

Bothayna Al Essa

The Blind Sindbad: an Atlas of Sea and War

السندباد الأعمى: أطلس البحر والحرب

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THE BLIND SINDBAD: AN ATLAS OF SEA AND WAR

Look with your mind for the eye is a liar and Listen with your heart for the ear will betray

Al-Tutili

Chapter Zero : The Genie Out of the Bottle

As the invading army advanced along the borders, declaring dominion over Sky, Land, and Sea, over Atlases, dictionaries, and History itself, and as the entire country was transforming into one large prison, the inmates of the Central Prison, alone, found themselves unexpectedly free.

It happened abruptly, like the sensation of falling in a dream. The prison bars had been the only constant in a world that wavered and swayed. None of them would've for a single moment imagined that they'd suddenly be free in an unfree land. None would've necessarily grappled with the meaning of that.

The minds of most prisoners weren't capable of appreciating the irony of their fate, contemplating its divine meaning, or admiring the celestial sense of absurdity that had descended on them. Looking at their litany of crimes—and most were not political—it would be fair to deduce that they lacked the skill for linking cause and effect: theft, blank cheques, honour killings, sexual assault, drugs. It was unlikely that many among them would've mastered the art of looking at themselves from the outside and laughing.

The joke was lost on them.

The doors fell open, and the inmates staggered out of solitary and group cells like a jostling bunch of mystics and fools. The sensible ones, and those were few, slowed down to ensure no door was left unlocked. Some unverified accounts later claimed that one person was left behind, to be found weeks later, dead fingers gripping the locked bars of his cell.

Those with terrorist experience, like making explosives and hijacking planes, turned out to be the most useful; they immediately began devising a way to blow up the external gates.

No one knew how it had all come about. Not even the prisoner whose story concerns us—let's call him Nawwaf.

The inferred sequence of events could be as follows: the radio would've announced the shocking news that the country was under invasion—as if the Iraqi army mobilising at the border for days hadn't been enough of a sign, which is another irony-rich joke no one was prepared to laugh at. Anyway, the invasion had now occurred, and the prisoners would've proceeded to knock on the prison bars, using shoes, cooking pots, and the palms of their hands. Their screams would've echoed through the prison corridors, a roar that came in waves and rose higher and higher as the guards started leaving their posts. The last of the guards to flee would've handed the keys to one of the inmates. No one wanted to be held directly responsible for setting criminals—rapists, murderers, and drug lords—on the loose.

Nawwaf was one day away from completing his first year in prison. Memory was a minefield. All he wanted was to stop his head from bombarding him with images from the past. He knew now, and for most of the past year, that memories sounded like howling dogs and felt like sharp knives. He watched the images glint menacingly at him from within the furrows of his brain; there lay the abyss. He heard a bellowing howl break out of him, followed by a strong desire to whimper. He longed for a hand to touch him, on the left side of his chest, the root of all darkness. Then he decided to sleep for an entire day; if he woke up, he would've put a full year between himself and that memory.

But that was not to be.

The blanket he was wrapped in was saturated with the smell of cigarettes, sweat, and mothballs. He grumbled to himself about the boorish inmates who never stopped fighting. This was probably another altercation over a pillow or a pack of batteries. But the din continued to rise, the voices grew sharper, more acute, then curved out into clear-sounding calls to the guards. He could make out the word 'Kuwait' but didn't understand the context. Then he heard the sound that no prisoner's ear could mistake: the rattle of gates opening, and not once but in a phonetic crescendo that filled his body with a near-sexual ecstasy. He found himself jumping out of bed to stand with the crowd inside the gate of his own ward. Then that gate too fell open.

The prisoners pushed their way to the outer yard. Nawwaf felt like he was being swept towards an unknown, carried by the whirlwind of bodies around him. He was barefoot but had grabbed his trainers and now held them under his arm. His eyes were unseeing. For a few moments, the pain permanently crushing his chest was gone.

When his feet stepped on the dust outside, his skin touched the dawn breeze, and the lilac sky stood before him with a waning crescent on its way to vanishing, he felt a peculiar pleasure wash over him. He realised then that he hadn't seen darkness or the moon all year. He had been sentenced to the unbearable brightness of things. Now, while the other prisoners raced like escaped cockroaches, he froze in his place, as still as a pillar, a smile forming on his face as he noticed the abandoned watchtowers and the groups of inmates hauling gas cylinders from the prison kitchen to the outer gate.

He heard shouts, then a string of names echoed in the night's air: Elias, Saab, Ashour, Abu Mohammad! Those closest to the gate ran away from it and threw themselves to the ground. His body acted before his mind had fully grasped what was about to happen. He was lying on his stomach with his hands on his head, his palms over his ears, when the world was torn open with a boom.

The prison gate was gone. The other prisoners were already sprinting in the street. Nawwaf smiled. He might've been the only one who got the joke.

Chapter One : The Heart of a Mermaid

(1)

Until that day, everything had been in its proper place: humans on land, the fish in the sea or the frying pan. The world hadn't been turned upside down. Manayer hadn't started to disappear.

The sea was mercurial blue, the slowly fading light turning it into a vast mirror, and held between it and the mirror of the sky was the labyrinth of existence. It wouldn't have occurred to any of them that they had already lost their way. For now, the sunset was languorous, staining the sky purple, then

copper, then apricot. It was a dramatic exit befitting what was to come. But Manayer couldn't have known that tomorrow's sun would be rising on a different world.

On her way to the chalet, the sea at her back, her feet sank into the warm sand. She had spent the last few hours collecting shells and urchins, chasing schools of tiny mullets, combing the beach for starfish and crabs and snails. Her skin was burnt and peeling, her heart bursting with the beauty of the world.

Thirty years later, she would understand that this had been a different Manayer. But for now, things had not yet got out of hand. She was perfectly content with the swimsuit she had spent the whole day in, and the plastic pail full of fantastic creatures she held in her hand. The sand gave way to a tiled area – white rectangles enmeshed with brown and grey pebbles – that extended to the chalets. Manayer stopped by the rusty shower. A front yard connected two twin shacks – gypsum walls and tin roofs – her father's and her uncle's. There were bushes of oleander, basil and citrus flowers. The sand had seeped into the cracks between the tiles, the smell of sizzling fat wafted out of the kitchen, a platoon of ants marched carrying bits of dry algae. Manayer was awake to every detail. At night, she would listen to the howling of stray dogs, the chirping of crickets, and sometimes, music.

The water spurted out of the tap like the pipes were having a sneezing fit. Manayer hastily washed her feet. She was about to go in when she heard her uncle's wife—let's say her name was Hoda—“Where do you think you're going, girl?” then it was back to the shower to clean properly. Hoda rubbed shampoo into her hair, rinsed it thoroughly, wrapped her in a large towel, and sent her into the chalet with a gentle spank. Years later, Manayer would remember that Hoda said she was going to put henna in her hair the next day before she went into the sea. But no one can be held to a promise like that after the deluge.

On the floor of the living room, Manayer arranged a line of seashells, one urchin, two starfish, and the red claw of a crab. She had her scented notebook, pens in multiple colours, a pencil and an eraser that smelled of chewing gum. Like the divers, *nukhdhas* and *tawawish* of old, she proceeded to examine her catch and note the details down. She knew the names of the different shellfish; the tusk shells, molluscs, *battoush*, *ou'ou* and *zabbout al-naqaa*. She catalogued her finds according to strict classifications which included texture and colour pattern. She licked the surface to taste the remnants of salt, and the gesture made her feel like an expert in her field.

But there was one thing she valued above all else: the incredible rumble that came from deep within the tusk shell. Manayer would always think of it as the earpiece of a telephone, the sea whispering its secrets from the other end of the call: *Aloo, Manayer? It's me, The Infinite Sea. I carry whales and submarines and turtles in my belly. Corals, sunken ships and human bodies reside in my depths. You know the two colours you see when you look at me, the turquoise and dark Nile-blue, there's a space between them and that's where the mermaids live. A mermaid is someone who left home for love, usually a beauty who has lost her voice. Hey Manayer, do you hear me? There's a dead fish that's washed up on the beach – please return her to me. But Manayer, listen, the crab is happy its claw ended up with you so you can keep that. Aloo, Manayer. Do you know Sindbad the Sailor? He's now ploughing the waters of the Indian Ocean and singing "Your lands are sweet, but there's none like home". Manayer, what does cement taste like?*

Manayer was sketching in her notebook when her cousin—we're calling him Fawwaz— appeared out of nowhere and snatched it out of her hand, causing the red pen she was holding to drag a line from the centre to the margin of the page. A typical scuffle ensued – fourteen-year-old Fawwaz held the notepad above his head, and seven-year-old Manayer bounced up and down trying to reach it -- and ended in the usual escalation: "Wallah I'll tell on you!" Creating a scandal, and hoping that it will have the requisite components for the grown-ups to intervene, was the only skill she could rely on. The grown-ups were the judiciary of her world, and they rarely took her complaints seriously. Sometimes they told her off for 'snitching', said that fitnah was worse than murder. In hindsight, they had always made murder sound like a trivial thing. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Fawwaz tapped the notebook on Manayer's head, then held it higher up and said, 'You want your notebook. Here it is! Jump higher!' Manayer felt small and insignificant, like a little flea, or like *zabbout al-naqaa*, a puddle pygmy. She tried to climb her cousin's torso but then he tickled her under her arms and she fell and hit her head on his knee. Before she had time to burst into tears, he'd thrown the notebook aside and left.

Her uncle had explained a few days ago what her nickname *zabbout al-naqaa* meant. They had been walking back from the beach with a bucket full of tiny molluscs – purple, taupe and white alternating on their spiral ridges – housing in their depths a puny animal with two pincers. 'Here's the pygmy,' her uncle had picked up one of the molluscs and held it between two fingers. She didn't ask if he was referring to the shell or the comic creature inside it. He dropped it in the shallow water and said, 'and

here's the puddle.' She understood perfectly well that this was what grownups called someone when they wanted to mock them for being little.

Manayer found her mum in the kitchen and complained to her about Fawwaz. "I want you to make me a brother," she demanded, "several brothers actually, or at least, if I can't have a brother, then I want a cat!" which the mother, having considered the particulars of the complaint, thought was an unwarranted escalation. Proceeding like everything Manayer said – about child-making, siblings and cats – was of no significance, she lifted the lid off the cooking pot, dipped a spoon in the red sauce, licked it and murmured that the *daqoos* needed more salt. Then, as if she had suddenly remembered, she said that Manayer must go and rub aloe vera on her skin. She was starting to peel like a boiled potato.

Manayer tiptoed out of the kitchen and went to find her father.

(2)

It felt to Nawwaf like he was seeing for the first time the outline of something that had always been under his nose. Whatever it was, it made him uneasy.

While Amer was tuning the oud strings and Talal turning the coals in the shisha, Nawwaf stared at the ebbing tide of the sea. When his daughter slipped herself between him and his brother and asked him why he doesn't get her a brother or a cat, and both Amer and Talal burst out laughing, he didn't even smile. He just placed her hand on her head for a moment, and he might have done that to push her away.

It was likely in that moment that the father started to lose the ability to see his daughter. Manayer will later find out that a child can become invisible when her parents stop seeing her. But it will be another thirty years before she had this thought. In that moment, she was still semi-visible. If she had sketched herself then, she would've given her body one half that was see-through and sharpened her pencil to draw the objects that stood behind it.

Manayer went quiet. Content with being squeezed between her father and her uncle, she took in the sound of water bubbling in the shisha, the wistful lilt of the oud and Amer's singing voice, the ebbing sea and unhurried nightfall. Her father's arm felt nice and his skin had a smell that belonged to her.

The world had not been turned upside down. Not yet.