeman said, suddenly appearing from within a shop adjacent to the checkpoint. "Let him go, please. I served with this man. He is a good man."

The soldiers looked at each other and shrugged, and then one said to the policeman, "Get him out of here quickly and quietly."

"Harun, quiet. Come with me," the policeman said, taking Harun's arm.

"Amir, my friend," Harun said, recognizing the man. "You must help me," he said, still speaking in English.

"What is it?"

"I have killed my wife."

The two soldiers turned back to Harun and the policeman swiftly, their eyes flashing with questions.

“No, no,” the policeman said, seeing their response. “It is a figure of speech. His wife was kidnapped. Her captors demanded that he resign his position to barter for her release.” He turned back to Harun and spoke in Arabic. “What has come of her? The kidnappers?”

“I have killed by wife,” Harun said again, this time in Arabic. “I have killed Fatima. Her blood is on my hands.”

People had begun to gather near Harun at the checkpoint, too many curious people beginning to crowd a small space. The Americans looked nervous and fingered their weapons. One moved towards the door of a Humvee. The soldier who first stopped Harun growled at the policeman, “I told you to get him out of here. Now move!”

The policeman made a show of swinging his arm and shouting to the gathering crowd. “Disperse, disperse,” he shouted. “There is nothing here. Show some respect for this man’s privacy. Have you no honor?” He pushed one man near him away and then herded a group of women behind a barricade as if they were sheep clogging a watering hole.

He guided Harun to the police vehicle by his arm as if her were blind or frail. Harun looked lost, staring at his shoes, as if the soil dusting their leather held answers to questions he could not formulate.

“Back in line!” the American soldiers shouted to the crowd. “Get in line and have your identification ready.” The soldier who had first questioned Harun turned to the Iraqi policeman and said, “Poor dense bastard. Take him home why don’t you.”

“No home will keep him now,” the policeman said.

The crowd moved away, the men still staring at Harun intently and talking among themselves. At the periphery several women passed invisibly among them, their eyes cast to the ground and their veiled thoughts held in silence.