



People You Will Never Meet

1

WHAT YOU ARE



‘There’s what you are. There’s what you think you are.
There’s necessarily a context, a shell, holding those two
together.’

‘I know about psychology,’ Adnan says. ‘Don’t try it out on me. Besides – a shell you leave behind. It’s held you, mind and body, till your time is up. You’re free then – watch out for the hawks.’

We perch, and amid the olive trees far off the olive figures do what they’ve been trained to do. He holds his rifle casual...

‘It’s not a rifle,’ Adnan says. ‘It’s the stick I use to keep the dogs from off the sheep. A rifle – and they shoot you – a stick, you’ll just be beat.’

‘We know it’s an injustice,’ I say. ‘Why bother with the words? “We were here first?”, “God told us to”, “We’re pure and you are dirty foxes” – why not just say, “All true. Everyone’s unjust. It’s innate. Rights? More antique words. Be realistic. Treat everybody bad.” So what? Where lies the difference?’

‘That’s what they say already. You’re right,’ he says. ‘If everybody says “We are unjust” – what is the difference?’

Adnan’s my friend, but on the other side there’s sex and sitting down on chairs.

I’m on holiday – I can pass over to the other side.

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When I’ve gone, Adnan tells his friend Bukayr, named after the dumb poet, al-Harith: ‘I told my friend our tale. We’re our grandfathers’ unborn sons. Those over there – they’re ghosts. Ghosts have to modernise of course, work the locks, make dumb calls on the phone, and push us down the stairs... Ghosts, Bukayr, malicious imps that multiply like roots that do not copulate – you split them: autogenesis. That’s them defined, and what they all believe in too, that before the humans, there were ghosts – before the beginning, after the end. It’s logical.’

‘Experience,’ Bukayr says. ‘So long as no history

creeps in – it’s an ephemeral good or bad. When it’s over, there’s no hurt. It’s lodged there for the telling.’

‘I could get out,’ Adnan says, ‘If I was a rasta. Convert, be unlike anything dreaded – just wear the dreadlocks, then once out – become a renegade. Renounce it all: maybe you keep the rhythm and the songs.’

‘You could be a troll,’ says Bukayr. ‘Sit and yawn beneath the tree of life, until it all goes down, the humans die, the sun – black rock... I think God sits and sculpts the little birds, with a watchmaker’s glass screwed in His eye, screws in their eyes. Maybe He thinks of sex, spills a few stars. It’s only important, sex, if you aren’t getting it, and someone’s locked its door.’

‘Birds – do they have free will, Adnan?’ he asks. ‘It seems it’s moot. Once you wind up the humans, set them to scurry round – there’s not much left for You to do. Birds too – each with its tune, its map, finding an empty shelf, interleaved between the other tiny tunes and appetites... How’ll they do in snow? Without a drink? It must be fascinating, worth a million years of observation. Nothing more’s required, no new models, colours ... the humans tag, compute them...’

‘The best part, Bukayr,’ Adnan says, ‘is – they fly. Maybe there’s a number on their leg, but from the ground, it is unreadable. No document, you fly along the coasts, the rivers – threaded together, a cape of beads ... going home. Going to your other home.’

‘That’s riches.’ Bukayr says: ‘Having palaces, Summer and Winter. We, though, are just God’s Slaves – the birds don’t have revolutionaries, nor cages. We Slaves – sit in the cellar and await the summons, that tolling bell. Maybe God has a bird – would He keep it in a cage? Dove or raven? If it flies – what explorations, in those unwatered interstellar spaces, unmeasured black! Bird of wisdom, bird of death?’

‘We’re bound to stay,’ says Adnan. ‘This is our place.’

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Billions of jerked-off stars, thinks Bukayr: each with a wriggling coil of life that seeks a conjugation before it sputters out. If stars could mate – there’d be a billion gods and goddesses, creatures like in star maps – the lion and the giraffe – each one in space too wide for any voice or bellow to carry to another... Eternal isolation – each one alone and powerful, without a realm. Terrible creatures! Stuck up there in oceans of the dark. Can’t get down. Or up. All points of flying spume, froth on a shoreless tide – away, away, ‘I’ll make new space for you, on, on!’ Ask not why – pointless expansion, for ever, emptiness that fills the empty minds.

When there’s tension, maybe there’ll be war? A bigger war than now? What would you want – not to go backwards, that’s for sure – there’s going to be war! After? See if the war sorted things out? Maybe another war? – it’s inevitable, there’s been so many, it’s never final. Maybe it’s not the worst thing anyway...What is? Losing? A bad peace? Living in someone else’s space? Deaths, expropriation – seeing the sheds burn and the animals inside? Just not surviving? That, you wouldn’t know.

BELGIUM

‘Here’s resurrections’, Adnan says. ‘Anticipated, deferred. In the mass. Inflated angels, like old Michelin men, flying up to destinies anew, the land of dreams.’

‘I’ve always had a soft spot for here,’ says Bukayr. ‘Belgium. Bruges la morte. You can live on *frites* and prosper. *Chiens chauds* too.’

‘I always thought I’d drive the truck,’ says Adnan. ‘Maybe this is more class, lounging in the back. Off to pick cabbages. Here, we feel wanted, here we feel free. So few of us can run like us – either we’re loyal to way back home, or else we mostly can’t get out. It’s both the same.’

‘Everybody here is strange, a stranger; we’re the strangest. We’re no threat, we ran. That’s good – there’s different faces everywhere, but there’s resemblance – a dumbshow, apes expressionless. Us monkeys herded, stood on walls and jeered at: and here – look! there’s ferris wheels. Resurrections, Bukayr – that is the speciality – and *frites*.’

‘Cabbages,’ says Bukayr, ‘the hopalongs, the other leg blown off. Then peas. Peas in the north, cabbages down here – each with a non-communicating language. It’s all like home – except the two states here are intertwined like vines, one black grape and one white. It’s paradise, Adnan – two peoples going nowhere on one passport. Who imagined that with death, things would be so simple? You pass over, lift the curtain, die as what you were, and are reborn. In procession, into Ostend...’

‘No offence, Bukayr,’ says Adnan. ‘But – go away! Separate! Two of us, young males: there’d be suspicion of our potency... To you – the peas. To me – the cabbages.’

‘View the locals through your poetry, in night vision, watching spectacles: fans red, purple, orange – waving their arms. When they don’t speak, they’re like my cabbages, your peas. Remember the song at the *Cigale*: “Fuck the pain away”, she sang. That’s good advice. She was Belgian too, I guess. Go do your act,

Bukayr – make it a solo, wave your arms, and all the rest. Don't try puffing out poetry, not yours. See, out beyond your shaky light – the people. The dark unknown, for us, the new. Standing and shuffling, like crows or Girondins. Anything can happen, here or anywhere. My brother – farewell! Nevermore be seen together – our fetters separated, off we run again.'

And so – they part. So much for brotherhood. Adnan is right – two of you's a threat – away you go, Bukayr! Your dirty images – they'd better go off with you! All the worse for you, if they are sharp and true.

I

The Arab lands! The riches! I need to find the terra cotta cities. The ceramic towns – they're all in fragments. Passing through, a desert, then another one – then, something ran out. My document, the cash. It all became a desolation. I was lost.

I can always find my friend Adnan, of course. I prefer Bukayr. Adnan is hard. But there he'll be, intent, in the furrow, among the other cabbage-cutters brown and grey; doubled like a prisoner of war – the true soldier, impotent, bent over. His legs trudge in slow march, the eyes downcast have nothing but greenstuff in their sights. You're safe, a prisoner – if you go back, you're a deserter, naturally. The knife they give to cut – you hand it back at twilight, handle first, the point is broken off. It's pretty blunt.

Of course, Adnan is my friend, who I don't much like; Bukayr is Adnan's friend, not mine.

Don't exaggerate – there's no house of the dead, not where they are, not where they came from: no one's Lvov, no Babi Yar, not quite, not yet. Those cabbages – they live, give life! Freedom, dear freedom!

A house of the living dead – that's possible.

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'I'm taking ship,' I tell Adnan. 'This is the world's most trafficked port. "Taking ship" means that while you're in it, it is yours. It would be the same with any floating thing – logs, or coracles.'

'Don't worry,' Adnan says. 'I'll say farewell, but ships – many return. And so will you. Don't be anxious – I have seen the world's end. It's nothing special. Where Bukayr killed his little brother – he tipped him, down the crevasse he went. You'd feel regret, of course, but without intent, you don't feel guilty, or responsible. Accidents – they're everywhere – drought, famine, massacres. No one set out to do them, probably. Part of the sadness of the world. As for the end – down there, they'd ploughed the earth – it was a porridge, maybe a cream caramel, ready for some stuff they'd build on it. That's what it will all look like, my friend. As I say – it's nothing special.'

'That's terrible,' I say. 'Bukayr. His little brother? He seems so creative. Maybe it's worse without intent. You don't know if it's what you want, or what you'll miss, or be happy for... The end of everything – it comes with ploughs, explosives too – the monochrome. The waiting, for it all to start again, from hovels on to happy families ... and back again.'

We're silent, probably thinking about far-off things. 'Maybe the end of the world is pinkish,' I say. 'Like the Greek stuff everybody eats...'

'No, you cretin,' Adnan says. 'It's not edible. Obviously. It's rubbish, primal mud.'

'I'll be back,' I say. 'I'm young, I'll spend all the money I was left, then I can start again – like you, Adnan.'

'No,' he says, 'nothing like. You're not holy. Ravens

will feed me. Everyone's a prophet, but I'm the best. You, my friend, you're a blown egg, before you start to roll.'

'I'm going to Brazil,' I say. 'I expect. It's the closest place to anywhere – there's a huge lump of land, sticks out. It catches you, so you don't drift south into the ice. It's caught people down the centuries. Then I'll come back, and tell you what I think.'

'Yes,' Adnan says, 'you've the right turn – "take ship", "down the centuries". You're already finding the melodic path – go a step ahead today, they'll laugh at how quaint you are tomorrow.'

We look at an old cat in the street – it seems rheumatic, its back legs drag, like Groucho Marx walking in a silent piece: 'Identity,' says Adnan, 'religion – all a ploy. Don't get caught up – it's politics, by guys you wouldn't spend a moment talking to. Ignorant. Besides – identity, ID. You need it, but what's the D stand for?'

'You're right, Adnan,' I say. 'Being right, though – where'd you get with it?'

'That's right too,' he says. 'Bukayr rails against a god that defies belief. God rails against God – that stupid plan for impotence. As if He could do better if He tried! Politics? Nothing I might want – and once you have the taste for kicking naked men in cells – you won't desist. No, my friend,' he tells me. 'Cabbages. That's for me – the clean slice for now.'

'At least,' I say. 'The running's over.'

'No,' he says. 'It's never over. You must run. In the end, it's everybody, running. Maybe you'll come back, running still. Look in time for life that suits. Fraternity – it isn't in our nature. The sorority, at first, perhaps... Humans prefer to battle. Victory gives satisfaction, moving on. It's always best to win. You must be ready for a scamper.'



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