

ABDUL RAHMAN

By Liane Al-Ghusain

To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets ... This anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. In all ages, he comes before texts. He does not expect representations. He squats now at the center of our scientific stages.

- Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*

Episode 1

The halogen lights cast a greyish-blue glow on his white dishdasha, making Abdul Rahman paranoid that it was dirty. He looked down slowly at the reams of paperwork on his desk and noted they were the exact same white. He looked up at the lights, and back down at his desk. The halogen bulbs cast white stripes across the surface of his fourth cup of tea. Or was it his fifth? He reached out a hand and cupped the base of the curvy glass. It was cold. It must just be the fourth; he'd never ordered a fifth from the office coffee boy. He decided it was time to go home and perhaps take a nap.

Abdul Rahman sat back in his chair and looked as far into the distance in front of him as possible. In this case it was at the cubicle wall, where he'd pinned up an A4 sheet of paper that said "Alhamdulillah" in 72 pt font. He was glad for this job. He could support his two wives, son and other children on the generous government salary and benefits. Abdul Rahman couldn't imagine what he'd do if he didn't have a government job. He wasn't one of those men, like his brother-in-law via his first wife, who had the vision and drive to do things on his own. That man had taken over an old sponge factory and was now exporting insulation materials throughout the Gulf! Abdul Rahman had a hard time raising his voice, and he associated entrepreneurship with shouting.

His breathing was heavy but unobstructed. He wore no watch. The only things that touched his skin were the soft elastic waistband of his underpants and cotton t-shirt that went under his dishdasha. He'd taken off the ghutra, egal and ghafiya from his head when he arrived at 8am. He felt the ghost headdress for most of the day and moved his bare head with the same careful craning of the neck, as if he'd still been wearing it. He did everything carefully, slowly, almost with tenderness, to fill up the voluptuously empty hours of being a government employee. It was a nice pace. The cups of tea, touching the paperwork, thinking about getting paid, going home, seeing his son, having a nap, having dinner, seeing both his wives and sometimes his friends and family.

Abdul Rahman's job was to prepare documents for immigrants coming in to Kuwait from India, Bangladesh and Nepal to do construction work. He would look at contractors' reports to count up the number of visas that needed to be issued before the newest shopping mall or office tower could be built. The office secretary, Saeed, would put these figures in a spreadsheet and calculate how much money the Kuwait government could make off of this human cargo. Abdul Rahman would stamp these papers before they were sent to their boss, Istaz Mohammad. It was the kind of work that needed to happen slowly and methodically as possible. The quotas had to be extended every year for the number of migrant workers, which the authorities were always reluctant to do until it became clear exactly how much money would be added to their Eid bonus,

mostly “donated” by landowners that were in a hurry to get started on their building projects.

Ramadan was over now. It was Wednesday so it was still a couple days until Friday prayers and lunch after. Diwaniya had happened the night before, and it wasn't football season. So tonight, Abdul Rahman could try and find some Quran verses on his phone to send to his coworkers over their group chat. Maybe he would order KFC for a late night snack. He wondered which wife's turn it was to cook. The older woman was better at chicken but the younger one definitely made the richer sauce.

He checked his phone. No new messages. Maybe he would get a new phone cover from the electronics store across the street—the one he had now was loose and snapped off easily. His son Mohammad kept dropping the phone as he pressed excitedly on the touchscreen, which was too big for his hands. Although he looked almost exactly like his mother Mohammad had the same quiet curiosity, large mouth and pointed ears as his father, Abdul Rahman could see as much.

He mentally prepared himself before he went to say goodbye for the day to his boss. He tried to slowly refocus his eyes on the objects closest to him. The white desktop computer. The red masbah from the honeymoon in Sharm El Sheikh. He put his phone back in his pocket. He stood up and looked over the neat maze of cubicle walls. All of his coworkers were gone except Saeed. There was a rumor that Saeed, who had come to Kuwait from Egypt 25 years ago, had started out as a coffee boy. When he appeared to remember every single person that returned to the Immigration office and was able to direct them to the right window, he was eventually promoted to a secretary position.

“Asaakallah bikhair” Abdul Rahman said nobly as he flipped the ghutra wing over his shoulder. Saeed intoned the appropriate farewell in response without looking up. Although Saeed did a lot more than secretary work, he would probably never be a clerk like Abdul Rahman, who had used what little wasta he had from one of his many brothers-in-law to get this job.

The problem with staying late at work to impress his boss was that more often than not his boss was already gone when Abdul Rahman walked through the offices. The door to mudir Mohammad's office was half-open, and from where he stood Abdul Rahman could read his name, “Mohammad Al-Khalifa,” on the gold plaque on his desk. The air-conditioner directly above the desk lightly fluttered the papers on it. A paperweight holding the stack down was filled with water, glitter, and a floating Kaaba with the word ‘Allah’ written in gold. Abdul Rahman often tried to guess how long ago his boss had left the office by the swirling of the Kaaba, which indicated when the paperweight had last been moved.

Among the ordered clutter was the pen that Abdul Rahman had given mudir Mohammad last Eid. It had a French brand name that impressed him, and convinced him to pay much more for it than he'd planned. It was a black ballpoint pen decorated with white veins, made to look like it had been cut out of a piece of marble. A few weeks after the fact, Abdul Rahman had gone to the shop and bought himself a matching one. He spotted the pen on the desk in front of him sitting in a gold cup and wondered if it had ever been used. He craved that fifth cup of tea now.

In front of the mudir's desk were large armchairs for visitors, which Abdul Rahman imagined

were rather comfortable to sink into. The spongy cushions would be cold and warm at once – aloof and leathery in their deep embrace of one’s body. He’d never been invited to sit down, other than at his job interview, and at the time he was so nervous he hadn’t remembered to record all the sensations associated with being momentarily invited to languish under the attention of his boss.

It was about five years ago, right before his first daughter had been conceived, that Abdul Rahman explained to his future boss that his work ethic was shaped largely by his work as a secretary for the Islamic student council of the Kuwait University, where he’d completed a diploma in Management Science. The interview was over before he’d even realized that he’d held his breath throughout the short set of questions and answers. It was merely symbolic—it was enough that Abdul Rahman’s well-known brother-in-law had recommended him for the job upon encountering mudir Mohammad at diwaniya night.

Mudir Mohammad’s cool attitude flustered Abdul Rahman whenever he approached his boss with an internally rehearsed script of questions about protocol that he already knew there was no answer to, or good tidings for the season or the weekend. Abdul Rahman would stand at the door with his head bowed, hiding his eyes and imagining that the sweat rings on his dishdasha were getting comically bigger, like in a cartoon. He would make himself deliver quick eye contact with his mudir to punctuate the ends of his sentences, with the intention of invoking confidence.

The mudir would sit there calmly, leaning forward in his office chair over his hard, muscular belly, which gave a masculine impression of fertility. After giving minimal answers, as though he were saving his energy, the mudir would say, “may God have mercy on you” with a generous sigh. He would smile and pick up his pen and look down at the paperwork that always seemed of utmost importance. Very rarely he would ask about ‘the kids.’ This made Abdul Rahman more flustered than anything.

Abdul Rahman often felt like he would cry when he talked about his son. What could he do to comprehensively express his feelings? Dance? Show his boss the lists he made during his free time of the earthly possessions he’d amassed so far to give to his son when he died? Tell his boss that his Mohammad was a muse worthy of a century of artwork and poetry? Recite a Quran verse of thanks? One occurred in his mind he as stood in the doorway of the empty office.

After giving his concluding thanks to God he wiped the sweat off his neck with the wad of tissues he kept ready in his pocket.

Sometimes he would show mudir Mohammad the slideshow album he’d made of son on his phone: Mohammad clutching a clump of biryani, Mohammad and his new tooth, Mohammad in his father’s shayla... Before he ever got through the album, the mudir would get back to more important things.

Episode 2

In the elevator Abdul Rahman’s hand went instinctively to the phone in his pocket and he looked at himself in the mirror. He snapped the phone cover off and on the same way his son did. He thought about going in and out of his two wives’ rooms, in and out of their beds, in and out of

their bodies. He wished he could have them both at once. He began to sweat again. Prophet Mohammad had visited his wives in a round.

He ran his thumb over the smooth cover of his phone and wished it were possible to cover the walls of his house with a mosaic artwork, making a picture of his son Mohammad with all the small tiles. Then, realizing he might have been committing a blasphemously idolatrous thought of some kind, he imagined a large mosaic of a famous religious site covering the entryway of the house instead.

It was hot out on the street and he wiped his neck again. Walking towards the mall, which was covered in square mirror tiles, Abdul Rahman thought of the beautiful Byzantine- style mosaics he had seen on his honeymoon turned full family vacation in Sharm El Sheikh. He was able to get a good deal, as the travel agent was Salafi. The trip itinerary was conveniently planned with group prayer breaks and shaded gazebos for the women while the men swam.

After he'd brought his second wife home she seemed to get along much better than expected with the first one, sharing her makeup and giving her tips about using raw egg yolks to get shinier hair. He'd overheard them chatting in the kitchen the morning after his second wedding night.

However, the first sign that the new wife would be difficult to live with came when she began complaining about humidity on the beach. Because none of the other women on the trip had changed to lighter clothing, he insisted she save him face by remaining in full abaya and niqab. She then responded by demanding Abdul Rahman buy her silk gloves because her hands were getting darker than the rest of her body. She had started a trend that way.

It was a shame he couldn't parade her youth and beauty in public after all the money and research that had gone into marrying her. Badriya had the full, dark lips he'd always dreamed of and the perfect black Bedouin hair. She had such large eyes that sometimes he would stare at them so long she would snap and chide him. She was bad at housework and struck up an intimate acquaintance with the housemaid, which meant she never had to clean up after she cooked.

His cousin Souaad had been much easier to get. Her dowry was much smaller than Badriya's. Abdul Rahman's mother, may she rest in peace, had given Souaad a necklace she already owned instead of buying her new jewelry. Souaad was devout and wanted children right away.

In Sharm El Sheikh she had taken care of the children in one hotel room while Badriya and Abdul Rahman had their own hotel room next door, though on one of the last nights they switched. The irony was that instead of the new wife being impregnated, his son Mohammed had been conceived with Souaad.

Souaad had gotten heavier and heavier after she gave birth to Mohammad and continued to walk squarely on her two feet as though she were still pregnant. Her breasts remained large even after she had finished breastfeeding. Now and then she would insist on outings for Mohammad or make plans to send him to private schools when she knew Abdul Rahman didn't have enough money to do so.

He wished he had the money for a wing in their house. If he had another wife maybe he'd have another son. He imagined he would take his future wife, who would be shy but beautiful, to the concrete walkway along the beach and recite love poetry, Quran, and ahadith to her. They would eat his favorite shawerma at the end of their walk and he would hold her niqab open while she ate.

Other than obtaining a third wife, Abdul Rahman wanted nothing more than to beget a new son from Badriya. Though with her strong will he could only imagine daughters coming forth from her, all with her same insistent wide eyes. But oh, her loins. He'd never seen them with the light on, but he could feel them flexing under him as he crossed the street now towards the shopping mall.

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Episode 3

The echoing noises overwhelmed Abdul Rahman and made it impossible to focus his eyes on any one thing. He remembered to be thankful that the shopping mall next to his work was small and practical, consisting only of an electronics store, a furniture store, and a café.

Whenever he went out to the bigger malls on the weekends it took his daughters' and wives' joint effort to convince him. The cacophony of noises and bodies scrambled his thoughts completely. He went into a daze, as though he was the one being taken out by his wives. Each time they went to the mall he remembered to set a budget only halfway through the outing, after paying for his son Mohammad to go on all the rides at the arcade with one of his sisters.

He preferred the food court with its comforting deep-fried smells and reasonable prices, but the women always insisted on walking around and gossiping about other families. They inevitably asked for frappuccinos with extra whipped cream and extra caramel and extra long straws. He allowed them usually, but not if he recalled that Starbucks was a Zionist entity and must not be supported, according to his boss and some of the higher ups at the diwaniya. The times he meant to truly say no, he would avoid making eye contact with Badriya.

How did other men deal with this? Was he just particularly weak? He imagined mudir Mohammad had trained his wife and children until they didn't even ask for things they knew they couldn't have. While he admired the man, and longed to glow in the aura of his influence, Abdul Rahman wasn't sure his moral compass would allow him to even try to approach his social circle. He probably couldn't quote the Sunnah. The wife didn't even cover her hair.

He let out a kind of animal, high-pitched sigh as he pushed open the entry door to the mall, meant to cleanse his mind of any thoughts – troubling or otherwise.

The doors were not automatic, so he was able to intuit when they would close behind him. Usually the robotic clang of automated glass doors startled him, even if he knew the sound was coming. This was definitely his favorite mall. The high ceilings felt like a mosque, except they let light in. The sun and the cool air-conditioned air seeped into his ghutra and settled about his shoulders. The brightness made the mall feel like a place for magic creatures to live. A place for

colorful butterflies and birds and fish and regal reptiles and small, serious rodents. He thought again of ancient mosaics, the regal queens they depicted, and all the possibilities of his world.

An elegant poster caught Abdul Rahman's eye. At the bottom it read:

THE TOP KUWAITI ART COLLECTORS

Come see world-class artworks from private collections!

THE LIFE CENTER, 2ND FLOOR
SEPTEMBER 1–DECEMBER 1, 2011

He'd always been envious of the painters at his university. They usually majored in Architecture or International Business and would organize exhibitions at the end of the term. Women would come at the "ladies' hour" and the artists would wait outside to speak to them. Those men were usually married before graduation.

This could also be the perfect entryway to a casual conversation with mudir Mohammad. At the very least he could take some pictures of artwork to send to his diwaniya WhatsApp group. He made his way up, taking the stairs instead of the escalator (the latter seeming much too hungry for a dishdasha hem), to where a small sign read "Contemporary Art Platform Kuwait" in English and Arabic.

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The first thing he didn't like about the place was its automatic doors. The gallery smelled of fresh paint, which made him think of the hospital when his mother had died of pneumonia and then more urgently of the debt he'd gone into building, painting, and furnishing his house when Badriya moved in. Layered over the chemicals was the thick scent of lilies, roses, peonies, carnations and baby's breath. The owners must have some glamorous friends to receive such a congratulatory bouquet like you saw at weddings and even then, only at the women's entrance.

He stood there trying not to sneeze and wondering what to do next. Would a salesman appear, like they always did in fancy but empty places? He remembered the time his wives stepped into the Gucci store at the mall. Abdul Rahman convinced them afterwards that their handbag copies looked very authentic- and worth it for such a fraction of the original price!

He took a few steps and found himself in front of a bright blue painting. It wasn't of anything. Just colors. He stood for a very long time wondering if it that's all it really was, or if he hadn't actually succeeded in uncrossing his eyes. He bent down close to the little paper plaque to see who the art collector was. It was an Al-Sabah. This is what the royalty was spending money on instead of on proper, Islamic charity? Jewelry for wives he understood. Yachts he could also forgive. But this? Why couldn't they collect ancient mosaics or beautiful landscape paintings that

celebrated God's earth?

It would perhaps be more inspiring to look closer at what art the self-made businessmen collected. Walking to the back walls of the gallery, he imagined what it would be like to own a car company or a fast food chain.

There was a very realistic painting of an astronaut on the moon. The man, clad in a white jumpsuit, seemed completely alone on the gray planet, except for his shadow. Abdul Rahman liked it—the work communicated something about ambitions and dreams, about the nobility of solitude. He took a photo of it, making sure to line up the camera crosshairs as straight as he could.

Next was a photograph of a two-headed man with very red cheeks that he couldn't look at for too long without feeling a little dizzy. It must have been made on a computer. This was the nice thing about artists – they thought of things other, normal people usually didn't.

Nearby there was a family portrait photograph with all the faces covered up with newspapers which he found strange. He would leave after he looked at one more work, to see if it would change his mind about art.

And then, deep in a corner were works that made him blink with rage and disbelief. There were paintings of women, signed by artists taking credit for God's work. In one photograph a seductive woman's deep cleavage was covered only with Arabic calligraphy. What were these cheap tricks? Something had to be done about this.

He took a deep breath and thought about all the times he'd been ignored by his boss. All the times he was sure Badriya and Souaad were laughing at him behind his back. All the times they'd placed things on the kitchen table just out of his line of vision or annoyed him by both getting their menstrual periods at the exact same time. He thought about how he could never get himself heard at the diwaniya, sitting around with all those confident men yelling over each other.

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Episode 4

There was already someone standing behind him when he turned around. A woman. She was uncovered. The only uncovered women he'd ever spoken to who weren't his mother, wife, or sister were the Philipina baristas at Starbucks or the Indian nurses at the clinic. He kept his eyes on the ground and took a deep breath. He recited with confidence the line that he'd been whispering to himself like a prayer.

“This exhibition is an offense to Islam.” There. He had said it.

“Really?” she responded, way more casually than expected.

“It... the works...” he stuttered, “let me show you just one of the many offensive examples.”

He walked back to that section of businessman art collectors, wincing slightly as he was still unused to the unforgiving hardness of the concrete floor under his feet. The air-conditioning

made his ankles cold under his dishdasha, which he wore short in the fashion of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

He was surprised that she'd followed him. It seemed she could have easily slipped away behind one of the many walls.

"This," he said pointing to one of the paintings, "condemns the niqab-wearing woman." Women sitting around obscenely close to one another, laughing at a dinner table, smoking cigarettes, baring their legs and arms, were all wearing sheer niqabs on their faces. He avoided looking at the breasts of the figures. He tried to focus on his own heaving chest, on slowing down his breathing to a normal rate.

Abdul Rahman imagined mudir Mohammad calling him to his office, inviting him to sit down, ordering him a tea and congratulating him for shutting down such an offensive exhibition. He would receive messages day and night on his phone with congratulatory texts and celebratory pictures. There would be so many of them he'd have to silence his phone at night so as to not wake up his younger wife, who would be so impressed she'd insist on sleeping with him all the time. He'd have to exercise his power in the house to make sure everything was fair and equal between all the wives and all the children as they would all want his attention. Especially because he would have a new, third wife who would send him an e-mail through one of the Muslim matchmaking sites he used after seeing him on the TV.

"They're not wearing niqab," she said. When he didn't respond she continued. "They're just covering half of their faces. The covering is a symbol for gossip and secrecy in the Arab world.

While he silently tried to focus his eyes and plan his next sentence she went on, "the niqab is a cultural symbol and not a religious one, as you know. So the Arab artist can utilize it just as the Western one can paint a bow-tie to denote the status of its wearer, and the Eastern artist references dragons or uses the color yellow when he hopes to make a statement about power ... As for what an artist is *saying* when he uses these loaded symbols, it's up to us to decide."

He mopped the sweat off his neck with the tissue pad, which was almost soaked through. His eyes fell on the hems of her trousers, noting her chipped red toenails. He thought of the way Souaad's toes spilled out of her sandals, the tips pressed white beneath her weight.

"For example, here I think the artist comments on hypocrisy within communities. This group of women sits rather intimately, almost holding each other like mother and child, and yet each one holds something back, she hides her true face from her closest friends."

"The way they're dressed is immoral," he managed to say.

"Do you think what they say behind each other's backs is moral?" she asked in a way that may have been patronizing, or may actually indicate that she'd be great with children.

"No."

“Then what I think you have there is a pretty compelling interpretation of this artwork.”

Abdul Rahman stared, finally, right at the girl, holding his breath, while more sweat gathered on his neck.

“Do you ... do you think ... do you think the niqab could maybe symbolize a kind of ... muteness? A-a-an-an inability to speak?” he asked.

She had light skin and light eyes, which made him recall the day they got their first color TV, and being eagerly taken into his mother’s lap to watch cartoons in color for the first time, even though he was almost a teenager at the time and she was almost crushed under his weight.

“Wow,” she said. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Wouldn’t you feel safer if you were properly covered?” he asked, speaking in the paternal voice he reserved for when baby Mohammad hit one of his sisters.

“Why wouldn’t I feel safe?” she asked. “Don’t worry, I always feel safe,” she continued.

“You seem like you are a very moral man.” She pursed her lips in a way that made it seem like she had small dimples.

Here before him was his dream third wife, the Kuwaiti version of the Byzantine Empire princess from his favored mosaic on his Egypt trip - ‘cypaste,’ as they say! Of course, he didn’t believe in the occult, he wasn’t superstitious, but there was something uncanny here. Here was the dark, thick hair and wide-hipped figure that inhabited his nightly dreams and daydreams alike – as though it were a pre-Islamic myth that had been encoded in his genes, branded in his imagination.

Sadly she wasn’t dressed like he’d imagined his third wife, who in his reveries was an angelic apparition in a golden thobe, completely naked underneath, of course. This girl was entirely in Western dress. She was wearing pants, to begin with, and had the gall to stand there in front of him and the security guard, in broad daylight without covering her face, her hair, her hips, or even her arms. But somehow this made her more desirable. It gave his fantasy some texture, some dimension. A true, real-life dilemma to overcome together.

She was looking docilely at him, or was it at the artwork next to him? These were the moments he absolutely despised his crossed eyes! Now that he had focused his eyes on her he could no longer look anywhere else, and had to cover his face with his hand so that he could blink comfortably in the small dark cave they afforded. She turned and moved before him amongst the white walls, dwarfing his slight, sweaty human existence. He decided to save examining her backside until later. She continued to torture him with her sinuous walk, pointing to different artworks, bunching her hands together in her face to make a point, then letting them fall at her sides. Her small, white hands drew his attention, he could instantly imagine putting a beautiful but modest ruby red engagement ring on the slender finger.

Her deep, assuring voice echoed in the room as she casually strolled along the row of idolatrous paintings. “Thank you for coming to CAP, I hope you will join us for our next exhibition,” she said with the kind of measured intonation that made realize with a start that his beloved was indeed a professional, and that it was going to take some real work to get her to share her emotions with him.

Abdul Rahman pursued her practiced tour of the space, nodding and blotting sweat.

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Episode 5

Sitting in her living room with the pink furniture, red Persian rugs, and sleek, shiny black tables, Souaad felt like the mother of the world. No, mother of the entire universe. The light coming from the television screen was the sun. The glints of light in the mini chandelier were the stars. Her babies were Adam and Eve, the first humans. Although she’d bought most of the furniture with Abdul Rahman, and they’d both made Badriya feel like she was involved in making decisions about the rugs and the arrangement of the fake flowers in the vases, really it was Souaad that was responsible for making sure everything ran like Western women in high heels – perfectly.

The couches fit in the rooms so that the electric outlets remained exposed and they could all still use their phones while they charged them and watch TV at the same time. It was Souaad that had angled the TV so that it reflected none of the windows or lights in the room, keeping all the onscreen action vivid and all the soap actors’ features perfectly delineated. And it was Souaad that suffered all the blows of the family’s misfortunes and only she that could put them right again.

The worst had been when Abdul Rahman’s mother passed away. The man couldn’t think of the poor woman (may she rest in peace) without spinning out of control. Each time it was different. Sometimes when his mother came up he would binge eat and the house would smell like fried chicken for days. Other times he would just get silent, which was the least disturbing reaction, almost indistinguishable from his usual countenance.

She herself had never lost anyone dear to her. Her mother and father were both alive and well – Souaad was the eldest of 13 children and there was only a twenty-year age difference between her and her parents. Her mother would come to their house everyday and sit barefooted and cross-legged, her flowery henna’ed feet matching the gold and black patterned rugs. She would take her grandchildren on her lap in turns by ascending birth order, first Mohammad, then Ghalia, then Maryam. Sometimes she would sit Badriya’s daughter Haya on her lap too. She would always make sure to leave before Abdul Rahman came home, as they both brought up painful memories for one another – Abdul Rahman’s departed mother was the very same sister of Souaad’s mother.

Abdul Rahman would come home after work and putter around with Mohammad in his arms and his chest stuck out as though he were overseeing everything, when really he was just trying to look busy before tiring himself out for his afternoon nap.

On days like today, when he'd be late coming home from work, Souaad would go crazy with hunger, knowing she would be expected to wait for him before she could put out the family lunch. She would pray for patience, and list the man's good qualities. He was so gentle, and wanted to give the family so much. He wasn't like other husbands who shouted between rooms and expected to be heard and heeded. Abdul Rahman was as proactive as he could be, given his paralyzing shyness and crossed eyes. And he definitely --

"I'm here."

Souaad jumped. He had entered the room so silently. Finally, Abdul Rahman was here, and he wasn't wearing his ghutra and egal, which meant he'd already laid out the paper-thin fabric on Souaad's bed, to be hung up by Shani, the housemaid. Which meant he was ready to eat.

"Let's go down to the--" before Souaad could suggest they take the familiar route to the kitchen – going down the flecked cream tile stairs, dimly lit by one long, narrow window, holding on to its wrought iron bannister, the pieces roughly twisted together into flower shapes and painted a coppery color, walking through the see-through purple curtains that opened up to a narrow hallway hung with souvenirs from Egypt and Mecca, into the white-tiled kitchen with its grey appliances and black plastic table and smell of chicken and boiled rice - he grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed one of her cheeks, then the other.

"- kitchen?" she finished her question and laughed, and he laughed too, that boyish chortle that made her first start falling in love with him.

He'd never done that before. The gesture was strangely warm and formal all at once. Two kisses like you were at a wedding reception and were making your way down the line of relatives, near, far and new. He'd kept his hands on her shoulders and was closely examining her face. It was as though he hadn't ever seen her, really seen her, until now. Wait until she told Badriya. Would he kiss her on both cheeks too?

She felt somehow she would remember this day. It would be the beginning of a chapter to come. Things were to change drastically – and only God could reveal if it were for better or worse.

"Souaad, do you remember those mosaics we saw in Sharm El Sheikh?"

"On your honeymoon, you mean?" She hadn't been taken anywhere after her wedding, and tried to control the resentment in her voice at being taken on someone else's instead.

"Do you have any pictures of the one in the church?" He sat down on the couch, why was he sitting on the couch? Wasn't he hungry? Didn't he want to have lunch?

"Oh of our prophet Moses and the burning bush? Let me see..." she took out her phone, a hand-me-down from Abdul Rahman. She scrolled quickly back to the oldest pictures and quickly found the image. As soon as she gave him the phone he expertly zoomed into the face of the Virgin, holding her baby and surrounded by flames.

“Abdul Rahman? Don’t you want to eat?” he didn’t look up at her, just zoomed in closer.

“Abdul Rahman? Are you alright? Abdul Rahman? Aren’t you hungry? Abdul Rahman?”

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Episode 6

Abdul Rahman’s desk had never been so spotless. He’d spent all morning stamping paperwork and had finished his work for the next month or so. Then he took all the stray sheets off his desk and gave them to Saeed for filing. It was like he was moving into his cubicle all over again. He’d taken everything off his board. He stared at the stark white wall.

In one hand he cupped the hot tea. He’d put the other over the business card, covering it completely. He could feel its edges under his palm and the shapes cut out of the thick paper. The heat gathered between his skin and the card, and thick paper was curling with the moisture from his sweaty hand. He’d held it there since he sat down at his desk in the morning. He’d done everything using only one hand, as though the other had been amputated.

He spread his fingers apart, so he could see just a corner of the card. He rubbed it with his thumb until he realized it was fraying. Picking it up with panic, he brought it close to his face to see if any other damage had been done.

It had gone a little gray from the sweat. He held it up and watched the light stream through each of the shapes. He held it against his beard and then fingered the hairs coming through. He put it back down and covered her name with his index finger, then uncovered it letter by letter L-I-A-N-E and wondered why it wasn’t written in Arabic as well. He then uncovered number by number and committed them to memory.

He entered and saved her number onto his phone. He wrote her messages where he copy and pasted definitions of good art that he’d found on a chat forum. He deleted them. He wrote her messages where he enumerated her most beautiful qualities. He deleted them.

And then he thought about how much love there was inside of him to give still. He took a sip of tea, a deep breath, and began typing.



CONTEMPORARY ART PLATFORM

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September 24, 2011

Hello my darling I've been thinking of you 9:31 AM

You are beautiful, you know that? 9:31 AM

9:55 AM Who is this??

Your brother-in-faith Abdul Rahman, from yesterday 9:55 AM

I would love to add you to my house
Be my wife 🤵👰 9:55 AM

You would be the third, but the first in my heart. 9:58 AM

I want to see you 9:59 AM

I'll get you anything you want.
Anything. 9:59 AM


 10:00 AM

Hello? 10:02 AM

Are you there?
I can't stop touching myself, all through the night 10:02 AM

I can't stop thinking of you, licking you from front to back
 10:03 AM

I can't
I can't
I can't 10:04 AM


 10:05 AM

I can't
I can't 10:05 AM

