

Bad Looks

By Rupert Beul

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Chapter 1 I presume

In the Kipengere Range, Ignatio whistled to the wind. He'd led his flock to this icy height to feed on thyme. Having gripped the curved head of his long crook, he stretched both flanks of his torso. Then he considered the way into the foothills; two familiar roads down, one over the ridge and another through the trees. He squinted into the distance. Nestled in a deep cut valley, he saw little wisps of smoke rising. Further along, he could hear the hyenas crying. The air chilled with the half moon rise.

The sheep set a slow pace. He'd tended his flock for years and was wealthy. Kinga villagers

were meek and didn't bling out for the swagger shows on the plains. Plus, he was in love, traveling with the woman of his life. He wanted her to bathe him that night.

He took a glass flask out of his pack and sipped on banana wine. It seemed to sharpen his senses. Something was awry. An unnatural grumbling in his left ear fractured his fantasies. He looked uphill to see four vehicles driving down the winding road. The sinking feeling that hit his gut sent him running down, ahead of his grazing sheep. It might be a government convoy or elephant hunters, but Ignatio had heard of village raids around Lake Malawi and it could only be, bandits.

He had strong legs and ran down fast. Grim thoughts gave him the speed of a cheetah. He was beating the ground with his bare feet, sending rocks and rubble tumbling after him. Eagles screeched ahead. He leapt from a low precipice and rolled to his feet on the scrubby grass below. His ankles were cut and bruised but his knees pushed him along faster.

A moment later, the eagles gathered over the village tea shop. "Ahoi there, look up!" Men rising up and noticing that there were perturbed birds beating and alighting and calling shrill warnings from above. They pointed and queried, "What are they telling us?"

Just then, Ignatio barreled in "Bandits!" between gasping breaths. "Four vehicles are coming. Maybe thirty men." Some groaned and grabbed their foreheads.

"These men come with heavy blades and bullets, and kill without mercy!" "We can't defend with our weapons." "We should make a deal. Offer up some gold, sacks of coffee." "You know who they want! Our daughters aren't trade goods!" "Whatever we offer them, they'll only want more. Let's fight and kill them."

Without coming to a consensus, the men split up. "Take these weapons to the forest. Flee!" Ignatio and the other warriors took spears in ambush at the road.

Their vehicles precursed their appearance. The engines groaned. Blades flashed the moonlight. Machine guns clapped the air and a pack of bandits drove into the village. In front was a large black car and there was a trailer full of guys who caterwauled murder. There was a truck and two open-top jeeps snapping bullets. At the ridge road the first villager stood up and threw a spear. It sliced through the roll-bars of the first speeding jeep, stuck in and slumped over. The warrior reached for his blowgun but was blasted across the chest by bullets.

They mercilessly pushed into the city and split into groups. One went to the village green and the other towards a large estate within a stone wall. He was wearing a leather bondage shirt with strange beaded jewelry and he stood up through the jeep to let loose a rocket, blowing the wall to smithereens. Everyone's ears were ringing when the guard at the old house ended four bandits' lives and slipped away.

Four more swarmed into the colonial estate and stole sacks of coffee, silver platters and jewelry. Bottles of scotch, were opened and guzzled while they turned the cabinets out, breaking calabash and looking for booty.

A half dozen bandits ran into the forest where they tried to dislodge villagers with hide-and-seek taunts. A woman threw a large rock down from a tree and quietly knocked one out. Another one climbed up the tree. She climbed higher, showing to give chase but smashing him down under a large stone. Another villager skewered one in the darkness. She covered his stuck mouth but was bitten and released. He screamed out.

Ignatio entered the dark forest whispering loudly -Fariha, Fariha!-

“Shhhh! If you don’t shut up, you’ll kill us all!”

He crept and stole through the garden next to the forest while a scattering of hot coals lit up the night at its edge. There were sharp, flat rocks there which he picked up. Inside the village, homes were burning and old women cried out to see their neighbors dead across doorways. The bandits left it easy to be harassed by rocks and an occasional spear but those who stayed and fought the warriors at the village gate kept their selves invulnerable. As Ignatio approached his home, the village flared. The pack, wearing leather and denim, were carrying bottles, metal, ivory and girls back to their jeeps.

Ignatio managed to ambush one from behind an unburnt corner of a house and broke his head open with a bloody rock. He stopped and looked down at the man for a moment. He wasn't completely sure who he was. He put his head down in his hands but kept his eyes open, touching them dry with his middle fingers and listening around him, walking away before removing them and taking a look into his home. He grabbed his weapons. Across the town square, the bandits had parked three trucks and large gunners were guarded by metal shields atop the trailer. The others approached it, satisfied with plunder. Ignatio saw the last band jog up, fastening their belts. The fourth jeep sped in from the shadows with its top off. Inside a woman was slung over a big set of shoulders. Ignatio recognized her hair and his heart pumped flames as he caught a glimpse of her face across the way. He charged.

A third bandit stood up with a machine gun but Ignatio, loath to see her like this, whipped the spear into motion. It narrowly hit the gunners back and he turned to raise his weapon. Ignatio whipped out his slingshot as he slumped sideways and let the rock lose. A bullet grazed his hair as he barrel rolled back to his feet and a fair distance lateral to the jeep, which was skidding directly towards him now.. The gunner swiveled, and fired two more shots before the gun clicked empty. Ignatio threw a last stone. It spun and ricocheted off the top of the windshield up to graze the gunner's adversarial eye. It veered again and closed in on him as his hand touched something flat on the ground, a shard of baked clay. He lunged again and sent it spinning off his finger and caught the side view mirror to hit the driver. The jeep hit Ignatio and he fell unconscious.

Chapter 2 Brogue

Metal claps are muffled by sweat saturate air whirling into fan blades. English voices count “1, 2, 3...”, “attaboy, crank down”, roars, encouragement and accomplishment, more reps and dissolved electrolytes as fighters prepare for work.

Between the concrete walls, among exercise equipment, crowded in, a guy in a jersey—Cork 9—asks, “Who's te keepah for te Turkish team?” His voice is like a tin whistle. “Whatsisname? Eh?... Musa... Musala?”

Abu and Tola are in earshot but strike up a conversation at the same cadence. Tola says, “Ya know, this used to be a proper boxing gym, and now we've got American football on the telly every morning. What the fuck is that show? Just ads and ref's calls if you ask me. What's next, a fruit juice bar?”

"Is anyone proud to say we're not the cheapest gym in London?" Jermaine had hurled for Cork. Now he works at the door of a club in North London. This morning he's come to the gym wearing his own jersey. He keeps talking, "He's... Paraguayan, no. Uruguan? Did ya see how quick he stopped Chelsea shots?" aggressively, "Shots! Shots! Shots we had, on goal! ... Muslera! that'sis name. Like BLAM! with the Mickeymouse gloves. b'DOW! all our best shots. I hate to see a match draw for Chelsea. Even to us, on our worst game. I'll be in Turkey next week, properly settle the draw, I will." Like the climax of a sweaty opus, with a change of timbre Abu says, "I'll score one on Turkey tonight."

"Yeah, get him Drogba," Jermaine cocks an eyebrow.

"Got a date with a pretty little Turk from Saint George."

"She kept your number after you dropped out? Ain't she a doctor?"

"Yeah, intern by now, at Saint Pancras."

"I like t'way t'Turkish girls play. Come off a winner's ball. Root last week. Kissed her goodnight and told her not to get pulled in any doors on her way to Camden. Now she sends me naughty pictures of her Sunday afternoon. But you boy, going out with a doctor, and a West End girl! Cheers to you mate. Bet she'll zone you out though, have you running circles round the middle. No penetration."

"Yeah, well maybe that, and maybe I've got a play that'll drop her panties even this evening" as Abu swings his towel around his neck and jumps up to grip the chin-up bar. He hoists his huge body, ridgy legs, size 15 trainers, arched shoulders and all, once from the biceps. Two. In his rounded rectangle head, his eyes cross. Three...

Abu is a young man reckoning with adulthood. At the awkward age of 14 he moved to the Orphanage of the East Mosque where he gained a sprawling surrogate family who argued about what was best. They guided him to study medicine at St. George University but he dropped out. He started an auto-repair service with Tola who had a silver tongue to sell anything.

He thought of his mother's eyes anytime he picked up beach glass. She whispered nonsensical epitaphs, frequently in Swahili, "My gentle little elephant, have you caught any prawns?" After she passed social services just left him alone in the flat. He nuzzled the cashier, a thirteen-year old boy, awkwardly growing. She took pity on him and gave him freebies but his childishness tit love led to menacing from the other kids. He grew so fast he didn't know what to do with his legs and he would get bowled over by the other kids. After she died, he willed it all away at the boxing gym. As he grew, girls could neither trust nor resist him and neither he nor they wanted much conversation.

He's been coming to this gym since he was sixteen (actually nineteen, foreshadowing sake). Jermaine knows he's hiding something because he's seen his ID but he too has a vested interest in seeing Ws on his scorecard. A shady past has worked to his advantage. At 6 foot and 15 stone, Abu can threaten without raising his voice. His nose was flat against his stiff jaw like an anvil. His cheeks and temples are like two bricks. He repairs engines part-time and otherwise hasn't developed a big ambition, but he's got his 400 kg deadlift, as well as his date tonight, well under control. He's late to mosque though, probably have to sit outside.

Chapter 3 Zig Zag

Abu's eyes rest as peacefully as a bird in a tree. He stands tall enough to see kufi hats like white carnations. Shopkeepers rush to retake the cash register from their daughters. Others shake hands and pray. "Al hemdu" "May Allah watch over Mira's new family and bring her many children", Abu exits.

Outside, Rabi is smoking a cigarette to the end. He lights another. "Did you see the Tabqa Dam video? Bismillah, what a firefight!"

"Am I a sick fuck or was that the greatest. Brother Letts was knocking off heads like dandelions!"

"Ah yeah. And those were fucking, military heads, trained by Americans. Listen mate. If you can keep clear of trouble there, I want you and Tola to come with me."

"Yeah mate? I know, well, jihad in Belgium, Paris, all over America, London tonight."

"At the drag track."

"Gotta have some fun, right?"

"Do you still want to sell your car, because I know a buyer in Paris. Thirty-thou."

"Pounds?"

"Is this fucking Paris man? Yes pounds."

"Alright. I'll think about it."

"And another propagandist scandal against Brother Mullagatwani. Same old honey trap. The only way to bring down powerful people is with drugs or girls. See you tonight mate." They clasp hands at waist level.

Rabi and Abu met in Saint George and at first, distrusting each other, eventually became friends. They've both fallen down the Islamist rabbit hole online. The Algorithm sent them videos like, *The state of the Ummah* and *her brothers called her Khanesaa* and suddenly they're exposed to this new spectrum of content that's not only informative but also really entertaining, with different creators bringing their own viewpoints to this giant group of people in the comments section. They laugh at government officials being turned away from their own offices and kicked out of village mosques. These videos, subtitled in English, French or German feel like a rebellion against authority, national identity, and society as a whole. They shouting *Kafir* at kids with beer cans. There was an extremist inflation in the anonymous chat rooms that they'd be invitations to join. Lots of people had been talking about this new *Dawal* for a while now; an uncorrupted proto-government where anything is possible. This huge group of people were learning Arabic online, and sharing new viewpoints they hadn't been exposed to by their families, nations or cultures. It was Zion and everyone had an idea about the Islamic State. Everyone's expertise was valuable. Those who'd ventured to elevate Shariah over Common law in neighborhoods in England found a reason to leave.

Abu quickly walks through the concentric rectangles that hem in the front door. Inside, the carpet patterns are bold lines winding and zig-zagging over-under each other. Lines like the path of a blown-off leaf swooping back to earth rise and the vines loop and creep onward. The vines which branch off, terminate. He gazes, focuses and finds the one vine to the stone *mihrap* in front. Abu saunters towards the holy lands. Imam has finished speaking and men greet each other.

He's still a young man, one-hundred kilograms with thirty-centimeter biceps of college dropout. His eyes show the flesh of his being, often full, varying of shape, size, spacing, direction and color. Contrast, brilliance, brightness, sensation, balance and symmetry function as motion in Abu's eyes and they well up with moisture. His forearms and upturned hands show a lighter tone to his dark face. He sits next to a young man with his palms up on his thighs and says, "...when God calls and we're obliged to answer."

Long before he dropped out of university, Koranic studies here had guided him. He matured to find meaning in it and between its lines. He seeks to educate people, especially those who would suggest a caliphate cannot exist. Mullah Mulligatawny trained his mind and the old guard at Summo's taught him to throw, dodge and take punches. These are Abu's lodges. Countless idle nights were spent here or there, 12 meters under the neon car park sign.

Now men shake hands, their sins falling like autumn leaves.

Throughout their adolescence, Abu and Tola would drink vodka from plastic bottles. Tola'd say "Ey man, sniff these white girls", or "Ey Mate, hit the spliff why not?" Tola is smaller, louder and more focused. Summo's was his lodge too but he didn't fight, last of anyone Abu. He'd hold his pads on Friday nights waiting for the two blonde receptionists to clock out. Then he'd rev up his Vespa with some of the other speed freaks. The chicks would wink from behind bleached plaits, boost up and whistle at a young Abu and his younger crew. When their dates pulled into the littered car park, teenaged Tola and his squad would follow them hos' date's shiny Jaguar half way to South-End on the Sea, hooting and hollering and grabbing their dicks.

Tola keeps his collarless shirt buttoned up in the East London Mosque. His pants bunch up at the waist as he bends and bows, sits with his back straight and feels his neck soften. He prays on the dole, but who isn't? He used it for a resin mold craft set, with which he does auto-detail under the table.

Throughout his life, Tola bought faster and faster bikes. He sold grass strictly for business but he dipped his little spoon on the weekends. He and Abu both stopped drinking. By the time he converted to Sunni Islam he'd flirted with dozens of faiths. Once a month, and he took it seriously. He found the peace of a man who knows God. His family, Smith used to work on the ferry to Holland. He met Zionists from Suriname in Rotterdam, but when he got back home he stumbled upon a Jehovah's witnesses court. After seeing the general English public as potatoes, listening to his pitch, he gave up. Later, he wore the same white shirt with The Nation of Islam, who schooled him on colonial abuse and the stink of Empire. He was happy to attend services at Armenian, Greek, Coptic, Russian and Ethiopian Orthodox churches for the next seven years and even whirled with Dervishes.

That's the history that his tattoos tell. King Joseph expands into a pastiche featuring verses, all manner of crosses, ankhs, and Celtic knots, Malcolm X, Haile Salessie, Jesus, angels, hands praying, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba coupling between a pride of lions, Inri, amen and bismillah. Sometimes, they jumped off his pale skin while he rode shirtless under a ball helmet, moving powder and pills just ahead of the forces. It made him enough money to partner in to an auto-body repair and detail shop with his friend Abu. He worked with custom resin molded frames. He crafted them and charged twice as much as a competing shop that used 3D printers. Tola, whose mother and father owned a few horses in Stoak-Newington, whose grandparents were gardeners in Enfield, whose great-grandparents caught foxes in Cheshunt, hated his parents as they hated theirs. Each generation traveled a short distance and a rural demarcation away, each pushing towards London on sharp acquisition. He made it on these Arabs, selling coke and fixing their wrecks. He also completely neglected to pay taxes.

A familiar group of scholars and students gather near the Imam's pulpit. A white bearded elder with shameless, bright eyes approaches them smiling. He's dressed in a white shirt, a white lace skullcap and baggy grey pants. He bids Abu, "My son, could you bring that Quran to the ground?" His name is Mullah Anjem Mulligatawny and he was once the imam of this mosque. He lost his position twice; once for encouraging antisemitism and again 20 years later in a sex-trafficking scandal but he's still allowed to pray here and this is one of the rare opportunities when he's able to preach. He motions towards the stained glass vector circle behind a bookshelf containing many volumes of Hadith and an open Koran resting on a pedestal atop the porte piazza.

Abu obliges, and sets the book on the carpeted floor. The men sit in a semi circle with the youngest in the middle. More boys are ushered front and center to listen. Abu sits with his palms up.

Mullah Mulligatawny begins with greetings and prayers, then asks the children, "Who freed Allah's people from the Pharaoh?"

"Hazreti Musa" they race to reply.

"Correct my sons. Musa spread Allah's wisdom to his folks. And who was even more knowledgeable than him?"

One of students blurts out, "Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu alayhi wa salaam."

"Indeed the prophet knows Allah, however the extent of the all the prophets' knowledge are unknown. But the Holy Koran speaks of another man who knew Allah, and he also knew Musa and Elijah. In Surah 18, verse 65, this man is called, *one of our slaves whom We had granted mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves.*"

"Who is this?"

"..."

"Well, neither did Musa. But one of the Israelites asked, 'O messenger of Allah, is there another man on earth more learned than you King of the Israel?' Musa said no. Allah rebuked him, saying that one man could not know everything, nor would one messenger alone be the custodian of all knowledge. There would always be another who knew more. Musa asked, 'O great Allah, Tell me his name, that I might seek wisdom.' So, Allah told Musa to bring a salted fish on a wandering journey and not to eat it. Musa ordered a servant to pack a light sack and he retrieved a dried fish from his storerooms. They set off into the desert, through forests and over hills. After many days travel they laid down to rest at a dry riverbed. In the night the servant awoke to see a trickle of water coming down the valley. Next the salted fish came to life and jumped into the water. He presumed he was dreaming and laid back down. The next morning him and his master saw the land changed. He told Musa and they checked to see that the salted fish was missing. 'Ah! The sign!' Musa said with excitement. He sent his servant packing and sat there, unable to believe his own eyes as green things grew and branched all around him. New saplings and shrubs were growing and green vines were wrapping around them. Down the stream a man approached. 'Peace be upon you,' said Musa. The mysterious man looked and said, 'Peace?' A lingering silence passed as he walked slowly, never taking his eyes off the old King. 'Is that how people greet each other in your land?' he asked. Musa replied, 'I am the God's Prophet, founder of the tribe of Israel.' Khidr snapped, 'I know you shepard prophet, and I know your divine tablets.' Khidr calmed and queried, 'Why seek me?' Musa replied, 'As a teacher. I seek to accompany you and to learn what I don't know.' The cloaked man immediately responded, 'The essences of our knowledge are divergent. I will upset your sensibilities and your impatience will bother me.' Musa was emphatic, 'I will follow you as a student and I promise to obey your every command.' Khidr pondered and replied, 'You may accompany

me on the condition that you remain silent.' Musa agreed. They walked three days in silence along the sea and came to a harbor with a sturdy boat at the dock. Musa followed al Khidr as he greeted the crew as friends. The prophets boarded and sailed with them. A short time later a sparrow was flitting around, dipping and drinking the water. 'O Musa, our combined knowledge is no more than a sparrow's drink in Allah's waters.' Suddenly al Khidr took a board from the ship and pulled it loose. Water slowly but steadily leaked in. 'Do you mean to drown the crew whom you greeted as friends?' Musa asked indignantly. 'Ah, the morning hasn't even passed and already you've forgotten your promise.' As they disembarked Musa's nose curled in disgust. He regarded his master's deed as evil and they walked on in silence. Then they arrived at a village and found some young boys playing. Al Khidr stops, singles out a boy, calls him over and kills him with a rock. Musa shouts, 'Indeed you're actions are evil.' 'You have already outpaced my expectations as a student.' Now Musa snaps back, 'I promise to be the one to turn back if I should break my silence again.' The master and disciple were hungry and tired but found no comfort because the villagers were miserly and paranoid. The travelers were shuttered out of the windows. Al Khidr, intent on some mysterious purpose, came across a fallen wall and began to repair it. Musa watched silently as he gathered the rocks, mixed the minerals for cement and started repairing the stone wall. They left the village. Musa spoke a third and final time out of frustration, 'You're mad! You sabotage your friends boat and kill a child but volunteer for undeserving people who wouldn't even give us a drink of water. I wanted to learn your wisdom but you've shown-' 'The time,' al Khidr cuts him off, 'has come for you to go back to your tribes.'

Ahem-" Anjem clears his throat. "What was the lesson of al Khidr to Musa? And what does this story teach us?" he turns his eyes to his audience, first the children.

A young man speaks up. "I believe they represent different aspects of humanity."

Another man cut in, "It teaches us the value of patience Anjem Hodja. I think Musa missed an opportunity to be a greater prophet."

"Anjem Hodja" a third student Allah told Musa that al Khidr was the wisest, so by questioning al Khidr's wisdom, was he questioning the wisdom of Allah, which is a sin."

Anjem continues, "Musa left. He walked back alone and came to a fishing harbor. He was shocked to see the same crew he'd crossed the water with. Musa apologized and took out some money but the crew refused it and praised his wisdom. 'A plunderous navy was commendeering fishing ships but when they looked at our sinking boat they left it. We easily repaired it and now, we are the only ship at sea, and catching more fish than ever!' Allahu akbar!"

"Allahu akbar!"

The youngest student asks, "But teacher, why did al Khidr kill that boy? And why did he repair the wall?"

"Those who tell the word do not always know the intention of the Almighty!" he snaps. "How many times do I have to tell you? Are you blind, illiterate or just stupid? This is no fairy tale, this comes from the Noble Koran. Don't tell me it's your first time reading it. You're nearly a man, but you've learned nothing of the quest for knowledge. Pray that the hours between now and your next beating stretch for you to read enough without blue fingertips!"

Abu winks and blinks at Tola. One eye drifts, the other gapes. He rubs them, takes out a set of wooden prayer beads, and carelessly whips them against the fist they are clenched in. Tola looks up at Abu, his voice is low and expressive, "And as for the boy, he was a pagan and his parents were true believers. We feared that he would pressure them into defiance and disbelief. Surah sixteen, al Kayf.

It's from the cave. Al Khidr killed the boy because he was going to corrupt his parents."

Chapter 4 The Unification of Tangankiya and Zanzibar

In Tanzania, it was more than one hundred tribal units which lost their freedom; it was one nation that regained it." -Julius Nyerere-

After centuries of colonialism, African nationalism ignited a revolution on the Swahili coast and the Sultanate's hegemony was overrun in Stone Town. In the heat of the night, January 12th, 1964, revolutionaries from the Afro-Shirazi party joined with the banned Umma party. Before morning broke, they'd forced open police stations, airstrips and the Sultan's palace. The exploited masses claimed revolutionary rule over Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam and the newly independent East African nation of Tanganyika. Centuries of Portuguese gold miners, Nazis, English warmongers, Omani iconoclasts, Indian dealers and other colonists has been driven out. The economics of slave and spice trade was confronted with a viable opposition. Arabs and Indians were slaughtered in the streets. Europeans and Americans were evicted and deported. The revolutionaries established new courts. Waves of nationalism followed. President Nyerere's *ujamaa* socialism, and the Tanzanian Shilling narrowly avoided hyperinflation.

Mbito was a young boy when his father and the revolutionaries helped massacre thousands. After a few days, order returned to the streets. Jubilant visitors came to his home followed the revolutionary action. They would gather around the radio in the evenings to hear Nyerere speak, "*The African is not 'Communitic' in his thinking; he is -- if I may coin an expression -- 'communitary'.*" Henceforth Tanzania, port and country, would be independently ruled by a single-party revolutionary council.

Coffee traders avoided Tanzanian tariffs and docked in Mombasa. Inside of dark storerooms in deep catacombs, saltpeter crystallized on barrels of old cloves and banged in phantom explosions. The economy was already in depression. Many traders in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, lost opportunities and resigned to village life. There was more money now for schools and ideas were open to trade.

Mbito was educated communitarily. As a boy he began working at the docks. At a young age he was given responsibilities and power. He made money and savored his life. He would get his hands on foreign products, music and even currency until he was caught by police selling a Madonna poster to a friend. He went to jail. On the third day inside, he wept and cursed his family, but then he came to terms with his crime. He was playing mancala with his cellmate when his father came to bail him out. The first night after he returned home he was thrashed with a rolling pin. "This music is pornography, bow your head to the dollar! Or or or... Kiss the feet of the Sultan when you look at this! Don't ever, *never* let it in our country again!"

He was forgiven and allowed to return to work. Forthwith, he checked the scales to the digit. He inspected the quality and sealed packages of coffee, sesame seeds and tobacco with the national crest; a man and woman building a shrine of tusks over a shield decorated with regional flags and traditional weapons atop Kilimanjaro- looking more like an anthill- with the words *Uhuru na Umoja* sashaying underneath. From the right angle, the mountain looked like an bottom view of a live elephant, with the

couple standing askew, gently holding on to the beast's tusks. The new tape had a holographic image that was mesmerizing to look at.

Chapter 5 Duygu

In a mostly empty flat, a woman's desultory voice bounces down dark halls with high ceilings. It's an old Kylie Minogue song, "Should I shout for rescue... uh oh oh oh, don't let go, two hearts... forever, I'm in love, I'm in love, Is this for ever and ever?" All the lights are off save for ten bare bulbs arched over a mirror on a vanity set. Brown boxes stack precariously on furniture in the front room. The curtains are dark, heavy and let only a flicker of light and motion through from the West End.

Duygu's finishes her eyes in the vanity mirror and unscrews a bottle of red lip-gloss. She puckers and swabs it around oval lips. A playful smile swings from her round, high cheekbones. Wide almond eyes set below smoothly rounded temples, over an arching nose and quivering upper lip revealing chicklet teeth. She feels beyond her vanity. Boxes are rustled. She considers the day's anatomy lecture. It was right before the school holiday and the professor asked everyone to touch their philtrum. The few people who did it, acted so smoothly, that others didn't notice. As Duygu touched the metal on her face he expounded. *A vestigial medial depression between the nose and upper lip. On humans it has no apparent purpose.* She misses her family. She's thrilled to be going home tomorrow. *It's just this fingertip sized saddle in the middle of our faces. But on dogs it's a moist groove that helps them have this amazing sense of smell.* Her patience is strained and she sheds a tear. *Jewish legends say that's where we're touched by angels within the womb as they command us to keep their secrets.* She really doesn't like going long periods away from her family. *I notice that some students here have got it pierced.* Recognition of herself as vanity is as disarming as baked goods. *We certainly can't practice medicine in England with those kinds of facial accessories.*

She grabs her purse, throws in the lip gloss and runs outside to her familiar street. 2 blocks up she's meeting Abu, the boy from Saint George. He dropped out sophomore year but randomly texted her last week. She decided to let him take her out, what's to lose? Later at Club Swag with all her girlfriends, she'll really try him on. She whips out her phone to see his message *a night at the races?* and a picture of Piccadilly Circus.

She replies, *u there now? If you're dressed good enough we can go up to Leicester later.* She continues on down the staircase.

The night falls and Abu's sitting in the front seat of his Alfa Romeo Giulia. He grabs his mobile and scrolls through the address book to text bouncers, club owners and bartenders. Duygu's message interrupts like a butterfly on his face. Abu's out of his car and she's leaning against a tree. She steps up, "Hello hello," and jumps up for a hug. She hangs from his neck for a second and gives him a little kiss on the cheek. She's wearing a tight black and white dress, tall boots and a lavender fur coat. Abu notices her curves, squints and inaudibly mouths "sexy bint".

Abu's never seen her in night clothes. In fact, he hasn't properly seen her smokin ass since college. They took a sociology class together, one of the few he attended. When he started working at the shop, he lost game with most of the college girls he'd known. She always returned his messages.

After class he used to come by and try to get her to come out but she was always in the library. For the first time since college Abu sees himself in her... future.

He's swallows his lust down to bend and kiss her on the cheek. After pleasantries, he opens the door to his Alfa Romeo. It's blue with A&W glittering under the streetlight.

"Nice car"

"You wanna see it hit a hundred in four point five?"

"OK," capriciously, "just not in the West End, alright?"

"C'mon, let's go to the quarter mile track. It's in North Kensington."

"But, that's like an hour away."

"Is it now?" he diverts a glance right before threading the needle into heavy traffic on Regent street, speeding down Pall Mall onto Marlborough Road. Before ripping past Buckingham Palace on the A4, he flickers the car alarm, the vehicle ahead of him pulls into the left lane and he speeds ahead. Whilst passing through affluent London, inbound traffic was heavy but his road is clear as they drive out through the parks district.

She announces, "I heard you were a junkie for a while."

He interjects, "That's bullshit. I'm a Muslim"

"..."

"Did you believe it?"

"Do you think I'd be here if I believed it?"

"So is this the chance?"

She exhales sharply. "A chance at what?"

"The one I've been asking for since Saint George. Girl, we go way back. Do you know the first time I ever texted you was on a flip phone?" he holds a lingering smile with gumdrop eyes.

"Haha, is that right? Well don't get the wrong idea, I'm a Muslim too." Abu's still staring at her. She laughs and cracks the window as headlights blur by, "I think you should watch the road Loverboy."

A bit later they pull onto a street on a ridge. At the end there's an empty industrial park with an empty lot in front of a boarded-up factory. A long tar-streaked pavement runs flat between the two hills. A dozen people splash beers around cars with bass heavy techno music blasting. A few cars have open hoods that people gather around.

Abu rolls past slowly and mumbles out the window, "I'm deadly on the quarter mile." Some of the men turn their noses up. Abu laughs and hollers jovially at another group. "Ay mates, ya know your boy's good for a laugh. C'mon who wants to take on my whip today? I want that spot son, gimme your ear son." He slows and pulls a silver revolver from under the seat. Duygu gasps. "Don't worry. I'm not doing dirt tonight. It's just the starting gun."

Outside, a man in a rubber suit gyrates with a magnum of champagne and a camera crew sets up a tripod at the finish line. A guy in a tux swings the trophy chain encrusted with glass jewels.

Abu takes both hands off the wheel. "Here," he takes Duygu's hand and the other reaches for something auspicious from under the seat. He pulls out a small white box and thuds it heavily into her

hand. "Hold the blanks." He opens it and takes out a thirty-eight shell. Duygu chuckles a bit. "Click clang, go in three out of six. It will turn, and every other shot will blast. You want to mash the pistol?"

Thoughts race through Duygu's mind. The police are likely flat roofing and can't be arsed with races in Croyden. Her left eye looks up to meet him. She grabs Abu's bicep and feels the pistol with the other hand running across the cylinders and hammer. Abu's spine tingles to the base and beyond. She nods and guides the piece into her purse, saying "gimme the gun."

As they get out, other cars growl around the bend. There's a low-rider that's wheels keep spinning after it stops, Jeeps with spotlights on roll-rails, classic cruisers and more than a few Jaguars on the tar streaked track. There is a group of girls in a photo session and Duygu joins in, chatting vapidly.

Abu steps up to his crew. Tola's rapping,

I'm blowing up for the final time, I see the blade at your belt and you wonder what's in mine, Hiding in plain sight and wired under a thawb, Right when they say alright Mate, bomb the synagogue.

Tola's bare arms show off his tattoos and dozens of gold rings. He's deepening his voice to boast about his motorcycle's balance. Rabi's Arabian chic with a short cigarette, tailored trousers and beard so thick, black and trim it could've been drawn on with magic marker. Abu looks through the group of friends and says, "What's up fellas? I just want you to know, that you can count on me."

"Thanks mate," chirps Tola, "but that sounds like butter, are you on a roll?"

"Wait and see, if it goes right. But I'm not sitting bitch."

Rabi declines, "Mate, you ain't bet your arse. Bitch sits, as bitch does. The way I see it, you've got to earn yourself that seat."

Abu knows he'll be stuck with the dirty jobs and heavy lifting anyways. He bargains, "I'll sell you the truth for a good story."

Adrift from the conversation Duygu's approached by a girl who keeps nodding her her head and raising her eyebrows saying quietly, "Who is?" She chides, "Oh is you a bad bitch? Is you gonna listen now or later?" Fur boots stomp over to lay a finger on Duygu who pushes her back with her chain stitch purse. Hands fly up back at Duygu and she's trifling, "Back me ho, get under me and I'll leave you here on the starting line."

"Hey! Duygu belts out, "Who's first?" and pulls out the magnum. The aggressor backs off but towards the start. "Ehhh piss yourself," she says sat down.

Drivers share last glares and pull up to the line. Duygu is there with the gun held high.

"Ready," the car engines putter.

"Set," everybody looks to the windshield.

"Go!" Duygu blasts the cap.

Two cars speed off at evens. As she turns, Abu catches Duygu's little body in a hug and they walk together down the track. He stands close behind her and reaches over to grab his pistol back.

"Good shot puppet." barely over the din of motors.

"Puppet?! Oh maybe you got me wrong, you're not stuffing your hand, or anything else!"

"Yo," he rubs his eye and looks around with the other one, leans forward and says, "Give me the damn gun."

"Oh I see. Now I'm the crazy bitch with the gun and I'm supposed to calm down. If you wanna take me out, show me what you've got. All night, people are throwing eyes at you. You must have a hell of a rep. You got this car, you can drive fast, you bring me out here to show me who you are. Let's see. And if your ride's got speed, you can drive me to the club after. And take your stupid gun," she shoves it in his pocket.

"Damn, everybody's stretching me out tonight." Abu tilts forward as Rabi approaches, tucked in.

"Hey man," Rabi grips his shoulder and yells into his ear, "Man! You want to race tonight?"

"Yeah, I'm bound to. Let me see the list?" Abu grabs the clipboard from the tuxedo clad emcee. It's full pairs until two a.m. "My gun got no clip but this board's full clip," he snaps the cylinder, "b-dididididiDamn."

"I have written my name already."

Abu checks again, "Rabi you're on race 3! I want that spot."

"It is not yours."

"Oh? And who are you gonna beat in a Rover?" He looks at the list of names "Here we are. *Replicobra*? Slow loser against Alfa. Listen mate, I'll race for you and I'll be your Romeo. I'll give you 20 percent."

"Keep your winnings, but pay the entrance fee back triple if you lose. There are higher ceilings. And a lot more money for both of us. Do you remember what we talked about on Tent Street?"

"What? When the little girl smelled poo? Sure, The Islamic State, but stifle your blackmail, I'll race third and I'll go when I'm good and ready."

Rabi cools his intention and calls Tola into the conversation.

"This is more than fast cash, but tell me tonight if you're ready to make ten-thousand easy quid."

Abu's circular eyes flatten. "I don't know man, I'm running up the wall here. I'm not looking for chump change with kafirs." Tola's ear's drawn in and he jumps off his bike.

"Drive with me... a delivery... for my uncle."

"A job for an Arab," he considered. "Alright maybe. Why do you need us?"

"This isn't just a job brothers. This is a life of jihad, in Rakka, and I wouldn't offer it to anyone else. *Al Khalifa*" he spread out his arms as if holding cudgels across the black night. "By the end of the week. It's four days drive. There's war there. There's work. Rebuilding something eternal and almighty." Rabi pulls a shining coin out of his pocket, "This is the premier Islamic currency. Pure gold. A standard that can never devalue. Listen," he pauses. "You'll make the same wage you get here, five-thousand, and live at the same standard of life, do the same jobs, boxer/mechanic and stuntman/body work, teachers of hand-to-hand combat, doctors, they're all state subsidized so you just keep the engines running. Your wages are two thousand pounds a month with no expenses. Rent, food, wheels, all paid for. I've already set up a new bank account to access all over the world. I can set up two more right now over the phone, and wire you five-thousand pounds each. Or take it in gold."

"I hate the fucking pound. Not for money, or the good life," he stands straight and puts both hands up in prayer, "I'll going for the glory, but not for my own," he pauses "That of Islam." He slumps back down and laughs. "How was that? Am I ready to be a mujahiddin?" The corner of his eyes sharpen.

"I love gold. I have one question, I saw people burning their passports."

"That's voluntary. Everyone takes an name so no one will be tracked." Tola curls his lip up, "Wheeling to Mesopotamia has got to be the most arsed scheme I've heard since gangbangers."

"OK, I'll give both of you the three-ounce bonus that I get for bringing you."

"The whole five." he bargains.

"You twisted my arm. Okay, but you each have to give me something. Tola, you're my mechanic but I need a different kind of speed from you. and Abu, you're my body guard."

"Wait a minute. Five ounces of gold?"

"Pure. Just to support the troops."

"Hmm, I'll consider it."

Chapter 6 Sailor Man

The date was February of 1984 and an old vessel was approaching Stone Town. Inside its cargo hold sat fifteen metal boxes made from corrugated steel, the industry standard; intermodal freight containers, shipped to train or truck without breaking bulk. They were full of chips, candy bars, fizzy drinks and other food. In a dark cargo bay, a man in an open vest held a clipboard and approached the labels, squinting to read their ID numbers, no bigger than rice grains.

"L... S... G...O... no, that's a U. One-oh-seven, seven-three-seven... How could these huge boxes make work easier?" He asked the rats in the darkness. "They're heavy, awkward and the machines to lift them are even heavier and more awkward!" For such a man, no less of a name than Simbat.

In the corner, a pile of old sacks were stacked on a cart. He flops down on it and rests his eyes. A cloud of dust diffused into a dream of the first time he sailed into Zanzibar as a scrub deckhand. At the port of entry the captain was shouting, "Maize in the front corner, shift that Ceylon tea back and bring forward the Earl Grey, or you can parlay your way into the harbor."

At Zanzibar Port with sacks of corn and seeds, Young Simbat, with earrings of less precious metal, finished hauling the goods off the ship. Afterwards he leaned against a wall, crossed his arms against his broad chest and closed his eyes. He immediately heard a loud voice bark, "Let's get to work! All this stuff needs inventory."

"Yes sir," he straightened his disposition and followed the serious looking man down a corridor into a dimly lit store room.

The official, dressed like a customs control officer, pushed up his glasses and started counting

sacks. Simbat leaned back up against a wall, waiting with empty hands. The local official was marking his tablet. Simbat took out his beads. The officer heard the noise, looked back and said, "Who are you? What ship do you come on?"

"I work for the Sultan of Oman."

"Simbat of the Sultanate," he laughed at the brazen deceleration and lowered his eyebrows, "Well, if your Sultan could see you now, would he think you were working hard enough?"

Simbat half understood, replied, "Yes yes, Sultan Sayeed, very good. Very rich!"

"Does your Sultan have many ships?" intrigued.

"Yes, a hundred, maybe. And warships."

"Oh ha! don't bring those here."

"What is your name?"

"Mbito, and I am the Order General."

"Very nice to meet you O.G. Mbito."

He showed the pins on his lapel. "Why don't you learn Swahili?" Simbat approached his tablet and looked down at the letters. He was happy to chat with this talkative man and it was far from the last time. He indeed learned Swahili and Mbito improved his Arabic too. As a young sailor, Simbat had taken his stipend to the girls but Mbito helped spark an ambition. He looked at inventory, memorized prices and repaired ships. They both sought trade.

Simbat woke up to Maymun, the monkey tapping his arm. He opened it and the little black monkey nuzzled in. He fell to dream of working for Sahip Sindhibaatr, an elderly shipping mogul from Thatta, a family man. Simbat knew some Bedouins who made lavish hajj treks across the deserts. He met Sahip in the dinghi while reeling 15-meters up the hull. "I am the father of eleven, and I have three wives." Simbat laughed a windfall and later approached Sahip Sindhibaatr with a gentle confidence and hidden intentions. "How fortune they are. They will certainly have every opportunity. That is the reason you spend eleven months a year at sea. To establish a legacy?" The con was long, difficult and based of intuition. Sindhibaatr had a dozen ships, one too many.

Simbat took his stipend, bought some American flags and rented a small boat. Bribes were paid to the wrong people but when the Persian gulf started to fill up with American ships, Simbat figured no one would know the difference and forged a lien against the ship he'd been working on. People were always chasing the old mogul down at ports to burden him with bureaucracy so he got an actor to impersonate a member of the US Navy and had it served to him, "This ship was stolen by the Soviets off the coast of Korea..."

Sindhibaatr went to the helm of another ship. He consider changing allies, or at least lawyers. He was well versed in wet law. But he'd never taken his hadj, and he was starting to suffer vertigo. "Perhaps a few months on land would do me well." "You might go with my assistance," Simbat said. "A noble tribe of Bedouins, once made me their honor. Please allow me to honor them by brokering your family's *hadj*."

Sindhibaatr considered but quickly refused. "There's too much work to be done. My ships will be seized by the empires." Next, Sinbad received for him, a letter from the Sultan of Oman. Sindhibaatr, busting through the wax seal with his gold letter opener regarded the crest. It read, *Sultan Said bin Taimur of Oman, Son of Muhammad, brother of the Sun and the Moon. Sovereign of*

sovereigns. He skipped a few lines. ...*your fleet has grown to exceed the protection of the Sultanate and its passages at Hormuz and Suez can no longer be sponsored.* Sindhibaatr threw his hands up and marched below deck to find him. "Simbat! Your offer for my family is most gracious."

Simbat appeared and clasped his hand, "but there are three dozen in family, and not one of them makes their own bed." So it was that Simbat paid for a band of Bedouins two-years salary to take Sindhibaatr, his elderly parents, four wives and eleven children, three more children from previous marriages, four siblings, eight nieces and nephews, and fifty-one camels two-thousand miles across Arabia. They considered it an honor gift and painted *Mashallah* across the stern. Sindhibaatr, returned to India spiritually fulfilled and never returned to sea.

Simbat turned a sharp profit in his first year, trading between East Africa, India and Arabia. The cargo holds were always full of coffee, textiles, fish, vegetables or whatever trade goods were available. He outfitted the communications tower with a new radar. The next year he procured a 20-year old, Mil-mi-6 helicopter from a Soviet black market auction and armed it with two missile launchers. He recruited zealous men from West Indian and East African fishing villages and they chased long loneliness away with fantasies and jokes- *The whores here are tighter than clams, and three times as fragrant* -as they passed from port to port and got to know them. Simbat would hoist, deal and drink as much, and they all wasted time betting on cat fights, singing, drinking, diving into the sea and shooting weapons. Old mates told stories with swords out. Whiffs of tales and legends carried them out time and time again but a sea change in maritime laws was catching up to these heavy machine powered ships. Procedures and technology was stripping the paint. There was nothing blocking the view of the sea there, in crows nest, high above the communications tower, which was where Sayeed Hesham Sameer, less ambitious but more wise than Simbat, and his pet monkey Maymun had risen early to climb up to.

His earliest mentor, more like an abetting uncle than a father figure, Sayeed was twenty years Simbat's senior. Once Simbat fell in love at port. Sayeed helped him smuggle the girl onboard but their lovemaking was too loud and they were found. The girl was sequestered in the captains quarters and Simbat and was locked in the brig with his accomplice. It so happened that the girl was a kind of princess. While the love smugglers were locked up, their ship was waylaid by the navy of a small, but wealthy island.

As the ship was burning and going down, young Simbat wailed, "We're left to die!" He banged on the metal bars, "Hey! Captain. Let us free! "

Sayeed replied, "No one's coming. This is all your fault, but maybe there's always a way out." He started to jab at the panels with his elbow. "A weak link, a low picket, a loose plank or a trap door." A panel sprang out, showing a dark rectangular gap in the high wall. The floor was starting to tilt, making the wall easier to climb. They crawled out through a vent and found a passage to the engine room. They opened a hatch and climbed into the bilge pump, crawling upwards with their backs against the vent. Before long they saw stars and scaled upward. Scrambling to grip the duct they scooted out of the tube which was tilted out as water rushed in a the fore hull. In the sea there were bodies among the flotsam and jetsam. The assailing ships' wakes churned the bloody sea under the moonlight. Sayeed and Simbat strapped a panel with O rings and waited three days to be rescued by the Malaysian Coast Guard.

Realizing that he'd been asleep for the better part of an hour, Simbat hastily finished inventory and passed up through the humming steel corridors to see another clear sunrise over the water. On

deck, he heard a holler, "Land Ho!", looked up to see Sayeed climbing down. "Count it! Today's the first day of Rabi al Thani"

"Not surprising who rises earliest," Simbat jested, "Did Maymun wake you up with a leak? In the morning his dick is longer than my tooth."

Sayeed glanced at his pet perched on his shoulder and said, "Hold back now Maymun, our venerable Captain is gonna try to outdo your sexual moves and we don't want old Simbat to bring back with him a case of the monkey pox."

It was too early to laugh, so they grinned slightly and kept their eyes squinted against the rising sun as the crew came on deck. "*Habari Yako!* Aakash," "Good morning Mbwana, baklava for breakfast again?" He slapped their backs. "A joke?" They whipped each other's chests with limp wrists, smiled and squinted.

"Did you hear about the boy who went the whorehouse to lose his virginity?" "The bitch took a look at him and said, 'You're too young. Go fuck a tree and come back in a year.' A year later the boy came back. When the pimp looked in the room he saw the boy with a long stick in her cunt. He burst in hollering 'What the fuck are you doing?' The boy replied, 'Well, the last time I did this, a squirrel bit my dick so I gotta make sure it's all clear.'" The deck roared in laughter, drowning out the engine.

"Alright," said Simbat, "Stone town tonight, but tomorrow evening we'll be in Dar es Salaam. After we unload, I'm sick of your faces until the first of June."

Simbat walked with Sayeed who passed out envelopes of Tanzanian and English currency. As the savory winds of Africa blew hard against his face, he said quietly to Simbat, "The Afghans are seeding a Jihad against the Russians. Every general in Afghanistan is looking to build a battalion and that means slave wives."

"And that means Africa."

"Fuck! I don't wanna come down on the wrong side of this thing."

"But if we do the right thing we can still get paid."

"Anyone who's ever been to a Pakistani brothel knows the difference between a slave girl and a free whore."

Chapter 7 White Cobra

Duygu's acting the vixen and harassing the bottle gimp. The emcee picks up a microphone, "There's an opening in the super street class. Looks like Replicobra's too slow to the starting line." Tola's motorcycle thrusts onto the back wheel and he leans back. Abu drives up to the guy in the tuxedo and calls him over. "My race is imminent. Where's the contender?"

"I don't know. I'll announce an open spot in a bit."

Duygu opens Abu's passenger side door and says, "Well, I guess that's your slow loser. Stuck in West End traffic perhaps."

"What's the buy in?" wonders a young kid

“Six-hundred wins a grand.” At that moment up on the ridge, a Shelby cobra with aggravating red headlights squeals through the gates and down the hill. It burns and smokes for a flash before ripping to the starting line where the passenger door swings opens and two women in long white dresses sashay out passenger door of the two-seater. The car revs as one of them lights two cigarettes and they split to the driver door, where a gentleman steps out dressed like a silver-age superhero in red and white.

“Wow, so he makes an entrance. Alright big boy, show on the road, let's go.” With the door open, they laugh and hum. She says, “but don't get it wrong, win or not, it won't change my mind.” He dares a closed mouth kiss. -Cheeky-, she smiles, looks up and opens his lips with her tongue for less time than it takes for an egg to crack. Abu eyes are thumping on his closed lids. She backs up to look at his face, tuts her tongue and heads up. “Have a good race.”

Audibly, the silver flake sparkles under the Cobra's red headlights on Abu's Alfa Romeo. He wants Duygu to shoot the gun but she chose to wave the flag. Abu concentrates on it and replays his race mantra. It's 60% man 40% wheels. His car is fast. Fill the mix and get rich quick. He puts the gun back under the seat and starts revving up with the car. He watches the flag fall and accelerates to the limit. The Cobra contender's tailpipes shoot flames. He's behind by a length. He flicks his turbo, kicks it into 6th, and pumps. Shwoom. Even at at 120 mph, Abu keeps one eye on the Cobra as he flies past it at the finish line. He sees the win in his peripherals and comes round to celebrate his victory.

Duygu's waiting, “Looks like a tie, it only registered one finish, 14 seconds.”

“Yea maybe even...” Tola hesitates.

“It looks even, but I filmed the finish line straight on.” says Rabi.

“It even looks like the flaming pits of hell.”

“What the fuck? Let me see,” Abu splits the crowd looking at a flaming loop of a video. As the cars drive past the aspect, it crackles and flares. When the angle shows the finish, it's just a fireball rushing through a gate, like old videotape of a bomb. “Wicked!” says Duygu, trying to keep her head from reeling.

A few people who'd filmed the finish with their mobile phones see two cars blurring slightly past a black and white checkered line on the road. Most people report that Abu's Alfa Romeo snagged the victory by a hair but it's hard to tell. The race official scratches his beard, brushes the dead skin off his lapels and awards the prize to Abu. Tola pops open a smaller bottle of champagne and takes a pill out of his pocket. He pops one and offers one to Abu and Duygu who refuse. He pours most of the drink on the ground. Abu looks at Duygu and says quickly, “no strings attached puppet.”

The loser stands aloof and flanked. He's looking at his girlfriends' phone, huffing and scoffing a bit but he's a duck in a chicken coop so they drive off suddenly.

Later in Leicester Square, the winning crew watch some neon clad, boy band sing and dance on a flashy stage. They quickly agree it's shit and move on to the clubs. Jermaine keeps an eye out for the right. To a well trained London eye, they appear harmless; sped mildly perhaps on amphetamines and surreptitiously posting photos that display them with all the glamour of Piccadilly. Abu sees Jermaine outside Club Swag. Rabi's in Tola's ear like a genie, “We need a kilogram of the highest quality amphetamine.”

“On it,” and slings out his phone. Rabi peeps his password.

Jermaine's got an earpiece with a curly white cord. “Heyyy mate!” They grip right hands and bump shoulders over the velvet rope, Duygu is putting on lipstick a few steps away. “Wah gwan?”

“Naught for much,” replies Jermaine, scanning the crowds, “watching out for a gang of vexed Paraguayans inside. Hang on mate,” he presses his earpiece. “Just a bit of rabble at the peep show, you go ahead in.” Jermaine nods to the club bouncer and trots off.

Abu says to Duygu, “Look at my man Jermaine. He does VIP services and in his ear right now, he’s got a direct line to one Bob McGilicutty.” The bouncer unclips a velvet rope and waves them in. They descend a dark staircase at 160 bpm. Deep bass pulsates from below.

“What makes this club great,” says Duygu in the moment before Abu pushes open the heavy door, “is that you can't hear the fucking boy band outside.”

Through the door, a drum break sets a timer and they weave through the throng of electronica while dancers close gaps behind them. Maroon and pink lights whip around and Duygu drags Abu past groups of girls, whose eyes wander and note the couple. They find a space in the dance floor as the bass drops and they bounce and tremble. They move like two swords clashing, and whirling until well into the night, after a slow song Duygu says, “So, I gotta go.”

Abu’s eyes gaped and drooped, “Well, lemmie walk you home. You gonna walk home?”

Duygu's eyes narrow, “Yeah, nah mate. I'm taking a cab to my cousin flat near the airport. So, see ya.” She turns and leaves without kissing him goodbye.

Abu stands for a moment and starts to feel the questioning eyes. He walks straight, catches the door before it shuts, and grabs the wrist. “I think you forgot something.”

She's totally annoyed and stretches her face at him. “What?”

Abu's blanking, blinking. He just says it, “the kiss.”

“Boy, what kind of girl do you think I am? I came from a good family.” Her affront nails Abu's raw nerve.

“Off ya go bint. Ya slag.”

She grabs a taxi. Out on the main road there's a little conglomeration on the hood of Rabi's car. “Ay mate, what happened? I just saw your biddy come out. Said she was going to the airport.”

“Yeah, I didn't piece it together at the time but she's likely going to Turkey tomorrow morning. Back to her own then. Anyways she's more like a mate than a bint. It's three o'clock and she still hasn't got her documents in order. I'm not bothered by it but it gave me a clear head and a fit last ride. I'm ready to sell it. 30,000 pounds.”

“Right mate, sell it in Paris, than get in the Range and drive the bint the rest of the way. Now's the time brothers. Two new accounts with Kuwait bank are going all the way. Believe me mates, everything makes sense.”

“What's the speed for?” wonders Tola.

“It's the drug culture there. They mix it up and make a pill called Captagon. It's actually decongestant for dogs.”

“Ha ah, okay.”

“Who are we to talk? Everyone in London's wacked out on cat tranquilizer.”

“So what? You're gonna start popping pills?”

“Fuck off mate, I'm gonna cook it and sell it. See the Caliphate's got a problem importing, especially medical shit, even shit for dogs is made mostly in Europe or America. We're gonna smuggle it in.”

“Sounds too risky.”

“Mates don't worry about the borders, the only sketchy one is Turkey and upon entry, we have a deal with our license plate scans at the border, we'll be golden.”

“What about ISIS, don't they execute drug users?”

“For hard drugs, yea. But we consider this like coffee. Besides, this shit's been round Mesopotamia for a long longer than ISIS has. Now's not the time for a new war on drugs. Unless the Saudis withhold the cash flow.”

Suddenly a clashing chorus of loud, local voices, “Buy you a drink!” and three open cans of beer splash over them, tepid foam spraying across their tailored shirts. The white back end with aggravating red tail lights is speeding away, so they rally fast into Rabi's black Land Rover and speed off. “He's fucking dead!” “Kafir's going to hell tonight!”

Inhibitions are abandoned for the chase. Abu and Tola are jeering to follow. Both are desperate and focused on the head of an old bastard. “First I'll get a piece of his face with this knuckle, then maybe an ear or a nose and I'll tear it right off. Then I'll put some rock or a brick right through the hole in his face, right in his fucking mouth. Than I'll stab him up and down.” They see ahead on the road, a stop light with his car idling in the clear of the intersection. -Drive up there.-

Rabi thinks and speaks, “He's baiting us. It's a fox hunt. There's surely a racist cop a few blocks up.”

“Well, fuck me. I'd have fallen right into that trap. You're too smart Rab.”

“Two can play at that.”

“Alright than roll up, real polite. Cuppa tea.” They approach the gentleman with mocking stiff upper lip swagger, miming a Victorian tea party. Him and his girlfriends are trolling with nasty sneers and rude gestures but it's a not taking. When the light turns green and the faux-bra speeds ahead, Rabi accelerate sensibly. They continue as the fake boon passes farther with an eagle eye on its taillights. It turns left.

“You reckon he's going to catch the A4?”

“No fucking doubt. He's a country cunt for sure.”

“Alright than, we'll just go east around Hyde and play a little hide-and-seek.

“Right, cat and mouse. They insult us by throwing alcohol over us. It's clear to see that we must return their insult greater. Abu, have you got any bullets or is that just a replica?”

“It's no fucking replica. My dad gave me this pistol but it's a pussy magnet. I've never actually shot it. And I'm not ready to murder a guy who splashed beer over me.”

“Than just shoot out his tyre. He'll come through quickly. Good timing getting here.”

“Alright, but I haven't got a bullet.”

Rabi opens his glove box, “what's this then? Thirty-eight eh?” and takes a loose bullet.

“What the fuck you doing with that?”

“I got boxes of em. Alright then mash man, can you shoot it straight? Or should I.”

“Fuckin hell,” Abu noisily pushes air through his lips and loads the bullet in his little revolver. They park the car at the edge of the highway. “That's it, Cromwell Road” “Right across there, he's gonna pass. Take a right at Nevern. Alright, now pull back and park behind the building. Down there, perfect shot at the roundabout, right? He's gonna pass right there. Just shoot his car—the tyre, maybe you'll blast his foot.”

Rabi rolls his window down a crack, “And what if he doesn't pass, we're sat—look there, red replica rolling.”

It's getting on to 4 a.m. and the first loser of this story has pulled up to a red light in West London. The road games by a provocative engine rev. He grins at his girlfriends and revs up again, but he's fucked. He was just an dickhead who started a fight and ran. He picked up some trouble and threw beer on the wrong guys.

So he peels out the straightaway and Abu squeezes the trigger. The accelerating thrust pushes his relatively light car with about four-hundred and fifty horsepower and four-hundred and twenty pounds of torque. When the bullet strikes his vehicle, it severs the front-left caster, wobbles the alignment, jams it turnt and springs the left side of the car up to flip it. It hops the short, embanked median strip and drops head-on a yellow taxi.

Abu, Tola and Rabi watch the carnage they engineered. A near perfect alignment of direct force. In an instant there are bodies pushed up against the windscreens with engine parts thrown through the taxi like buckshot, ejecting two people. They watch, awestruck and share the collective thought -flee!-

Chapter 8 OG Mbito

20 years dedicated to this office, and with each passing year, Mbito saw fewer and fewer ships sail in. He passed time at his desk with a two-way radio and learned that textiles from Zambia were making good profits. He heard news that Kenya was exporting hundreds of tons of coffee. Secret broadcasts spread news about Mujaheddin soldiers in Afghanistan. He also heard all the gossip of the political systems of neighboring countries, and that zombies were cracking people's heads open. Although he wanted to open the economy, he accepted that the conservative trade policy was keeping their assets safe.

Mbito had matured with his nation. He wasn't religious or cosmopolitan so his family values, ethics, and pride were with Tanzania. He was soon to see his oldest child get married. Good things were happening and he hoped to bring down tariffs by three percent. He was always encouraged by his peers who, agreed with him but enacted no change.

He straightened the items on his desk and turned off the green lamp. The theme of the evening