

Weak Point



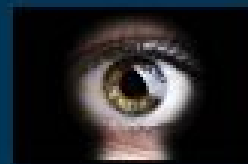
A Novella about
Privacy

Ayedh H. Alqahtani

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This novella addresses individual privacy in a world full of high-definition video technology. This supremely philosophical story is set in Hawaii; its events focus on an American woman named Charlotte, a former employee of an intelligence agency who was tasked with monitoring foreign students at US universities, and Abdullah, a former foreign graduate student in the United States. The novella is rife with rich conversation between the two characters. By way of gradual confessions, Charlotte reveals the ins and outs of how Abdullah's entire life was monitored during his time in the United States—much to the shock of the former graduate student.



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A Novella about Privacy



Dr. Ayedh H. Alqahtani

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Dedicated to HGW XX/7, in gratitude.

1



“I know that a woman’s body is what brings out a man’s demons.”

Thus Charlotte met Abdullah, as he

unleashed his devious gaze upon the pretty woman before him at the scientific conference he was attending in Hawaii.

“You seem to know a lot about a man’s weaknesses,” he joked to crack the ice. She was sitting alone at the table facing him. Abdullah ventured a question. “Might I sit next to you, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course I don’t mind; I know you well!”

Abdullah was taken aback by this woman’s forthrightness. She was many years his elder, and old age seemed to be creeping into her features. Still, she appeared to have been radiantly beautiful in her youth. Even in his shock, he respected her obvious femininity. He found it attractive when a woman remained effeminate despite her age and refused to

surrender to the vexation of bygone youth.

“I was in charge of surveilling you during your graduate studies in the United States. You have no idea the amount of information we have on your personal life—piles of voice recordings and videos!”

The quickly uttered words struck Abdullah like a whip. What started as passing chatter had turned into a dangerous conversation that busted down the door of his life and opened memories that had long been buried.

“I hate you men. You grow more handsome and dignified with time. And you Abdullah, I had the hots for you!” She continued, “I oversaw a file that contained all the details of your life and could be used at any time to blackmail you if needed!”

Abdullah recoiled from the woman’s

insolence and the overt boldness she displayed in addressing him. He got up to leave and gathered his belongings from the table at which he was sitting.

“If you’ll excuse me, ma’am, you’ve crossed the lines of sense and decency. I shall have to excuse myself from finishing this conversation, for you are very nosy. It looks like you need help!”

“Will you go even if I tell you that for twenty years your favorite food has been steak cooked well done? Or that the worst year of your life was when your mother died while you were in the midst of studying for your doctorate? Or that in a single year, you broke three girls’ hearts, all of whom believed you wanted to marry them? You really were the strangest case I saw out of all the foreign students we were monitoring!”

It was then that Abdullah realized that she was not a deranged old woman driven mad by the passage of time but rather was speaking from a position of knowledge on a dangerous subject—one that had kept him awake at night during his studies in the United States.

* * *

2



After reading her name tag, Abdullah sat down once more at the large, round table, which had room to seat eight people. He sat

two seats farther away this time, as if he were taking a defensive position against a likely attack.

“Charlotte, please ... forgive me, but I don’t understand what you want.”

“I’m also sorry. I don’t want anything from you. I just want to have some fun here in Hawaii with you. To be near you. I’m still very attracted to you, and I’m so pleased to see you in the United States once again!”

Abdullah smiled at the odd request, which resembled that of a prison guard complaining of loneliness and insomnia to an inmate.

He piped up. “As a foreign student, I always felt that we were being monitored in the United States, and that our privacy was being violated. It’s an obvious thing, and most of it is legal. But what’s the deal? Why

tell me this now?”

“No reason. I told you that I want to have some fun with you here in Hawaii. What you said is ultimately true. There’s a bundle of laws, not just one, that are promptly updated and developed to keep up with modern technology. But we only use them for their intended purpose. You know this from all the time you spent reading those websites—the ones about privacy that oppose government surveillance of citizens.”

“You mean to tell me that you know everything about the websites I read every day at home while I was in the United States?”

“Yes, everything is documented by the second, minute, and hour at which you visited each website!”

“It’s certainly possible. I always believed that the US intelligence community and its seventeen agencies were about twenty years ahead of the rest of the world in terms of technology and research.”

With a smile and touch of humor in his voice, he continued, “If David Petraeus, the director of the CIA, couldn’t protect his secrets and the contents of his e-mail from being accessed, I would naturally expect that Muslim students, already objects of suspicion and accusations, would inevitably be subject to around-the-clock surveillance and intelligence gathering.”

“No, it’s not quite like that. We intensify surveillance on persons of interest only, but everyone is subject to general surveillance!

“Incidentally, it is said that Petraeus used to communicate with his girlfriend online

using a method inspired by terrorists. One would set up an e-mail account, write an e-mail and save it as a draft without sending it, and then give the other party the username and password to log in to the account. The other party would read the e-mail, which could not be intercepted because it was not sent via the web.

“Edward Snowden revealed what we already kind of expected about US surveillance tactics ... I never doubted that what he said was true, but at the same time, I don’t think he opened his mouth because of a sudden crisis of conscience. It was just a scene in the clash of the titans, if you will, between the FBI, CIA, and NSA. During my time in the United States, I always enjoyed following news about the struggle to see who would get the lion’s share of the annual

government budget.”

He continued, “I’m fascinated by the technological race taking place between companies that contract with intelligence agencies and how it’s helped to bring about new, mind-blowing technological advances ... I can’t deny the benefits to humanity.”

Charlotte smiled faintly at Abdullah’s innocence and felt a pang of regret at having overseen the massive intrusion into his personal life.

“You’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg!” she protested. “It’s only after we’re done with them that we allow advanced technologies to be released and become known to the public. At one point, we were testing very advanced technology in your house: a device that looks exactly like a fly, with the same size and form, and is

equipped with a 360-degree camera and high-quality microphone. Basically, we had you surrounded on all sides. We could see your facial expressions as you approached the ‘fly.’ You would get annoyed with it and try to kill it and throw it out the window. You thought it was real.”

Abdullah smiled as the memory came back to him, and he said to himself: *So my crazy suspicions turned out to be true. It wasn’t just doubt and delusions of self-importance.*

“I always told myself, ‘Who am I for them to spy on me?’ ” he thought out loud. “But what you just said lets me know that we’re nothing more than lab rats for your intelligence community. I convinced myself that they only use the information and recordings they gather for their expressed purpose ... fighting terrorism, right?”

“Yes,” Charlotte replied. “Your problem is that, at the time, you displayed many suspicious characteristics. You were a graduate student in computer engineering from a geographic region that has produced a lot of terrorists, including some who participated in the 9/11 attacks. On top of that, you were still single at an age that was considerably older than the average marrying age in your home environment. Add on to that your odd habits: your love of solitude and reading and your defense of your privacy at all costs. You didn’t have friends; you were fond of being alone...you were the closest thing to what we called in the intelligence community a lone wolf.

“A lone wolf is the type of person whom we expect to carry out an attack,” she explained, “but we don’t know where he’ll

start, who he’s affiliated with, or what his exact ideology is. The lone wolf is a terrorist that acts on behalf of a specific ideology or serves a certain group, using violence and terror that may go so far as to include killing tens or hundreds, but he does so on his own, without receiving orders from anyone. These types are very dangerous. They make intelligence work difficult, and they keep you on your toes. Unfortunately, sometimes they even start global conflicts. On top of all of that, you were fond of reading websites about modern spy technology, you were interested in news about global intelligence agencies and their operations, and you had an obvious tendency to watch spy movies—you watched the movie *Eagle Eye* more than once a year!”

“Wow! You guys really know everything! You know more than you should. How did you do it?” Then, sneering at the amount of information they had gathered on him, Abdullah asked, “Were you guys watching the movie with me ... at the same time?”

“Of course not. You know how we did it! We simply loaded software onto your PC that would give us a complete analysis of every mouse click and keyboard stroke. In your case, we had to monitor every electronic device in the house. You were the kind of person who called for heavy surveillance!”

Charlotte, I never had any doubt that the stuff in *Eagle Eye* was real and could be put into action. The government’s generous support for companies as big as Booz Allen

Hamilton and Lockheed Martin means that it could ultimately develop programs like the one that controlled and influenced the life of the film’s protagonist, Jerry Shaw.

“Charlotte”—he paused—“you should have asked yourself why I watched this film more than once a year.”

“Why indeed, Abdul ... or should I say, Doctor Abdullah? By the way, you truly deserve that title. I know all about the obstacles you overcame while studying for your doctorate and about the big conflict between you and your first dissertation adviser, which forced you to switch to a new adviser. The first guy was truly a difficult person to work with, and he wasn’t convinced that you should pursue the dissertation topic that you wanted. He thought it would threaten US national

security, even though he wasn't originally from the States! Coincidentally, that was the same year you lost your mother! That year was truly one of sorrow for you, wasn't it?"

"Let's not talk about my mother," Abdullah replied curtly. "Just know that the reason I repeatedly watched that movie was for one part ... my favorite scene, which shook me time after time. I'd often rewind and rewatch it multiple times. The scene features the voice of the scientifically plausible program that was designed to spy on every US citizen and resident. It said:

"This is you. This is Jerry Shaw. A series of purchases, preferences, and quantifiable data points that we define as your personality. We monitor every social network, Internet logs, instant and text messages, known associates, your friends,

and companions. E-mails received and sent. Cell-phone usage. We utilize security, surveillance, and traffic cameras to analyze movements. We use this data to form personality profiles. We know who you are. We are everywhere. We, the people of the United States."

"I won't deny that we wage an internal battle with our own morals when we monitor people like you. But we dare not stand up to the government, being that they're the ones in charge, and they constantly reinforce a fear of the consequences of even thinking about revealing our work."

"In that case, Snowden was telling the truth when he came out?"

"What did Snowden say?" she asked coyly.

“He said, ‘They’re using these capabilities to make us vulnerable to them and saying, ‘Well, I have a gun pointed at your head. I’m not going to pull the trigger. Trust me!’”

“It’s true. In life, you will inevitably meet enemies who comb your private life for things they can use to accuse you of something you didn’t do.”

“I don’t disagree with either you or him at all,” Charlotte responded. “In reality, we used to ask ourselves if what we were doing to you—especially you Muslims—was immoral.”

“Do you know Henry L. Stimson, Ms. Charlotte?”

“No, I haven’t heard of him before, but the name seems somehow familiar.”

“Mr. Henry L. Stimson was the United

States Secretary of State in the Herbert Hoover administration. He had a famous quote that really resonated with me. You should be proud of that as an American, and you should be ashamed if you ever have contravened it.”

“I can now say that you’ve got my full attention,” Charlotte said. “I’m eager to hear it.”

“He said, ‘Gentlemen don’t read each other’s mail.’ If you want, I’ll update the quote for you: Gentle countries don’t spy on the whole world. Your voracious appetite for collecting data and surveilling large groups of people is what drove you to build the Utah Data Center, which houses the entire world’s data and uses units of information never before heard of, like the yottabyte. It shows just how much

electronic data is stored in that center.”

“First of all, I love the quote,” replied Charlotte. “I hadn’t heard it before. Secondly, we are a great power, and we have our justifications. If it weren’t for the Pearl Harbor attack here in Hawaii during World War II and the September 11 attacks in New York, we wouldn’t have been forced to go down this path.”

Abdullah interjected, “Don’t get too enthused about the quote. Stimson changed his tune when he became minister of war during World War II.”

“Abdullah, we don’t spy on you without legal grounds!”

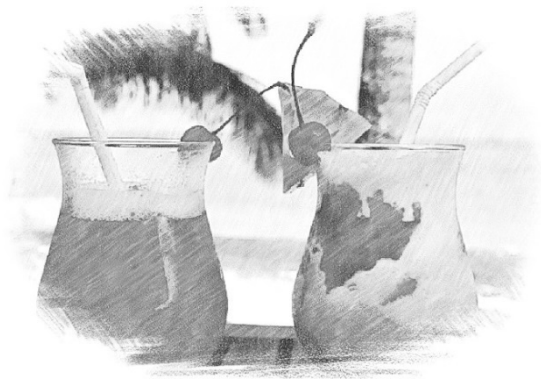
“Ah, what you mean is that you go get a warrant from the secretive FISA court on the sixth floor of the United States Department of Justice? I believe Edward

Snowden revealed the warrants that the FISA court gives you, like those that allow you to spy on every telecommunications subscriber in the United States and abroad!”

“In any case,” Charlotte said dismissively, “I won’t get into the issue of Snowden with you. He was a domestic issue. I trust that the American people can benefit from his actions. The legal pretexts used to justify spying always come back to bite us and reveal how grievous and atrocious our actions are. Let me explain from the perspective of a retired CIA officer, who said, ‘I’m a spy, and I’m telling you that spying doesn’t work!’”

* * *

3



At this point, the waiter interrupted Abdullah and Charlotte’s captivating exchange to serve Hawaiian juices, courtesy of the conference organizers. The cold

drinks seemed to extinguish the conversation’s vigor.

“We’re not the only ones who spy on you,” Charlotte ventured. “Others invade your privacy in the most egregious ways. Do you remember Dina?”

Abdullah was taken aback by this latest volley, which Charlotte offered up after taking a long drink of the juice the waiter had just served her.

“Dina? Who do you mean by Dina?”

The impact of that name caused Abdullah to sit up in his chair, bewildered. He was unable to take even one sip of the enticing juice.

“You know full well who I mean. Someone like you, who claims to be sensitive and a lover of poetry and literature, could never forget the details of a

romance that lasted for over a year.”

“You mean that Dina was ...”

Charlotte nodded. “Yes. Dina was an artful ploy, the likes of which you men often fall for. In the intelligence community, we call this type of espionage ‘honey trapping.’ Dina wasn’t an agent for any of the US agencies. She worked with the Mossad.”

Abdullah began to laugh hysterically, revealing a newer, whiter upper first molar that he’d had implanted while in the United States.

“It wasn’t just you, then,” he said. “You mean to say that Dina was gathering intelligence for the Mossad?”

“Yes, and the reason is too trivial for you to imagine. Our allies in the Mossad were paranoid. You had written a poem praising the people of Gaza for resisting the Israeli

occupation. You sent it to a website that they’re familiar with—a media portal for Hamas. They immediately opened a file on you and began reading all your e-mails. They then sent an agent, who was paid for the sole purpose of gathering intelligence on you and sending reports about any intent you might have to work with resistance movements.”

From the branches of the adjacent tree, which was throwing shade over Charlotte and Abdullah, a single worm dropped onto Abdullah’s arm, seemingly drawn by the juice. The worm appeared to be friendly as it gathered itself. Abdullah tried to swat it away with his hand, but it managed to climb onto his palm. With a flick of his finger, Abdullah batted the worm into the nearby bushes and resumed the conversation.

“I find it hard to believe that Dina was working with the Mossad. She was a simple person. She needed someone to rescue her from her constant loneliness.”

“She wasn’t officially an employee of the Mossad,” Charlotte explained, “but she was getting paid by them. She may not have known for whom she was working! Recruiting agents to gather information is very easy in the intelligence business. Women and money are guaranteed to bring down even the strongest men!”

“Even pillow talk is used to spy on the public...” Abdullah was outraged. “Charlotte, pardon me, I must say: you’re such bastards!”

Abdullah’s rising adrenaline was noticeably beginning to upset his body’s equilibrium. Signs of anger crept in—he

began to visibly sweat, and his breathing quickened. Taking a refreshing sip of the colorful juice, he exercised control over himself. The brief wave passed over him, and he regained his equilibrium.

“Look, I’m sorry,” he began. “I’ll be honest with you. As it says in the *Qur'an*, I do not acquit myself. The soul is a persistent enjoiner of evil. Dina wasn’t an ordinary girl. She must have been carefully chosen. She was exceptionally beautiful and knew how to attract men. She had this exotic lure ... I almost can’t put my finger on its source. It was—if I might say—something that I love. It was...”

“I’d ask you not to recount the details. I’m a woman, and I get jealous!” Charlotte objected.

Charlotte cut Abdullah off from delving

into the facets of Dina as lethal female jealousy flared up inside her—despite her old age!

The trip down memory lane inspired Abdullah to recount Dina’s virtues. She had big, beautiful blue eyes, with eyebrows that looked as though they had been drawn in with a pen stroke, and beautiful eyelashes long enough to be grabbed by one’s fingertips. She was a full-grown woman, possessing a deadly and wonderful beauty that could bring men to their knees.

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would you get jealous? Don’t say that you ...”

“I told you about my feelings at the start of our conversation. I don’t want to say any more. I couldn’t stand that slut. She was using you with her body—and not just you. We know everything about her.”

“I don’t know. It never occurred to me that Dina could do that.”

“A honey trap ... you’re no different than other men,” proclaimed Charlotte. “Many others fell for it before you. History is full of stories about honey traps, and men keep repeating the same mistake. Most of them fall like dominoes before women. Some politicians in France during World War II fell for the biggest trap of this kind, with the Dutch dancer Mata Hari. She was executed as an example to anyone who might consider following her lead.

“Women have also fallen victim to the honey trap,” she continued. “Or the ‘Romeo trap,’ as it’s also called. During the Cold War in Germany, indisputable evidence was found in one case, but one of the victims of the ‘trap’ didn’t believe it, even after being

presented with the proof. She kept saying, 'No, that's wrong. I loved him, and he loved me!' The poor girl couldn't comprehend the difference between her pipe dreams and the harsh reality!

"Simply put, Dina played her role and then left," she said. "The plan was well designed to monitor the target, a.k.a you!

"At the time, you had no wife, no kids, and no pets. As usual, every Thursday you would sit in the quiet reading room at the university library. The bait, Dina, got there before you, to make you think that everything was just a coincidence. You entered the reading room. She gave you an interested look, using her beautiful blue eyes to lure you—an easy prey for a woman's seduction. You men are so weak in the presence of a beautiful woman!

"You were all too happy to go over and introduce yourself. She was throwing you flirty and interested looks without restraint. That's where the story began."

Abdullah exclaimed, "Oh my God! I was so naïve! Yes, I remember. That was the start of my fleeting love story with her. Abdelhalim Hafez wasn't lying in the song 'Gabar' when he sang:

I never knew ...

Before today ...

That those eyes ...

Could lie that way!"

"Who is Abdelhalim Hafez?" Charlotte asked, surprised at the mention of this strange name.

"Never mind; that's another topic," Abdullah reassured her, wishing to avoid starting a side conversation far less

important than the harrowing details surrounding Dina.

“I truly did fall for a honey trap,” he continued, “but the obvious question is whether they found something on me. Why was she sending those reports?”

“That’s an agent’s job, Abdullah. They are merely tools used to accomplish an objective. Sometimes they are asked to write reports. In reality, agents are also monitored—by the people who sent them!

“Dina, for example, thought that she was dating you in secret, outside the reach of her work. She would put her recording equipment away every time she wanted to have some private time with you, but there were, in fact, video- and voice-recording devices set up in your house without her knowledge.”

“I need you to stop right there, Charlotte. I’m embarrassed ... I feel foolish thinking about my youthful impulses. I should have resisted. You’re tearing down my life!”

Regretting what had happened, Abdullah refused to revisit past mistakes. The desire for women had been his obsession—naturally, for he had been a young man then. He started recalling every woman whom he had met and all of his romantic encounters. Lust had been his constant temptation.

“The thing that always confused me about your personality, Abdullah, was the clear contradiction between your impulses and your piety. At the same time that you were seeing Dina, you did not miss your five daily prayers. Sometimes you would even

get out of your comfortable bed in the early morning and then go the mosque, which was far from your house, just to carry out a short prayer and come back to sleep!

“I’ve noticed this among some Muslims. They keep up their prayers even though they commit sins. How is that?”

“Charlotte,” Abdullah said, “in every religion people sin, people die, people are imperfect ... Islam is a moderate religion that mixes monasticism and secularism. The contradiction that you saw in me...you were doing something far worse by invading people’s privacy and their homes. Tons of dirty deeds never see the light of day in this world.”

Charlotte sat up, as if taking a defensive position against an attack. The subject struck a sensitive chord within her. She was

convinced of the error of her ways and knew that it was a point of weakness.

She shakily muttered in a low voice as her eyes dropped to the ground, as if she were talking to herself, “How was what we were doing worse than your hypocrisy?”

“Let me tell you an ancient, popular story from our books,” said Abdullah. “It’s about a prince in Muslim lands who was known for his commitment to fairness. While patrolling the city at night, he heard a man singing in his home. The prince climbed into his house and found him drinking with a woman. The prince told him, ‘Oh enemy of God, do you think that God will protect you in your sin?’

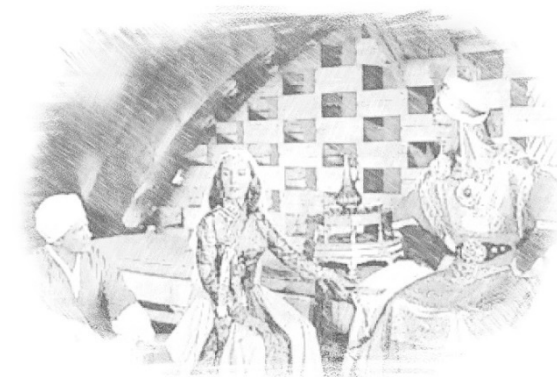
“The man replied, ‘Oh prince of the Muslims, do not rush to judge me, for if I have committed one sin, you have

committed three. The word of God says, “Do not spy, ” yet here you have spied. The glorious God also says it is not righteousness to enter houses from the back, yet here you have climbed up into my house without permission. The Almighty also says, “Do not enter houses other than your own houses until you ascertain welcome and greet their inhabitants,” yet here you have entered without greeting me!’

“The prince was ashamed, and he apologized.”

* * *

4



Charlotte fell silent for a bit and then drew in a long breath, exhaled, and took to staring at the ground in silence.

Abdullah then continued, “Charlotte, please

don't think that I believe everything is automatically forgiven or permissible. I believe in God, and I also believe that no matter how big a person's sins, they do not exceed the boundaries of God's forgiveness and grace, if he so pleases. Every human being was once an innocent child with a soul free of evil and sin."

Charlotte brushed a bundle of her hair aside with her right hand as she tilted her head. The signs of hair loss were evident, though there remained a glimmer of her hair's old beauty. She turned her head away as she spoke:

"I can't deny that we saw great things in your religion. We read things that amazed us and called us to acceptance, but, unfortunately, you all are terrible representatives of a great religion. I will

never forget a very deep post I read on a website about Islam. The post classified God's creatures into four groups, in a precise way that made me rethink life. They were angels, creatures that think but do not lust; livestock and cattle, creatures that lust but do not think; objects, which neither think nor lust; and humans and spirits, creatures that both think and lust."

Abdullah did not respond, appearing to be pleased by her words. Shortly thereafter, he inquired, "So after you and your friends in the Zionist state gathered information on us, did you discover that I truly was a lone wolf, as you called it, or a peaceful lamb?"

Charlotte smiled at the term "peaceful lamb," though her smile was mixed with regret over the time and effort she had wasted in monitoring him.

“I can say that you’re closer to a peaceful lamb, but in my opinion, you’re actually a peaceful wolf!”

Abdullah flashed her a smile and asked, in the midst of a playful laugh, “And how is that?”

“Aren’t all men wolves? Aren’t they always wolves?”

“It looks like you’re going back to the subject of Dina?”

“Yes, as I should, because it wasn’t *just* Dina, was it?”

Abdullah turned away quickly, his right hand clasping the thick black hair on the back of his head. His face darkened with a frown as he attempted to escape from the conversation, as if he knew where it would lead.

“It looks like the jig is up ... Charlotte, I

admit that I was truly naïve. It never occurred to me that Dina was a honey trap. How could I have been so foolish? She was way out of my league in beauty, and she was better educated. Her beauty was mesmerizing, and I am very ordinary looking ...”

Abdullah suddenly cut himself off as he realized what Charlotte had said and contemplated her last words. “Wait, what did you mean by ‘not just Dina?’” he asked.

“I told you that you are all wolves, and I meant what I said. Did you forget that you were in a long-distance relationship with Suad, your first love back home, at the same time that you were dating Dina?”

“Suad ... how ... you even know about Suad?”

“Yep, yep,” Charlotte confirmed.

With the utmost confidence in her words, Charlotte began recounting the history of his life, almost as if he had turned into a full-fledged novel, complete with romantic twists.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but I must say again, in total honesty: you’re such bastards!

“You even spied on my non-US mobile phone. You don’t just invade privacy; you butcher the very concept of it.”

“I don’t think you’re that naïve,” ventured Charlotte. “I’m telling you about the most advanced technology, such as a fly that lives in your house for years, seeing and hearing everything that goes on. Yet you’re talking about a cell phone that uses publicly available applications!”

Abdullah was lost in thought, turning his gaze to the four high-rise buildings of the

hotel that was hosting their conference here in Hawaii. He spotted a Muslim family sitting in a restaurant in what appeared to be the second floor of the adjacent building. In the midst of the tourists, most of them Japanese, the mother and daughter were wearing hijabs. The father was excitedly speaking to them as they engaged in a lively family discussion. He thought, *Are they also under constant surveillance?*

Abdullah continued, “What about Suad? Why did you want to gather information on my love life, when you were originally looking for a possible terrorist?”

Charlotte responded with the shame of a criminal who has finally confessed to a crime after having denied it throughout a lengthy investigation. “I am a woman, so that information piqued my curiosity. I

found excitement in following and studying the details of your love life. Ultimately, everything was available to me at the click of a mouse. The programs we used to collect video, audio, and tracking information were the very pinnacle of design and programming.

“Let me explain the intelligence in a simpler way,” she said. “Pretend that you are like a YouTube channel filled with video clips, audio files, and written reports from experts, and on top of all that, an index of all your electronic communications and associations, whether personal, familial, social, business, religious, et cetera...this is how you became an open book that I could read as I pleased.”

Abdullah’s stomach let out a grumble, signaling that it was his preferred

lunchtime. He liked to take an early lunch, usually around 12:30 p.m. He cut off the conversation and asked Charlotte if she would like to accompany him for lunch. She was sure that he would generously pay the bill. It was a habit that Abdullah had learned from his home environment.

“Thank you for the invitation. I accept. I need to go to my room to take my medicine—it’s on the tenth floor of the second tower—but I’ll come back as quickly as I can.”

“All right, I’ll be at the restaurant, Honolulu,” replied Abdullah.

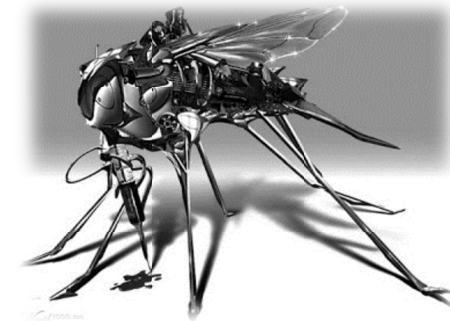
He pointed to the restaurant’s location and asked her not to be late. One of his traits is an unwillingness to tolerate sharp hunger.

Charlotte gave him an OK gesture and a

wink, as if she already knew about his trait—like a wife knows the traits of her husband!

* * *

5



The waiter came by with a cheerful air about him and handed Abdullah the menu. Abdullah requested a second menu for Charlotte and then took to absent-mindedly browsing the options as he tried to come to terms with what was happening. With all

the joy of an orphan who has just been told that his parents are alive and well, Abdullah awaited Charlotte, who shortly thereafter entered the restaurant at a hurried pace.

“I’m sorry if I’m a little late. Did you order?”

“Welcome,” Abdullah said. “No, I didn’t order yet. You can check out the menu—I’ve already decided what I want.”

Charlotte took the swiftest of glances at the menu, a reflection of how well she knew the local fare and how often she had eaten at Hawaiian restaurants. She muttered, “Hmm, it looks like they serve moco loco here; you want to try it?”

“No, I like healthy food. Moco loco has a lot of fat. I’m going to order the local turkey burger.”

The waiter returned and with the

utmost professionalism, he jotted down the lunch orders and then served a glass of water to both Abdullah and Charlotte and left. The two contemplated each other during an awkward silence, after which Abdullah ventured, “So you said that you all had access to my personal life in every way.”

“You could say that,” Charlotte said in a calm tone, clearly annunciating and carefully pronouncing each word.

“Did you enjoy your work?” he wondered.

The question clearly had an impact on Charlotte, but she had a response at the ready. Such questions had been oft repeated in conversations with colleagues, or within her own mind, throughout her time working in the intelligence community.

“Of course not,” she replied. “A small

salary, a huge burden of secrets, an uneasy feeling of human longing ... it's also a job that invites worry and robs you of the joy of sleep. You don't know what it feels like to be lonely as you fall asleep!"

"It's hard for me to understand why honorable people stay in such dishonorable jobs," Abdullah quipped.

Charlotte shot Abdullah a look that combined anger, vehemence, and rebuke. His somewhat-hurtful words affected her, almost as if he had taken a chip out of her pride. She responded in a mocking tone and raised voice, "I like when you talk about idealities. You still pretend to be perfect in everything that you do. You should know, Abdullah, that people will get used to anything with enough time ... whether good or bad."

Charlotte's quick anger abated slightly, but her sudden change caused Abdullah to stammer as he tried to continue the conversation.

Charlotte noticed Abdullah's surprise at her sudden change of state, which may have been related to the hormonal effects of old age. Charlotte apologized and reassured Abdullah by shifting the conversation to a less problematic subject after the talk had died down for a moment.

"By the way, did you get married and start a family?" she asked.

Abdullah was happy that her previously sharp tone had disappeared. He had a knack for understanding women—a skill he had picked up through life experience, mostly thanks to his work. He replied, "Yes, I got married, and I have a large family ... four

daughters and a son. They're growing up, and responsibility is growing with them. To tell the truth, even after earning the highest of academic degrees, I've found that the harshest and most difficult tests are those that occur in everyday life. What about you? Do you have a family?"

"No, people who work in jobs like mine usually don't get married."

"I'd like to ask you," Abdullah replied, "what was the nature of your relationship with the Mossad? How did you find out about Dina? How did you find out that she was working for the Mossad?"

"Dina ... I know she was the kind of woman who isn't easy to forget, especially for someone like you. In truth, the relationship between the CIA and the Mossad is very old and goes back to the

founder of the Mossad, Reuven Shiloah. In 1951, a secret joint-cooperation agreement was reached between the United States and Israel. The United States wanted an ally that would provide it with intelligence against Russia. Israel wanted an ally that would provide it with intelligence about its rival Arab neighbors. The agreement was capped off with the Mossad's first gift for its American ally; they leaked Nikolai Khrushchev's famous speech before the Soviet Communist Party, at a time when it was very difficult for the United States to get its hands on material like that. Ever since then, there has been close cooperation between the Mossad and the CIA. As for how I knew that she worked for the Mossad, I can't tell you that."

She continued, "But why are you only

concerned about Dina? Don't you men have bigger priorities than women?"

In a lighthearted, singsong tone, one that he had occasionally used when caught making a misstep, Abdullah uttered an old phrase from his childhood. He repeated the phrase in a bout of self-deprecation, rubbing his hands looking at the waiter coming, anticipating his meal. The waiter brought the food out—the loco moco looked delicious—and asked if the two needed anything else. Charlotte and Abdullah said, "No, thank you," so the waiter moved to another table.

Charlotte was getting ready to start on her loco moco when she said, "I remember a habit of yours before bed. It seemed strange to me, and your commitment to it made it even stranger. What were you chanting into

your hands, when you would hold them up like a book before bed every night?"

"Where and when did you see such a scene?"

"In video recordings of you, as I would start my shift to spy on you."

"You say 'spy' with pride? Without a second thought toward that word?"

"I think we've moved past this discussion. Don't get upset. How about ... when we were *monitoring* you. Is that better?"

Abdullah inaudibly muttered to himself, "You are such bastards ..."

He then said aloud, "Those are bedtime prayers. I turn to them to protect me from all things."

Charlotte, in an innocently mocking tone, rolled her eyes and said, "Ah, now

we're back to the hypocritical young man, disobeying God by day and begging his forgiveness by night."

"You know, Charlotte, I don't claim to be virtuous, but I know that God created us and that he knows that we'll make mistakes and sin. Perhaps his wisdom is revealed when we seek forgiveness after sinning. Don't forget what the Messiah said: 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'"

"I'm sorry," Charlotte responded. "I know that we're all human, and we all sin. We are all sinners."

Abdullah was eating at a slightly faster pace than Charlotte. He asked her, with all the eagerness of a child asking his father about every little detail, "Can you get footage for any period of time that you were monitoring me while I was in the United

States? I mean, if I pick a specific date, in a specific year, can you pull up the files?"

"It's not that simple. At the moment, I don't have the kind of security clearance that would allow me to access anything. Clearances come in levels: confidential, secret, and top secret!"

"Who has these clearances? Who grants them?" asked Abdullah.

"As far as I know, around 1.5 million people in the United States have top-secret clearances. One third of them are contractors, not government employees!"

"Hold on ... slow down. How is that possible?"

Abdullah abruptly stopped eating. He waved his hands in a perplexed manner. He locked eyes with Charlotte, silently implying the question, how is that possible?

“I know this is odd,” admitted Charlotte, “but lately most of the jobs have asked for high-tech expertise. Clearances have been granted—obviously, with conditions—to private quasi-governmental companies, the owners of which generally have top-secret clearances. I think that makes things clearer.”

Abdullah’s mouth hung open in surprise as he nodded his head in acknowledgment.

“All this time, politics and private corporations have been in bed together,” continued Charlotte. “You understand the way things work. You read extensively on this subject, and you know some of the secrets,” Charlotte said hurriedly, as if uncomfortable with the conversation. “I can’t get access to anything right now—I have none myself. But I’ll try to recall what I

can.”

She carried on, “I’ll never forget the moment you brought tears to my eyes for the first time, and how I wished I could have consoled you and given you a comforting hug.”

“Odd ... what do you mean?”

“It was a sad time for you. It was the day you got a call from your sister telling you that your mother had suddenly passed away. You weren’t able to return in time for the burial because it happened so quickly. After that, you had no reason to go back. She was the only motivation for you to go back home. The news came as a real shock to you. For an entire week after you received that phone call, I followed with unbearable sorrow everything that was picked up by the panoramic cameras planted in your house.

“I watched as though it was my favorite TV series,” she explained. “In the aftermath of the call, your situation distressed me. You were in disarray ... all torn up inside. You didn’t know what to do. You would pace around your room like a madman and then, suddenly and erratically, move back and forth from the living room to your room while spilling the bitter, silent tears of men. As the tears fell, snot would start to flow— then you would wipe your nose and throw yourself onto the couch in a bid to relax ... but you didn’t truly rest. Rather, it seemed to me at the time that you were reminiscing about scenes with your mother. I guessed that she had played the role of both father and mother after your dad died when you were a boy.” She paused. “I was generally impressed with the way Muslims honor

their parents, and I understood the heavy grief you felt for your mother. The way you constantly called her and exchanged stories with her, by phone and on Skype, was a clear indication of how deep and special your relationship was. You were very close to your mother.”

Abdullah remembered those days vividly. His tears had not been like the loud sobbing of someone in immense pain but rather had silently flowed down his cheeks without end.

As the conversation picked up, Abdullah’s quick eating pace began to slow. Charlotte had pulled the bandage off a deep wound that was not fully healed. He felt blood rush to his face and his heart writhe in sorrow. The memory was very painful; it choked him up and clouded his vision. That

year had truly been a year of sorrow for him—sorrow, the meaning of which he had not previously known. His relationship with his mother had been strong, and he had honored her as much as a son could manage. She, for her part, had mastered the dual role of father and mother.

Abdullah gathered himself after the brief bout of sadness and the feeling of losing the privacy of even his sorrows. The whole subject was frightening, that a person could be subject to total, around-the-clock surveillance. Abdullah shook off his grief with his head held high and his heart kept in check.

“Charlotte,” he admonished, “your tears remind me of Captain Wiesler from the classic *The Lives of Others* by German director Florian Henckel von

Donnersmarck. Your tears are not from sadness but are the tears of one who knows they have made a mistake—they might as well be the tears of the Stasi, who invented the policy of ‘Know it all. Collect it all.’”

The conversation stalled as the two became lost in thought. Abdullah began to wonder at the reason for the long gaze that Charlotte held upon him following his latest words.

Charlotte began to feel irritated at Abdullah’s harshness toward what she considered to be a sentimental gesture on her part. “That’s very harsh of you, Abdullah. How dare you say that?”

He was almost finished with his dish and was scraping up what remained with his fork and knife. Charlotte was nearly done with her loco moco.

“With all due respect,” Abdullah replied, “the feeling of being an open book, of being laid bare in front of a stranger, is like a splinter that digs itself deeper and deeper into the skin with every attempt to extract it.”

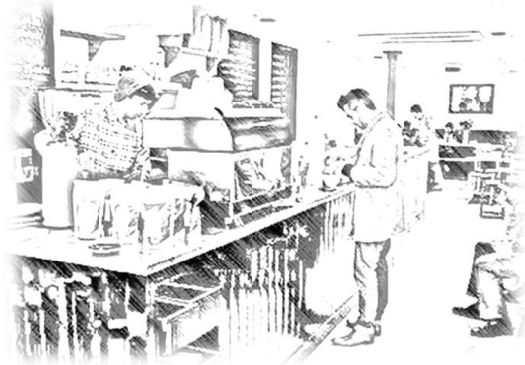
“I don’t disagree. I told you that I don’t believe that what we were doing was right, but I was expecting a politer answer. In any case, there’s no problem. You can be harsh sometimes; I know that. But I can understand why.” She took a deep breath. “Thank you for the lunch invitation. I’d like to invite you to coffee this evening. You’ll enjoy the conversation. I know that you’re filled with questions that need answering. The place that we’ll go is very appropriate for inquisitiveness!”

Abdullah paid the bill after he and

Charlotte received two chocolate mints from the waiter. They parted ways and went separately to their respective hotel towers. The experienced Charlotte had made sure to reserve a room with a balcony that looked out onto Abdullah’s room in the tower across from hers.

* * *

6



In her room, Charlotte had just finished taking a warm shower to get her circulatory system pumping after half a day of happenings that still seemed like a dream to her. Long years had passed since she left her

job. Now, she had sat and conversed with one of her surveillance subjects. She wrapped herself in one of the towels provided by the hotel, covering the area from her upper chest to her knees. Charlotte moved to the balcony window to draw back the shades, perhaps hoping to find Abdullah doing the same in the adjacent tower.

Her room was on the tenth floor and his on the eighth. She appeared to be practicing an old, beloved hobby. Charlotte chose to look down at Abdullah from above to feel power over him and to monitor him—this time without equipment or technology!

She slipped on some light summer garb and then returned to the balcony, only to find Abdullah's shades ... still closed. She poured herself a cup from the water jug that

had been set out for guests to cool off with after a hot shower and then looked down at her smartphone and checked her inbox for new e-mails.

After an hour-long nap, Abdullah felt a new pep in his step, especially after he had kicked his day off early by delivering a presentation at the conference. He felt energetic after a quick shower that had given his face cheeks fullness and glow, and then he moved over to his laptop and began skimming news from his country. When he had finished, he felt drawn to the door of the balcony, over which danced the remnants of some light clouds that had found their way into the space between the hotel towers. It was a captivating sight and one quite impossible to find in his home country. He opened the balcony door and

let the breeze wash over him. *What a view,* he thought, *to see the clouds sift between the balconies on the tenth floor of the hotel.*

Across the way from his room, he spied Charlotte waving from above, smiling with her right arm extended and fingers waving hello. He returned the greeting with a smile.

Charlotte signaled to him in a sort of makeshift sign language. She displayed four fingers, minus the thumb, and pointed them downward. Abdullah gleaned from the gesture that she wanted to meet him on the bottom floor at four o'clock. He turned his gaze away from her for a brief moment to sneak a peek at the clock in his room: 3:15 p.m. He turned back to Charlotte and gave her a thumbs-up.

Abdullah prepared himself to go out with Charlotte, loaded with questions. Her

field of work had been a central interest throughout his life, always drawing him to read as much as he could.

Abdullah decided to avoid the formal clothes that he had worn in the morning at the conference. He was loudly humming a song dear to him that had comforted him during his homesick years away from his country. He donned a pair of flexible shoes that would help him comfortably take on the streets of Hawaii.

Abdullah and Charlotte met in the hotel lobby, at the intersection of its four towers, as the clock struck four o'clock on the dot.

Charlotte greeted Abdullah and asked him to accompany her to the parking garage.

The two climbed into the vehicle. Charlotte kicked off the small talk by

complaining of the exorbitant parking prices at the hotel.

“Did you know that it costs thirty bucks just to park your car for one day?”

“Yeah, I know. Prices are going up everywhere because of demand. The market controls everything.”

“Doctor, kick back and relax.” she chuckled. “I want to see you in your natural state. Be yourself! You don't look too comfortable!”

“I just need some time. I'm still trying to wrap my head around what's going on and comprehend the fact that you and I are in the same car.”

“I understand your situation, but I want you to meet my boldness with some understanding of our own, and bear with me ... do you know this street?”

“Yeah, I know it a bit. It’s not the first time I’ve visited Hawaii.”

“I’m aware of that. All of your travel records from your time in the United States were recorded in great detail. All we had to do was fire up a program that was custom made to track the electronic paper trail, if you will, of your daily interactions ... exactly like the monologue from *Eagle Eye* that you said made you want to watch the film over and over again!”

“You know, Charlotte ... the truest statement about privacy was made by a man whose technological predictions mostly turned out to be true, including ‘The network is the computer.’ Anyway, he said, ‘You have no privacy anyway. Get over it.’”

Charlotte let out a cackle at the sentence, for it was simultaneously witty

and true. How could she not have come across something so amusing?

She laughed once more and slapped her right hand on the steering wheel as her laughter steadily subsided.

“Where did you find that lovely quote? You really are an accomplished reader. You hit the nail on the head.”

Abdullah smiled at Charlotte’s approval and then followed up the quote with one that she might enjoy even more. “Not everyone liked that quote. There was a writer who responded to it in one of the prominent tech magazines and said, ‘He’s right on the facts, wrong on the attitude ...’”

As they moved from street to street, following the flow of traffic, Charlotte turned the conversation to a different-looking building sitting at the intersection

of two of Honolulu's prominent avenues.

Its architecture seemed to have a different flavor than the buildings surrounding it. In a coyly obnoxious manner, she asked, "Do you know the company that works out of that building?"

"I do not. Do tell ..."

"Here lies the great Booz Allen Hamilton. Don't tell me you've never heard of them!"

"Surely you're joking? You mean Booz Allen Hamilton, the company that Snowden ..."

"Yes, yes. This is where Snowden worked, at a company that fills the world with both security and fear at the same time!

"The staff that work there are truly unique, and Booz is the NSA's largest contractor. Its administration is full of

former heads of the NSA itself!"

"So this is where the most technologically advanced surveillance and spying in the entire world happens. What a complicated world we live in, Charlotte. When Snowden appeared on screen for the first time, he said, 'I, sitting at my desk, certainly had the authorities to wiretap anyone, from you or your accountant, to a federal judge, to even the president if I had a personal e-mail.'

"After watching him, I thought for a bit and laughed to myself. If I had the power to spy on someone's e-mail, whom would I pick?"

"Surely you would pick Dina? I know how men are!" Charlotte exclaimed.

Abdullah chuckled, as if to agree with Charlotte. He pointed out a nearby coffee

shop that looked comfortable and suggested that they find a parking spot. As the two removed their seat belts and emerged from the vehicle, Charlotte recalled a famous story about a related issue.

“Abdullah, there’s a term in intelligence called ‘LoveInt,’ which is when intelligence employees use their broad powers to spy on their romantic interests, whether wives, girlfriends, or otherwise.

“In his first day on the job at one of the top intelligence agencies, a young employee decided to use the powers he had just been granted to test the computer system and extract information from e-mail inboxes. Can you guess whose inbox he picked?”

Abdullah was walking at Charlotte’s side as they headed toward the café door.

He looked at her in anticipation of the story. “Let me guess, his wife’s e-mail was first?”

Charlotte smiled coyly. “Let’s order and get a table and then I’ll tell you who the overzealous young man picked ...”

The two sat at a comfortable, cozy corner table. As usual, Abdullah avoided coffee, tea, or any kind of energy drink. He had a glass of lemonade brought to him, along with an oatmeal-raisin biscuit. Charlotte had just taken the first sip of her coffee when she said, “As for your question, he wasn’t married! The first e-mail account was actually that of a former lover. The second belonged to someone else whom he knew—an American citizen.”

“Ah, as I expected. Search for the woman! *Cherchez la femme, pardieu. Cherchez la femme!* A bombastic phrase uttered by an

Alexandre Dumas character: ‘Look for the woman! There is a woman in every case.’”

“I’m tired of seeing fine, strong men fall like dominoes in front of the magic of women. Are you all incapable of patience?”

“It’s the balance of life, madam,” he replied in a philosophical way. “The balance of life. If men were not predisposed to a woman’s love and did not pursue it, women’s value in this would be nonexistent. That’s why men are willing to bear insult and shame just to taste a woman’s nectar.”

Letting her mind wander for a bit, Charlotte replied, realizing full well the difference in how men and women think, “In any case, the overzealous young man did not lose his job, but he was demoted, suspended for forty-five days, assigned overtime for an additional forty-five days,

and had his pay cut in half for two months. A recommendation was also filed to not allow him access privileges again.”

Charlotte was giving details in a way that suggested that she was hiding juicier stories about widespread misuse of powers. However, the mere thought of revealing such secrets to Abdullah was enough to scare her into secrecy.

“Poor guy,” offered Abdullah. “He paid the price for his mistake. But Charlotte, you haven’t told me: Did any woman abuse the surveillance systems to spy on men?”

“I don’t know. Do you know something? I suspect you haven’t stopped reading and following such stories!”

“Yes.” Abdullah chuckled. “I remember a funny story from 2011 where a female employee knowingly abused her

powers and used surveillance systems to spy on her lover, who wasn't an American. When she was confronted about it, she contended that she had wanted to make sure he wasn't a dubious person who might do harm to the United States. Sensing that punishment was near, she presented her resignation and was never charged."

Charlotte laughed. "Now can I say, 'Look for the man?'"

Abdullah smiled at Charlotte's thrust into the controversial subject of gender equality and its problematic logical fallacies. "Perhaps, but we need to avoid correlating things in this way. It's a logical fallacy. Have you heard of them?"

"No, what are logical fallacies?" Charlotte asked.

"Logical fallacies are mental traps that

are easy for our minds to fall into. We must be wary and try to avoid them. To put it another way, even if we have all the right evidence, we can still make a faulty assertion if the logic we use is also faulty. One of the most famous logical fallacies is the false dichotomy, which is exactly the kind of thing that was widespread following the 9/11 attacks, when the George W. Bush administration adopted the dichotomy, 'You're either with us or against us!' This logical fallacy ignores the neutral option: I'm neither with you nor against you.

"We use a lot of logical fallacies in our daily lives—fallacies that negatively affect our relationships, even if we don't realize it. The most famous and widespread of these are 'the straw man' and the 'ad hominem' fallacies.

“The straw-man fallacy is when you misrepresent the other party’s argument. If a member of parliament proposes cutting the military budget while raising the education and health budgets, a colleague will stand up and act *shocked* at the former’s hatred of the country and willingness to leave the country without the means to defend itself. This kind of crude, lazy straw-man fallacy brings down the level of discussion and frustrates reasonable people.”

Abdullah paused for a moment, contemplating the pastries on sale and whether he should order another or stop with the one he had just finished.

Charlotte quickly interrupted his thoughts. “And what is the ad hominem fallacy?”

“Ad hominem means attacking the arguer instead of the argument itself. For example, if a female thinker proposes a solution to decrease the instance of divorce, then a man says, ‘This woman doesn’t have a degree, nor is she even married. Don’t believe her!’ That’s ad hominem.”

“That’s very deep and philosophical ... what discipline does that fall under?”

“It’s logic, madam, a special discipline that seeks out the basic principles of sound thinking.”

“Leaving logic aside,” she said, “let’s suppose I give you broad powers to use programs developed by the big-time companies.” She pointed toward the company that Snowden had worked in. “Who’s the first person you’ll search for?”

Abdullah answered with surprising

speed and with no hesitation, “You, of course. Then, Dina ...”

Charlotte laughed, but a flash of surprise crossed her face. “Why me?”

“It’s the principle of reciprocity. Humans as a whole tend to favor reciprocity, whether positive or negative. A negative example would be me spying on you because you know everything about me; therefore, I want to know everything about you. A positive example would be how after I invited you to lunch, you felt obliged to invite me to this café. Positive reciprocity is a social obligation, and those who fail to uphold it are seen as ungrateful.”

“In any case,” Charlotte replied, “you won’t find anything interesting on me. The nature of our work necessitated that we lead boring lives, ones less full of enjoyment.

With every step we take, we always assume that someone else is watching us. And so ...”

“A simple life is truly a blessing, one enjoyed by many,” interrupted Abdullah.

“For sure,” agreed Charlotte. “There’s not much enjoyment to be had in a life where you know that the essence of your work means that every move you make will be monitored and evaluated.”

Some time passed; Charlotte’s coffee cup was empty, and Abdullah moved to slouch down on a comfortable couch adjacent to their table. From his seat, he caught a clear view of the sunset as it blazed upon the horizon.

People outside of the coffee shop were pouring out of their workplaces, hurrying to close out a long day. On these isolated islands in the midst of the vast

ocean, sunset brought life to a halt, clearing the way for nighttime to roll back its curtains.

Abdullah's eyelids felt heavy as he told Charlotte that he wished to head back to the hotel. She offered to accompany him to dinner at the restaurant next door, but Abdullah declined the invitation, saying that he was accustomed to eating a light dinner in his room, which helped him to sleep easily.

"Let me get your plate," he offered.

"No, I'll return the plates," replied Charlotte.

Abdullah's hand brushed against hers by chance; a shock of static electricity shot through them as her fingers then met Abdullah's forearm.

"Ouch. What was that?" she said as she

felt the desirable sting of the touch.

"I felt the same thing," he said as he chuckled.

Abdullah picked up the plate, smiling as he took their scraps to the trash can. Charlotte followed Abdullah with her eyes, examining his muscular body, which she had long desired, despite a small belly that he had developed with age, which she spotted slightly peeking out as he returned to the table.

She had felt something unusual in that touch. It didn't cross her mind that she had just touched the *potential terrorist* whom she had been in charge of monitoring.

"Come on, it's time to go," said Abdullah.

"Yes ... let's go."

Sporting a pleased smile, Charlotte

stood up and followed behind Abdullah as they made their way toward the door. She tried to close the gap between them, hoping that he might stop suddenly and make contact with her once again. It was an old trick from adolescence that she had learned from her flirtatious friends.

Abdullah opened the door for her, preparing to immediately follow her out.

Once in the car, Charlotte asked, “Do you miss life in the United States? I mean, when you were studying here.”

“Of course I miss it. Despite what I’ve discovered about the surveillance and monitoring that you talked about, I still say the same thing that I always have. Anytime I saw things that I liked—such as the comfortable way of life, how easy it was to find what you’re looking for, and the way

the country embraces anyone who dares to dream—I would always say this country deserves to be the greatest in the world.”

“Is that really what you think of our country ... the United States of America?”

“Absolutely. I don’t think there’s anything controversial about that. But the question that must be asked is, Who pays the price? At whose expense does the United States sit upon its throne?”

“What makes you think we’ve reached that level of greatness on the backs of others?” quipped Charlotte.

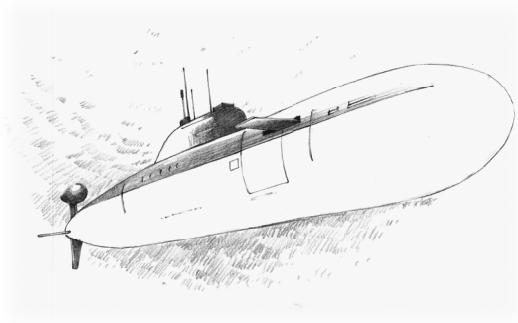
“The world order is complicated, and I’d rather not get into that subject,” Abdullah replied. “We live in a time when the realm of secrets has grown smaller and smaller. The game’s inner workings have been exposed to history. The story goes like

this: someone writes some nice-sounding words on a blackboard—freedom, justice, and equality—and then quickly erases them. The process is repeated over and over, writing the same words and erasing them rather quickly. Writing, erasing, writing, erasing, et cetera ...”

The two arrived at the hotel lobby and then parted ways and headed to their separate rooms, thus ending a long day.

* * *

7



The next day, Abdullah awoke as usual to perform the dawn prayer. Before performing the prayer's two prostrations, Abdullah searched his smartphone for local prayer times in Honolulu, just to make sure he had the right time and was facing in the

direction of Mecca. Unlike in most Muslim countries, Hawaiian hotels did not provide signs indicating the direction of Mecca. He recalled that the direction of Mecca in the eastern United States was approximately the northeast. In Hawaii, it flipped to northwest.

The thought brought Abdullah to consider the world from the perspective of an astronaut. Imagining the world from above, he figured out that the information was correct—the direction of Mecca was indeed different in Hawaii.

In that moment, Abdullah felt a longing for the warmth of his family—the voices of his daughters and his son in the morning before school, some of whom would awake sad and grumpy, while the others would spring forth with joy and energy. The quiet

of the hotel caused him to reflect on his family and how he loved to be close to them, even when busy. Nothing captured the feeling of missing one's family quite like the popular saying from back home: "It's easier to stay single for life than be a widow for a month."

Abdullah got a text on his phone. He figured that it was a message from his wife reminding him to maintain good morals and avoid any sinful glances. He had long been accustomed to receiving such messages from her ... but this message was different.

It was a message from Charlotte asking him to call as soon as he woke up. He knew that she was awake, for she'd sent the message mere moments before, but he intentionally waited to respond, wishing to enjoy a few moments of just lying down and

relaxing after waking up.

Abdullah proceeded with his day by performing ablutions and the dawn prayer, after which he checked his personal e-mail. The thought occurred to him that Charlotte might have gone out onto the balcony to monitor him and thus might have seen his reaction to her text.

After making sure that she hadn't seen him, he pulled back the curtain covering the balcony door in a light, quick movement. He instantly felt an awkwardness at the humorous situation before him, for he saw Charlotte sitting on her balcony holding a cup of coffee and breathing in the sweet scent of the dawn in the moments before the sunrise.

Abdullah felt embarrassed for not responding, so he punched his text into his

phone. "Hello. Good morning, ma'am. I'm awake now."

"Good morning to you, Abdullah" came the reply. "There's a submarine ride that takes people to the ocean's depths, where you can see oceanic creatures up close. I reserved two tickets, one for me and one for you, and I was wondering if you'd like to accompany me. The ride starts at nine o'clock sharp. You in?"

Abdullah shot back a text. "If I don't go, will you be upset with me?"

Charlotte replied, "Of course I'll be upset. Don't ever turn down the invitation of a woman who has fallen in love with you!"

Abdullah laughed, shocked and not fully grasping what she meant. "OK, OK ... I'm in."

"Great; I'll see you in the lobby at nine o'clock sharp" came the response.

Charlotte was overjoyed that Abdullah had agreed to go along with her plan. They seemed almost like teenagers at the outset of a love story but still in the puppy-love phase.

Two hours remained before their date. Charlotte got busy preparing herself, just as every woman prefers to pretty herself up when accompanying a man. She applied some makeup to get dolled up and boost her self-confidence and will to live—or perhaps her will to return to life.

Many believe that a woman puts on makeup in order to escape from herself. In reality, she does so to search for herself.

Before doing anything, Abdullah put his phone down next to his laptop and went

back to perusing his e-mails. Abdullah had multiple e-mail accounts for different purposes; one was with the university at which he taught, one was a personal e-mail for friends and relatives, and a third was for buying tickets or other transactions of any kind.

After finishing with his e-mails, he checked his phone for social-media notifications, whether related to family, academics, friends, sports, committees, or otherwise. The number of groups he followed was never ending. He would jump from group to group, adhering to relationships determined by custom or sometimes by the nature of his work.

Charlotte went down to the lobby a full hour before the agreed-upon time, bringing with her a book to read. She loved to read

but was not a voracious reader. Her current book was *Six Days of the Condor*, a novel that was somewhat dated but whose central idea was still relevant and accurately described the current state of the world.

Abdullah went down to the lobby a half hour early, only to find Charlotte engrossed in the novel, as if she were a participant in the twists and turns of its scenes.

He greeted her and turned his gaze to the book's cover, slowly pronouncing the title. "*Six...Days...of...the...Condor*. The book looks interesting, and you seem to be enjoying it!"

"Yes, it's an outstanding book. You should read it. I'm sure that you'd like it."

"I'll have to read it very soon."

He made a note of the book's name in his phone to check later.

The two tickets for the submarine ride were laid out on the table in front of Charlotte. Abdullah thanked her for buying them and tried to reimburse her, but she refused. She laughed and said, “I don’t want us to argue about it like you do with your friends at a restaurant when it comes time to pay the bill.”

She continued, “We used to laugh about that a lot when we would recall the things we saw during surveillance. The whole thing was a bit chaotic but so charming. We actually considered it to be an excellent trait and a very commendable virtue.”

The two began moving toward the dock, where a small boat was moored that would take the tourists on a ten-minute ride to an awaiting submarine in the middle of the ocean. The participants formed a queue at

the boat. Some of them came on their own, while others had a companion. Two families were at the front of the line.

Abdullah and Charlotte gave off the impression that they were an interracial couple. Abdullah felt embarrassed at being so close to Charlotte and accompanying her without a valid excuse. He was also bothered by the accusing stare coming from the direction of an Indian woman for his being with an American woman.

Charlotte smiled at Abdullah, appearing to sense his embarrassment and understand the Indian woman’s critical glares. With no reservation, she turned to the woman. “We’re just friends.” Overcome by shame, the Indian woman retreated a few steps and clung to her husband’s arm, her defeated smile signaling her tacit withdrawal and

unwillingness to engage in conversation with Charlotte.

Abdullah smiled at what had unfolded before him, nodding that he approved of Charlotte's actions. He felt a bit more relaxed, having found an excuse to enjoy her company.

The view of Hawaii from the boat, in a word, matched the description offered by the captain of the airplane that Abdullah had flown in on two days before. When the airplane landed on the tarmac, the captain had said, "Welcome to paradise!"

Abdullah had initially recoiled at the captain's comparison between a group of islands and heavenly paradise, but he had returned to his senses and inferred that the captain was speaking in an abstract sense.

In the boat, everyone was either

standing or sitting. Half the passengers huddled down in the seats and ignored the rolling waves, while the rest stood to look out on the horizon. Abdullah and Charlotte were leaned against the boat's railing as they took in the fresh air. It had never occurred to Abdullah that he might one day see a collection of such wondrous sights as these in a single place and at a single time.

The view was awe inspiring. A glimmering rainbow shot down through the cloud-soaked sky near the modern, stylish, neatly arranged buildings on the nearby shore, which itself provided a captivating canvas for the waves' ebbing and flowing. The air carried the scent of flowers, while mountains of varying sizes penetrated the cloud layer and provided a backdrop to the city in the foreground. It was a view straight

out of a skilled artist's painting; only this time, the scene was real.

After a long breath of the fresh air and a feeling of romance, Abdullah said in a clear voice, "What good is a great view if you don't have someone to marvel at it with?" He had read the phrase in an Arabic book once and now shared it with Charlotte to display the depth of his culture and literacy. The poor man still felt the need to show off in front of women.

Charlotte did not fancy the phrase much, perhaps because Abdullah's translation was not quite on point. He had thought that it would sound just as good in English.

"Look there! The submarine!" Charlotte pointed out as the submarine emerged from the ocean.

For those who are inexperienced and have not been on a long trip out to sea, the sight of the top of a submarine emerging from the ocean is quite intimidating. At first, the submarine appears like the terrifying dorsal fin of a giant shark. It then reveals itself little by little, exposing an iron railing encircling the hatch area, where three guards greet the tourists and help them board the submarine from the boat.

"Wow! That's something you don't see every day!" Charlotte shouted to Abdullah with obvious excitement and eagerness as she moved forward to board the submarine, the boat having been moored to it.

"We're going to love this ride, Abdullah. Trust me. You haven't seen anything yet. The brochure says we're going to dive very deep."

After everyone had boarded the submarine, it began its gradual descent. An electronic counter displayed the submarine's depth, which increased until it exceeded one hundred feet below the surface. For forty-five minutes, the submarine roved about, passing between ocean creatures of all shapes and sizes: fish, turtles, coral reefs, shipwrecks dating back to World War II, and plane wreckage from the Battle of Pearl Harbor.

"Japan's attack had a severe impact on you all, didn't it?"

"Of course. It was a tragedy. Perhaps you could even say it was a failure. It was one of the reasons that the NSA was founded!"

"Exactly the same process occurred after 9/11 with the Patriot Act! History is so kind

as to repeat itself. The more things change, the more they stay the same."

"I totally agree." Charlotte moved closer to Abdullah's ear so that he might hear her above the cacophony of noise inside the submarine. "Abdullah ... why do you look blue?"

"Everything looks blue in here," replied Abdullah, cupping his hand over his mouth to project his voice in her direction. "It's a phenomenon known as color absorption. The color red disappears at a depth of a few meters and then orange and then yellow ... thus the visible spectrum changes until we get to a point where there is just blue, as you can see."

"Fascinating scientific explanation. I just remembered something that you'll find interesting. Did you know that the Israeli

army has developed a military uniform that changes colors with the soldier's surroundings, just like a chameleon?"

"The Israeli army!" exclaimed Abdullah. "Did you bring up Israel on purpose to gauge just how much I dislike that country?"

"No, no, please don't take it the wrong way. I understand your position. It's an old conflict, and debating it is pointless."

"In any case," Abdullah continued, "I'm not afraid to share my opinion on that issue. Israel remains a state founded upon oppression, and Palestine remains an occupied country. The Israelis have spent so much energy preparing for war with their neighbors because they know that the land is occupied!

"My dear Charlotte, it is difficult for the oppressed to live with their oppressor in

peace."

"I didn't know you were a fan of war."

"Never that. Please don't misunderstand me. I love peace and wish people would avoid war. I simply wish Israel would treat the native population the way that Muslims treated followers of other religions on that same land when they first arrived. At that time, Jerusalem was truly a city of peace in both word and deed."

"The only thing I can tell you is that you'll never beat Israel in your current state. Israel's neighbors, and you Arabs in general, succeed on an individual level, but you fail in groups. The hostility between you and Israel is old and multifaceted, but let's not delve into that subject. How do you like the submarine trip so far?"

"I don't know how I missed the chance

to go on a submarine trip the first time I visited Hawaii,” lamented Abdullah. “Thank you so much for inviting me. It’s really an incredible experience.”

“No need to thank me. I knew you’d like it. Hawaii holds many secrets!”

“Secrets?” he wondered aloud in surprise.

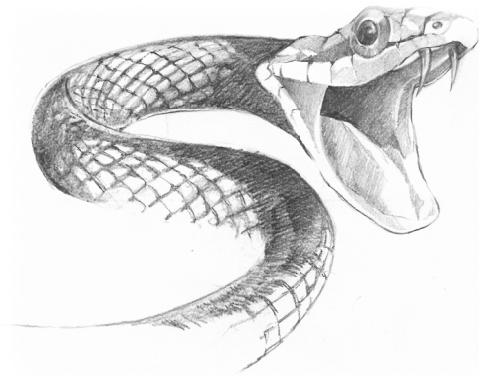
At that moment, the submarine captain announced that the trip had come to end and that the submarine had arrived at the surface to meet the boat that would return them to shore.

As usual, Charlotte’s words left Abdullah full of questions, none of which were quelled by her allusions to espionage. Did she mean tourist secrets or secrets such as the location where Edward Snowden used to work?

The two mutually agreed to feed their desires; Charlotte wanted to share what she knew with someone she was comfortable with, and Abdullah was enamored by the excitement of the world of intelligence and espionage.

* * *

8



The tourists began seeping out of the port once the boat arrived at the shore. There was a smile on every face after the enjoyable submarine ride, an experience

that most people settle for watching on the Discovery Channel.

Although the sky seemed to be clear with only scattered clouds, intermittent sprinkles of rain began to fall on the island, even as rays of sunshine shone through onto the beach. Abdullah bounded to the nearest covered area to elude the raindrops, finding shelter among umbrellas belonging to a row of shops bordering the hotel. Charlotte followed after him, laughing all the way at how slow she was by comparison. Abdullah suggested they have a seat at a nearby juice bar and sample some more of Hawaii's colorful fresh juices. Charlotte approved of the idea.

“You said that Hawaii holds many secrets ... what were you alluding to?”

“When will your voracious appetite for

these kinds of things be sated?” Charlotte said in exasperation. “You’ll go to your grave enamored with a lifestyle that you wouldn’t be able to put up with for even one year!”

“You remind me of what Jack Nicholson arrogantly said in *A Few Good Men*: ‘You want the truth? You can’t handle the truth!’” He continued with laughter, “I’ll admit that I’m somewhat paranoid. Call it an infatuation or a sort of obsession. We are all victims of the technological age in which we live. Spying on people has become easy. In the past, it would take a whole team of people to monitor one person. Now, with a few clicks of a mouse and strokes on a keyboard, smart technology can pinpoint and track every aspect of my daily life—and not just me but everyone in my social circle.

So my misgivings are partly justified.” He took a deep breath. “When are you going to tell me about these secrets? What does Hawaii have to hide?”

Acquiescing to Abdullah’s request, Charlotte began to delve into Hawaii’s distinction in the intelligence field but not before the waiter brought her a colorful cocktail topped with a small slice of banana. Abdullah, for his part, had ordered a medium-size coconut and a straw. The top edge of the coconut was trimmed with artistic precision.

“There is an NSA center here,” she began, “one of four main centers in the United States. The one here is the most advanced and developed in the entire world. The other centers are in Texas, Colorado, and Georgia.”

“It’s like Snowden stumbled upon a gold mine,” quipped Abdullah.

“Yes, it was reported that he had a lot of classified documents from the center here in his possession.”

“To what extent does the United States wish to surveil the world?” he wondered. “Do they realize how slippery this slope is? Are there any boundaries in what they do?” “It’s not that simple, my dear,” replied Charlotte. “I hope I can give a simple enough answer that will demonstrate the different aspects of this issue. It’s extremely complicated. There are commercial, technological, and security considerations, as well as issues of sovereignty. Perhaps I can put it to you this way.

“There’s a wonderful fable that speaks of a snake that used to lie by the side of the

road in a small village and bite at passersby. The residents of the village got fed up with the snake, so they asked a wise man to talk to the snake and convince it to stop being violent and killing children. At the wise man’s wishes, the snake indeed stopped. Years later, the wise man was passing through the same village. He found that the snake had been stoned by the village children and was hanging in between life and death. The wise man was shocked and asked the snake what had happened. The snake said, ‘This happened because you told me to stop being violent!’ The wise man said, ‘You misunderstood me. I said don’t bite people. I didn’t say don’t scare them by hissing!’”

Abdullah greatly enjoyed the fable, almost as if he had found some sort of

justification for the actions of the United States and other countries in surveilling and spying on people. He knew in the bottom of his heart that the balance between privacy and security was a tricky subject, and that security usually won out. However, the words of Benjamin Franklin were ever present in his mind: “Those who would give up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither.”

Abdullah spoke up. “The thing that really captives me is the technological aspect. The love for power and the people in your line of work have combined to make surveillance equipment and its accessories somewhat like a person unto itself! Governmental agencies and the tech companies that contract with them continue to develop espionage programs and devices

that will be able to penetrate and influence our daily lives even more than they already do.

“Because of my understanding of developments in both the public and secret worlds of IT and espionage,” Abdullah continued, “I’m afraid that our subconscious mind will soon be encroached upon. Algorithms are used in search engines on the Internet and even sometimes in smartphone applications. These algorithms can manipulate our decisions!

“Such future programs would be able to infiltrate every aspect of our human selves in a calculated and frightening manner, and they would be capable of teaching themselves to form an AI nerve network. It’s astonishing that a human being would attempt to probe the depths of his

fellow humans.

“In one of the stories that I read, a number of coinciding events happened to an outstanding journalist, but they were not mere coincidences. Upon further investigation, there was a clear and obvious pattern caused by programs created for espionage.”

Abdullah took a sip of the coconut juice, feeling the health benefits that caused many people to use it as a substitute for sports drinks. He continued, “The journalist remembered that he had purchased walnuts the week before. He yelled to his wife in the other room to ask where she had them. The smartphone charging on the table next to him picked up his words. Sidebar ads began appearing on the browser, most of them dealing with walnuts! Walnuts ... benefits of

walnuts ... buy walnuts and receive great offers ... et cetera.

“Did the smartphone pick up the word ‘walnut’ and save it somewhere and then pull it back up in the phone’s browser? That would be easy for modern programs. It wasn’t an isolated incident either. The same month, he went with a friend to an art exhibit in Hollywood. The very next day, he found his inbox full of e-mails promoting investment in fine art and paintings!

“The key was that, while he was on the way to the exhibit, he searched Google for the address of the exhibit location—a place that hosts many such exhibits.

“In a similar vein, YouTube can see your favorite searches and videos and then suggest videos that match your interests and mind-set, almost as if it’s a little side brain

working alongside your primary one.

“These kinds of programs are used by commercial enterprises for marketing purposes. One can’t help but imagine what advanced programs are able to do in the hands of international intelligence agencies!”

“Didn’t I tell you we live in a scary world?” Charlotte paused. “This is what you know ... but there’s much more that you don’t know.”

“I believe that some things are better left secret,” retorted Abdullah.

“In that case, how about we only focus on the element of technology in this issue?”

“If that’s what you want ... here are some things that I think we’ll see in the near future. Your smartphone will not need to charge its battery every day; the screen will

act as the primary charger. The technology will rely on see-through solar cells.”

With his smartphone in hand, Abdullah acted as though he was bending the phone, much like his children bent the magnetic pizza parlor cards that populated their kitchen refrigerator. He continued, “The consistency and weight of smartphones will slowly decrease, until they become easily foldable and bendable items.”

Charlotte interjected, “In reality, we weren’t especially close with our contracting companies. Personally, my work was purely administrative. We would only rely on contractors when we didn’t understand the technology, but one time I heard something that will make your hair stand on end ... voice reconstruction technology. I don’t know the specifics of it,

but it will allow for reconstruction of conversations that occurred in a specific room at a specific time. This might explain why some intelligence buildings have no windows!

“Previously,” she continued, “governments would request specific work from contractors. Things have changed. Now, the contractors tell us what we can use, and sometimes they even force governments to buy technology!”

Abdullah chuckled. “Ah, you mean they use the mafia creed: ‘I’m going to make him an offer he can’t refuse!’”

Charlotte’s ensuing laugh was both hysterical and laden with fatigue after the morning’s submarine ride. She concurred with him, recalling the famous line that Vito Corleone used in *The Godfather* when

extorting his enemies.

“Yep ... yep. That’s exactly what happens, but in a manner more refined than that of the mafia. In the end, the companies are out for profit and profit alone.”

As the two were in the midst of conversation, a very young girl at the neighboring table slipped away from her mother’s embrace and stood in front of Abdullah and Charlotte’s table. She looked to be about four years old, and her features suggested that she was of Latin American descent. She was radiant and full of innocence and energy. She stared at Abdullah, appearing to inspect his features as he intently listened to Charlotte. At first, he paid her no mind, but her odd silence drew his attention. He turned away from Charlotte and smiled at the girl in the

manner of a father showing affection to his children.

Charlotte turned as well, surprised by the child's silence and rapt attention. Charlotte blurted out, "She's adorable!" The little girl gave her a shy smile and scurried away.

Abdullah agreed with Charlotte's assessment. "Children are life's greatest joy. I miss my family a lot. The little ones are no doubt awaiting my return."

"You told me that you have four girls and a boy," said Charlotte. "Could I see what they look like, if you don't mind?"

"No, I don't mind ... just a minute."

Abdullah opened the smartphone in his hand using a long password, just one indication of his deep-seated fear of someone spying on his phone. He began

showing Charlotte pictures and video clips of his children that he had taken over the years.

Charlotte studied the children's features intently, but she failed to find much resemblance between them and their father, except in the youngest girl and the boy. They both had their father's eyes and his kind features. The son resembled someone that Charlotte knew very well!

An extremely dangerous secret—one that she would not reveal to Abdullah until she was assured of his return to his country.

"You all look like a happy family," she said.

"Well, a big family has its drawbacks," replied Abdullah.

"Why did you want to have so many kids?"

He shot back, "Natural selection!"

She laughed wholeheartedly. "So you're a Muslim who believes in Darwin?"

"Not exactly. I believe that he did some outstanding scientific work, but not everything that he posited is completely correct, nor is it completely wrong, for that matter. I'm not the kind of person who labels others as either devils or saints. I love science, and I respect scientists."

"I understand," replied Charlotte.

At the same time, she was thinking how she might go about telling him the secret that she bore and what its impact on him would be. She had thought about telling him upon his departure from Hawaii, but a voice in her head told her that revealing the long-buried secret would not be without consequences.

Abdullah continued, "I really liked the coconut drink ... very tasty and distinctive. How did you like your drink?"

"It was great ... great." She snapped back to attention after having become lost in her thoughts and missing the first part of what he said. She stared at him as he broke off a piece of the coconut's white lining and then chomped it as their eyes met.

"It's time for me to get back to my room," he said. "I promised my family that I would Skype with them. Before I leave town, let me invite you to take a short trip with me to a place that I know well in Hawaii ... does five o'clock this evening sound good to you? We'll meet at the same spot in the lobby."

"I've got no problem with that," replied Charlotte. "I'll see you then."

“Sounds good.”

Each of them gathered their things
and prepared to head to the neighboring
hotel towers.

* * *

9



As always, the children were jostling with each other in the corner of the camera during the Skype call between Abdullah and his family. The oldest daughter asked her father for a new hand purse from an

international brand that could not be purchased in her country, so that she might show off in front of her friends.

The other girls jealously made the same request, except for the youngest, who asked for a strange gift. She asked her father to buy a small airplane equipped with a high-definition camera so that she might take pictures of the garden of the house across the street. That house was like a palace, and the young girl had heard much about its garden's beauty and its supposed history dating back to the childless widow of a former governor, who had dedicated her time to attending to the garden.

For his part, the son did not want a gift, but he took advantage of the discussion to ask his father to teach him how to ride a motorcycle when he returned. The boy had

long urged his father to do this for him.

Abdullah's wife asked the children to leave the room and give her the chance to speak to her husband alone. When they had done so, she asked him in a terse tone, "Do you love me?"

After a pause and a moment of apprehension, Abdullah answered. He sensed doubt and suspicion lurking behind her gaze. He was intent on avoiding the subject of Charlotte, but at the same time, he understood a woman's ability to sense change in the man she loves.

"Yes, of course I love you," he said. "Why do you ask? After all these years, do you doubt my love for you, my dear wife?"

"I just asked you a question," she retorted. "I want an answer, not a comment!"

"Yes, yes ... I love you," he responded.

"OK, OK," she said. "That's all I wanted to hear from you. Please get home safely. We're all waiting for you, darling. We want you home."

Abdullah closed the Skype application, feeling a sense of worry over his wife's unusual look. Speaking to himself, he wondered, *How do women know when a man changes?* He took a look in the mirror, changing his facial expression in an attempt to hide the feeling eating away at him. He wondered, *Can a man's face project sadness when he is happy or happiness when he is sad? What is it that a woman sees in a man when he speaks to another woman? Is it suspicious intuition, or does some kind of hormone produce an aura about a man that is invisible to all but the eyes of astute women?*

Abdullah began getting himself ready to meet Charlotte in the lobby, making sure to wear nice clothes that showed off his masculinity, as well as a very light touch of fine cologne that mixed the magic of Arabic perfumes and the creativity of Parisian scents. He had read in a book about etiquette that cologne should not be applied heavily when going out in public.

Abdullah left the room after making sure to pocket his key card. He took with him a bottle of water and a bottle of juice, for he and Charlotte would be taking a walk next to the sea on a beautiful promenade that he had discovered during his previous trip to Hawaii.

In the lobby, he met Charlotte, who had worn very light athletic clothes. “You look younger in this,” ventured Abdullah.

“Thank you.”

“Are you ready? We’re going to do a lot of walking today.”

“Where are we going?”

“Just go with the flow and enjoy the ride.”

“Sounds good ... I love a man who takes control.”

He smiled. “Men love that type of attitude. So it looks like you have some of the traits of an obedient wife?”

She gave him a brief chuckle, and the two made for the car, which Abdullah had rented from the airport—a convertible sports car. “Looks like I’ve got your attention. Is that what you look for in a woman—an obedient wife? Couldn’t you marry me if you wanted to? You have the right to marry four, right?”

Abdullah was surprised by Charlotte's forwardness and the speed at which she broached such a big topic. He replied with a smile, "Should I consider that an official invitation for me to marry you, madam?"

"I don't see why not. Unless you don't want to?"

"I don't make such decisions lightly."

"Ha ... I like the feigned wisdom after all your years of recklessness."

"Why do you insist that I was reckless? How could I not appear reckless, with you monitoring my every move? Who among us is a real saint?" Abdullah asked as he opened the convertible roof to let the breeze wash over them. The two felt refreshed as the car pulled out of the dark parking garage and onto the sun-soaked street, basking in magical moments beneath a sky of light

clouds.

Abdullah turned onto a road that ran parallel to the Honolulu beach.

"Where are we going?" asked Charlotte.

"I told you to go with the flow and enjoy the ride. We're very close to the spot. It's the most romantic spot on the island of Honolulu. Did you know the name Honolulu has Arabic origins?"

"Arabs attribute everything to themselves. Doesn't it bother you when people brag about their contributions to the past?"

"It's merely a piece of information—maybe it's right; maybe it's wrong. It's a harmless discussion. Don't ruin it with social and anthropological explanations."

She chuckled a bit. "Oh, fine ... I'm sorry. So what is the origin of the name?"

“Honolulu is derived from two words in Arabic. *Huna*, meaning ‘here,’ and *lu’lu’*, meaning ‘pearl.’ I read that the name was given to the island by Arab sailors who arrived here.”

Charlotte interjected, “I’m sorry Abdullah, but I think that’s laughable. It’s not possible. How and when did they get here?”

Abdullah smiled. He was not committed to defending the information, but he was amused that Charlotte insisted that it was wrong. He took advantage of her momentary mental preoccupation with the subject to poke fun at her a bit. “The information is supported by the similarity in the pronunciation of the two names. I think it is closer to being right than it is to being wrong.”

“You have the right to believe what you want.”

“OK, OK ... let’s not start a fruitless discussion. Here, we’ve almost arrived at the enchanting spot.”

Charlotte protested, “Just sitting here in the parking lot in this convertible sounds great. Do you want us to get out?”

“Yes, I’d like us to walk around a bit and circle around that bench over there. Many years ago, when I was a single man and visited Hawaii for the first time, I would sit alone in this very spot and ponder things. I enjoyed the time I spent here taking in the beauty of this place.”

“No one was with you?” Charlotte asked.

“That’s right, no one was with me. Sometimes people need to sit by themselves.”

“Well, let’s go then!” she exclaimed.

Abdullah closed the convertible roof, worried about the possibility of rain. The two exited the car and made for the distinctive promenade that ran parallel to the beach.

Abdullah spoke up. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Go ahead. I think we understand each other very well by now. I know you well anyway—I don’t need to discover your personality, and here you’ve gotten to know me more and more in just two days.”

“Have you ever been in love?” he asked boldly. “I know that the nature of your work is top secret, but human beings must fall in love at some point.”

“Hmm ...” mused Charlotte. “You could say that I’ve been in love. I had a hidden love

affair with one of my coworkers. He was older than me at the time and far outranked me. He had a wisdom and cool-headedness that was difficult to find in my male peers. We had chemistry, if you want to call it that. But I put up boundaries between us, because he was a married man.

“The most that ever happened between us was a kiss that I stole on a work trip. I didn’t like work trips because they break down the barriers between coworkers if they’re not careful. But I fell into the trap of his charm and presence.”

“So you prefer to be alone and not let anyone break into your comfort zone?”

“You could say that.”

Conversation between them tapered off. To a stranger in that moment, the two would appear to have come to the

promenade alone. Mutually understood silence reigned, a respite from the conversation and a moment for reflection.

After walking a considerable distance, Charlotte began to feel the strain on her back, being that she was older in age. In a broken voice, she pointed to a bench next to the promenade and said, "Let's sit down over there."

"Of course, after you. Let's have a seat."

Abdullah handed her a bottle of water that he had been carrying in a small backpack.

"Thank you," she said. "It looks like I'm not in as good of shape as you. I can't handle walking long distances like I used to."

Taking care not to mention her descent into old age, Abdullah replied, "It's normal. We all get tired from walking."

The two found themselves sitting before a beautiful view. Waves lapped at a small nearby pier just off the promenade. The cloud cover had muted the sun but not quite enough to suppress its rays. The nearby mountains towered above, and the streets were exceptionally quiet save for the occasional passing car. It was as if time and space had collaborated to make the area perfect for conversation between the two.

Abdullah looked toward the horizon as the sun dropped in the sky. They both seemed to enjoy the moments of silence that dominated the area. Neither wanted to initiate conversation, each believing that the other felt the same way. Charlotte took advantage of the silence to ask Abdullah if she could lay her head on his lap. She had long sought to get close to him, and now she

could do just that in a sensitive and tame way.

The request disconcerted Abdullah, but the way in which it was asked, coupled with Charlotte's age, persuaded him to consent. Shortly thereafter, tears of sadness began to gather in her eyes, though Abdullah did not know the reason; he supposed that the tranquility of the scene had a role in it.

Abdullah pretended to play it cool as she lay her warm head down on his leg. He looked toward the sea, searching for a new topic that would put the conversation back on its original course. He glanced down to find several tears falling from Charlotte's eyes. She appeared grief-stricken and pale, which only added to Abdullah's confusion and uncertainty over how to deal with the situation. With a forwardness and deftness

that surprised even himself, he asked Charlotte what was the matter. She dejectedly replied, "Nothing."

"Is loneliness eating at you?"

Abdullah's assessment hit the mark, taking Charlotte by surprise. Her head left his lap as she sat up in her seat and replied, "How did you know?"

"It's not rocket science. You're at an age when companionship is needed. We all feel loneliness but to varying degrees. Even someone who has a big, happy family can feel loneliness gnawing away at him."

"I forgot that you're so well read. People like you can see right through others. Do you enjoy reading psychology books?"

"Very much so," he said. "Perhaps too much. I have a strong preference for psychology and anthropology books. If I

had picked another major in college, it would have been psychology.”

“What was the book that piqued your interest in that field?” asked Charlotte.

“Well, as you know, I went through a rough period—you said that you cried when you saw the recordings of it. The day my mother died, I couldn’t bear the sorrow, so I started reading about how to deal with sadness.

“I searched the Internet for websites and articles on the topic. An old book caught my eye—its author, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, had made a model of the stages of human grief and had herself worked with hospice patients. I rushed to Amazon and bought a copy that day and then read it.

“The groundbreaking book was called *On Death and Dying*, and it laid out her

theory of the five stages that humans go through when experiencing grief that stems from a tragic event.

“First is the denial-and-isolation stage: ‘I’m fine.’ ‘This can’t be happening to me.’ ‘This isn’t real.’

“Next is the anger stage: ‘Why me? This isn’t fair.’ ‘Whose fault is this?’ ‘I don’t deserve this.’

“Then, the bargaining stage: ‘At least let me get married and have kids.’ ‘I just want to live to see my kids grow up.’ ‘I’ll do anything to go back to how things used to be.’

“After that, the depression stage: ‘Well, I was going to die anyway.’ ‘What’s the use in trying?’ ‘The person I love is dead, so why should I keep living?’ ‘I’ve lost hope in everything.’

“Finally, the acceptance stage: ‘It is what it is. I have to live my life.’ ‘I will find purpose and meaning in my situation.’”

He continued, “I can’t deny that the book was very sad. I mean, it’s about sadness anyway, and reading it certainly might make people sadder. But it helped me to explore and analyze myself.”

Charlotte let out a soft exhale and then said, “It sounds like the book was very depressing. I don’t think I would enjoy reading it.”

“No, I disagree. I’m not saying you should read it, but the model the author laid out is very famous and universally accepted by psychology books and literature.”

“Let’s not talk about sadness and tears,” she said. “I’m sorry if I ruined this beautiful scene by bringing up painful memories and

grief. It’s almost like the sound of the waves and the view of the sunset has trapped my heart here with you.”

“I agree with you. The view here is enchanting, and the breeze is unmatched.”

“Abdullah ... are you happy?” she asked after a pause.

“Yes, I’m happy ... if happiness is understood as being relative. If you burden yourself with troubles, you’ll find that they never end!”

“How is that?”

“Happiness is generally relative. For example, people who read history generally do not let despair creep into their hearts. They see the world as a constant cycle—the rich could become poor; the poor could become rich. Yesterday’s paupers are today’s heroes. Yesterday’s rulers could become

today's homeless. The judges could become the accused. The stars continue their orbit, and life goes on."

"Wow! Who wrote that?"

"An outstanding writer from Egypt named Mustafa Mahmud."

"That's a beautiful way to look at life. I must admit that Arabs as a people have brilliant minds. The difference between you and us is very simple: we work, and you talk."

"I don't disagree with you at all."

Night began to fall.

"I suggest we go back to the hotel. I'm feeling sleepy, and I like to take an early bedtime," said Charlotte.

"Let's go then. I also need to pack my bags tonight. I have to be at the airport early tomorrow morning."

"I would love if you'd let me accompany you to the airport so that we might sit together at a café before you board the plane. I know a nice café up there, and I want to tell you something that might be of interest to you."

"Why not tell me now, or in the car on the way back to the hotel?"

"Better to save it for our last conversation."

"As you wish ... I won't force it out of you. I'll have to wait until morning. Let's go..."

* * *

10



The glimmering of a new dawn broke over Honolulu, Hawaii. The time was 6:15 a.m., and Abdullah made sure all his travel bags were organized neatly for his flight. His first plane would take him from Hawaii to another US state, where he would board a second plane that would take him back to his country.

The room phone rang.

“Hello!”

“Hello, Abdullah, have you packed your bags?”

“Yes, I’m just about to leave for the airport.”

“Excellent ... at the airport, let’s meet at the café next to the shop that sells flowers and traditional Hawaiian clothes. You can’t miss it.”

“I think I remember it. OK, I’ll see you there.”

Abdullah hung up and called the lobby to ask for a porter to carry his bags to the car. Only one of the bags was his—the others were full of gifts for his family.

On the way to the airport, Abdullah wondered what Charlotte would say to him. There couldn’t possibly be anything bigger

than what she had already revealed to him. He truly felt like an open book, to the point of being totally transparent in front of her.

Abdullah turned on the radio and found a frequency playing soothing local music that lulled him into deep thought about the events of his life thus far. *Human beings are odd*, he thought. *No matter how much they accomplish, they always manage to remain busy.* He looked back at his achievements, imagining them as though they were video clips, much like the archiving method used by US security services that Charlotte had described.

Abdullah recalled the important stages of his life—academic hurdles that he had conquered ... challenges and difficulties that he had overcome ... all of them steadily growing dimmer as he grew in age.

The journey of life appears short as one approaches its bitter end.

Abdullah arrived at the airport and returned his car to the rental company and then took his bags to the baggage-and-ticket counter. When he had finished checking his bags, he began heading toward the café that Charlotte had mentioned, looking forward to one last enjoyable conversation with which to bid her farewell.

Abdullah carefully picked out a cozy table and sat down. He pulled out his tablet and began reading the news, choosing not to order his light breakfast until Charlotte arrived.

Twenty minutes passed before he spotted Charlotte approaching from afar. She waved, and Abdullah returned the gesture. He stood up and moved to greet her

at the café entrance, inviting her to sit and eat with him—a mere formality.

The two sat together as they awaited their breakfast order. Abdullah spoke first. He confessed that Charlotte had given his trip a unique kind of excitement and that, despite all that she had said and revealed, he was very happy to have met her.

At that moment, Charlotte found herself in a position far more difficult than she had imagined. The secret that she wished to reveal was more significant than anything in the past two days.

The café called Abdullah's name to pick up his order. As the two began to eat, Charlotte spoke up. "What do you think I'm going to tell you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps another story about what intelligence and espionage

agencies know but the public doesn't?"

"What I'm going to tell you doesn't concern the public."

"It concerns me, then?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead."

"Well! Look, this might come as a shock to you, but it's true, and I've verified it myself."

Abdullah smiled, burying his anticipation. He was simultaneously feeling apprehensive and maintaining his composure, taken aback that the issue concerned him personally.

"What could it be?" he wondered aloud.

"There's a plot that you're totally unaware of. I wasn't able to figure out how they did it—I've only seen the outcome with my own eyes. You have an illegitimate son

in the United States, born without your knowledge. He was raised by a family in an environment custom-made for breeding future generations of spies. His development has been overseen by a special unit that tracks the children's growth from birth up through adolescence."

"What are you talking about?" Abdullah exclaimed in disbelief. "How? How could I have an illegitimate son?"

"Trust me, I don't know how it happened, but the kid looks just like you. I saw him with my own two eyes. I didn't have prior knowledge of the plot, but I'm telling you...the kid is a photocopy of your personality and characteristics."

"You're joking, right? This is a trick—you're fooling me, right?"

"No, trust me ... I don't blame you for

thinking so, but he really is your son. I no longer have the clearance to find out anything more.”

Charlotte pulled out her phone and showed Abdullah a video clip of the boy talking. He appeared to be sitting in a school cafeteria with friends.

Abdullah felt a pang of shock run through his body as he watched the video. He froze in his seat, and his face showed the beginnings of a serious and violent reaction as he turned beet-red and began to tremble with rage from head to toe. He stood abruptly and screamed, “It’s not true! This is another dirty trick! You want me to believe it ... impossible ... impossible ...”

Charlotte stood for a brief moment like a statue, petrified by fear that the situation might escalate. She left her breakfast and

briskly headed toward the exit, not turning to look behind her.

Abdullah, now alone in the café, threw himself down on one of the couches, gathering his wits and attempting to control his anger. His brow was furrowed in a deep frown. The café’s patrons were nervously watching for his next outburst, wondering to themselves, *What did the woman say to that man?*

Just as after their first encounter, Charlotte left Abdullah full of questions ... this time more dangerous than ever before. How could a man live in peace knowing he had a son somewhere in this dark world, while not even knowing how the child was conceived? In that regard, Abdullah was sure that he had never had sexual intercourse with Dina.

Abdullah's airline announced that boarding was about to begin. He slipped his tablet inside his leather computer bag and made for his gate.

This time, the trip home would be different. Realizing the gravity of the situation and the difficulties he would face, Abdullah decided he would take advantage of the twenty-hour flight home to look at the situation from every angle before deciding his next step...

* * *

THE END

A b o u t t h e A u t h o r

Dr. Ayedh Alqahtani received his BS in engineering from University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 2000, his MS from University of Southern California at Los Angeles in 2005, and his PhD in engineering from Ohio State University in 2013. His interest in literature started when he published his books *Lover's Comfort* in 2004 and *Love Notes* in 2008. He has appeared on the famous Arabic show *Good Morning Arabs* on MBC TV. He is a member of Kuwaiti Writers Association and has given workshops on writing and publishing books. He lives with his family in Kuwait.

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