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# Someone to Disturb

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In those days, the doorbell didn't ring often, and if it did I would draw back into the body of the house. Only at a persistent ring would I creep over the carpets, as if there were someone to disturb, and make my way to the front door with its spyhole. We were big on bolts and shutters, deadlocks and mortises, safety chains and windows that were high and barred. Through the spyhole I saw a distraught man in a crumpled, silver-grey suit: thirties, Asian. He had dropped back from the door, and was looking about him, at the closed and locked door opposite, and up the dusty marble stairs. He patted his pockets, took out a balled-up handkerchief, and rubbed it across his face. He looked so fraught that his sweat could have been tears. I opened the door.

At once he raised his hands as if to show he was unarmed, his handkerchief dropping like a white flag. 'Madam!' Ghastly pale I must have looked, under the light that dappled the tiled walls with swinging shadows. But then he took a breath, tugged at his creased jacket, ran a hand through his hair and conjured up his business card. 'Muhammad Ijaz. Import-Export. I am so sorry to disturb your afternoon. I am totally lost. Would you permit use of your telephone?'

I stood aside to let him in. No doubt I smiled. Given what would ensue, I must suppose I did. 'Of course. If it's working today.'

I walked ahead and he followed, talking; an important deal, he had almost closed it, visit to client in person necessary, time – he worked up his sleeve and consulted a fake Rolex – time running out; he had the address – again he patted his pockets – but the office is not where it should be. He spoke into the telephone in rapid Arabic, fluent, aggressive, his eyebrows shooting up, finally shaking his head; he put down the receiver, looked at it in regret; then up at me, with a sour smile. Weak mouth, I thought. Almost a handsome man, but not: slim, sallow, easily thrown. 'I am in your debt, madam,' he said. 'Now I must dash.'

I wanted to offer him a what – bathroom break? Comfort stop? I had no idea how to phrase it. The absurd words 'wash and brush up' came into my mind. But he was already heading for the door – though from the way the call had concluded I thought they might not be so keen to see him as he was to see them. 'This crazy city,' he said. 'They are always digging up the streets and moving them. I am so sorry to break in on your privacy.' In the hall, he darted another glance around and up the stairs. 'Only the British will ever help you.' He skidded across the hall and prised open the outer door with its heavy ironwork screen; admitting, for a moment, the dull roar of traffic from Medina Road. The door swung back; he was gone. I closed the hall door discreetly, and melted into the oppressive hush. The air-conditioner rattled away, like an old relative with a loose cough. The air was heavy with insecticide; sometimes I sprayed it as I walked, and it fell about me like bright mists, veils. I resumed my phrasebook and tape. *Fifth Lesson: I'm living in Jeddah. I'm busy today. God give you strength!*

When my husband came home in the afternoon I told him: 'A lost man was here. Pakistani. Businessman. I let him in to phone.' My husband was silent. The air-conditioner hacked away. He walked into the shower, having evicted the cockroaches. Walked out again, dripping, naked, lay on the bed, stared at the ceiling. Next day I swept the business card into a bin.

In the afternoon the doorbell rang again. Ijaz had come back, to apologise, to explain, to thank me for rescuing him. I made him some instant coffee and he sat down and told me about himself.

It was then June 1983. I had been in Saudi Arabia for six months. My husband worked for a Toronto-based company of consulting geologists, and had been seconded by them to the Ministry of Mineral Resources. Most of his colleagues were housed in family 'compounds' of various sizes, but single men and childless couples like ourselves had to take what they could get. This was our second flat. The American bachelor who had occupied it before had been moved out in haste. Upstairs, in this block of four flats, lived a Saudi civil servant with his wife and baby; the other flat upstairs was empty; on the ground floor across the hall from us lived a Pakistani accountant who worked for a government minister, handling his personal finances. Meeting the womenfolk in the hall or on the stairs – one blacked-out head to toe, one partly veiled – the bachelor had livened up their lives by calling 'Hello!' Or possibly 'Hi there!'

There was no suggestion of further impertinence. But a complaint had been made, he vanished, and we were sent to live there instead. The flat was small by Saudi standards. It had beige carpets and off-white wallpaper on which there was a faint crinkled pattern, almost indiscernible. The windows were guarded by heavy wooden shutters which you cranked down by turning a handle on the inside. Even with the shutters up it was dim and I needed the strip lights on all day. The rooms were closed off from each other by double doors of dark wood, heavy like coffin lids. It was like living in a funeral home, with samples stacked around you, and insect opportunists frying themselves on the lights.

He was a graduate of a Miami business school, Ijaz said, and his business, his main business just now, was bottled water. Had the deal gone through, yesterday? He was evasive – obviously, there was nothing simple about it. He waved a hand – give it time, give it time.

I had no friends in this city as yet. Social life, such as it was, centred on private houses; there were no cinemas, theatres or lecture halls. There were sports grounds, but women could not attend them. No 'mixed gatherings' were allowed. The Saudis did not mix with foreign workers. They looked down on them as necessary evils, though white-skinned, English-speaking expatriates were at the top of the pecking order. Others – Ijaz, for example – were 'Third Country Nationals', a label that exposed them to every kind of truculence, insult and daily complication. Indians and Pakistanis staffed the shops and small businesses. Filipinos worked on building sites. Men from Thailand cleaned the streets. Bearded Yemenis sat on the pavement outside lock-up shops, their skirts rucked up, their hairy legs thrust out, their flip-flops inches from the whizzing cars.

I am married, Ijaz said, and to an American; you must meet her. Maybe, he said, maybe you could do something for her, you know? What I foresaw at best was the usual Jeddah arrangement, of couples shackled together. Women had no motive power in this city; they had no driving licences, and only the rich had drivers. So couples who wanted to visit must do it together. I didn't think Ijaz and my husband would be friends. Ijaz was too restless and nervy. He laughed at nothing. He was always twitching his collar and twisting his feet in their scuffed Oxfords, always tapping the fake Rolex; always apologising. Our apartment is down by the port, he said, with my sister-in-law and my brother, but he's back in Miami just now, and my mother's here just now for a visit, and my

wife from America, and my son and my daughter, aged six, aged eight. He reached for his wallet and showed me a strange-looking, steeple-headed little boy. ‘Saleem.’

When he left, he thanked me again for trusting him to come into my house. Why, he said, he might have been anybody. But it is not the British way to think badly of needy strangers. At the door he shook my hand. That’s that, I thought. Part of me thought: it had better be.

For one was always observed: overlooked, without precisely being seen, recognised. My Pakistani neighbour Yasmin, to get between my flat and hers, would fling a scarf over her rippling hair, then peep round the door; with nervous, pecking movements she hopped across the marble, head swivelling from side to side, in case someone should choose that very moment to shoulder through the heavy street door. Sometimes, irritated by the dust that blew under the door and banked up on the marble, I would go out into the hall with a long broom. My male Saudi neighbour would come down from the first floor on his way out to his car and step over my brushstrokes without looking at me, his head averted. He was according me invisibility, as a mark of respect to another man’s wife.

I was not sure that Ijaz accorded me this respect. Our situation was anomalous and ripe for misunderstanding: I had an afternoon caller. He probably thought that only the kind of woman who took a lot of risks with herself would let a stranger into her house. Yet I could not guess what he probably thought. Surely a Miami business school, surely his time in the West, had made my attitude seem more normal than not? His talk was relaxed now he knew me, full of feeble jokes that he laughed at himself; but then there was the jiggling of his foot, the pulling of his collar, the tapping of his fingers. I had noticed, listening to my tape, that his situation was anticipated in the 19th Lesson: *I gave the address to my driver, but when we arrived, there wasn’t any house at this address.* I hoped to show by my brisk friendliness what was only the truth, that our situation could be simple, because I felt no attraction to him at all; so little that I felt apologetic about it. That is where it began to go wrong: my feeling that I must bear out the national character he had given me, and that I must not slight him or refuse a friendship, in case he thought it was because he was a Third Country National.

For his second visit, and his third, were an interruption, almost an irritation. Having no choice in that city, I had decided to cherish my isolation, coddle it. I was ill in those days, and subject to a fierce drug regime which gave me blinding headaches, made me slightly deaf and, though I was hungry, unable to eat. The drugs were expensive and had to be imported from England; my husband’s company brought them in by courier. Word of this leaked out, and the company wives decided I was taking fertility drugs; but I did not know this, and my ignorance made our conversations peculiar and, to me, slightly menacing. Why were they always talking, on the occasions of forced company sociability, about women who’d had miscarriages but now had a bouncing babe in the buggy? An older woman confided that her two were adopted; I looked at them and thought: Jesus, where from, the zoo? My Pakistani neighbour also joined in the cooing over the offspring that I would have shortly. She was in on the rumours, but I put her hints down to the fact that she was carrying her first child and wanted company. I saw her most mornings for an interval of coffee and chat, and I would rather steer her to talking about Islam, which was easy enough; she was an educated woman and keen to instruct. Monday, 6 June: ‘Spent two hours with my neighbour,’ my diary says, ‘widening the cultural gap.’

Next day, my husband brought home air tickets and my exit visa for our first home leave, which was seven weeks away. Thursday, 9 June: ‘Found a white hair in my head.’ At home there was a general election, and we sat up through the night to listen to the results on the BBC World Service. When we turned out the light, the grocer’s daughter jiggled through my dreams to the strains of

'Lillibulero'. Friday was a holiday, and we slept undisturbed till the noon prayer call. Ramadan began. Wednesday, 15 June: 'Read *The Twyborn Affair* and vomited sporadically.'

On the 16th our neighbours across the hall left for pilgrimage, robed in white. They rang our doorbell before they left: 'Is there anything we can bring you from Mecca?' 19 June saw me desperate for change, moving the furniture around the sitting-room and recording 'not much improvement'. I write that I am prey to 'unpleasant and intrusive thoughts', but I do not say what they are. I describe myself as 'hot, sick and morose'. By 4 July I must have been happier, because I listened to the *Eroica* while doing the ironing. But on the morning of 10 July, I got up first, put the coffee on, and went into the sitting-room to find that the furniture had been trying to move itself back. An armchair was leaning to the left, as if executing some tipsy dance; at one side its base rested on the carpet, but the other side was a foot in the air, and balanced finely on the rim of a flimsy wastepaper basket. Open-mouthed, I shot back into the bedroom; it was the Eid holiday, and my husband was half-awake. I gibbered at him. Silent, he rose, put on his glasses, and followed me. He stood in the doorway of the sitting-room. He looked around and told me without hesitation it had nothing to do with him. He walked into the bathroom. I heard him close the door, curse the cockroaches, switch on the shower. I said later: I must be walking in my sleep. Do you think that's it? Do you think I did it? 12 July: 'Execution dream again.'

The trouble was, Ijaz knew I was at home; how could I be going anywhere? One afternoon I left him standing in the hall, while he pressed and pressed the doorbell, and next time, when I let him in, he asked me where I had been; when I said, 'Ah, sorry, I must have been with my neighbour,' I could see he did not believe me, and he looked at me so sorrowfully that my heart went out to him. Jeddah fretted him, it galled him, and he missed, he said, America, he missed his visits to London, he must go soon, take a break; when was our leave, perhaps we might meet up? I explained I did not live in London, which surprised him; he seemed to suspect this was an evasion, like my failure to answer the door. 'Because I could get an exit visa,' he said again. 'Meet up there. Without all this ...' He gestured at the coffin-lid doors, the heavy, wilful furniture.

He made me laugh that day, telling me about his first girlfriend, his American girlfriend whose nickname was Patches. It was easy to picture her, sassy and suntanned, astonishing him one day by pulling off her top, bouncing her bare breasts at him and putting an end to his wan virginity. The fear he felt, the terror of touching her ... his shameful performance ... recalling it, he knuckled his forehead. I was charmed, I suppose. How often does a man tell you these things? I told my husband, hoping to make him laugh, but he didn't. Often, to be helpful, I hoovered up the cockroaches before his return from the ministry. He shed his clothes and headed off. I heard the splash of the shower. Nineteenth Lesson: *Are you married? Yes, my wife is with me, she's standing there in the corner of the room.* I imagined the cockroaches, dark and flailing in the dust bag.

I went back to the dining table, on which I was writing a comic novel. It was a secret activity, which I never mentioned to the company wives, and barely mentioned to myself. I scribbled under the strip light, until it was time to drive out for food shopping. You had to shop between sunset prayers and night prayers; if you mistimed it, then at the first prayer call the shops slammed down their shutters, trapping you inside, or outside in the wet heat of the car park. The malls were patrolled by volunteers from the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Elimination of Vice.

At the end of July, Ijaz brought his family for tea. Mary-Beth was a small woman but seemed swollen beneath the skin; spiritless, freckled, limp, she was a faded redhead who seemed huddled into herself, unused to conversation. A silent daughter with eyes like dark stars had been trussed up for the visit in a frilly white dress. At six, steeple-headed Saleem had lost his baby fat, and his movements were tentative as if his limbs were snappable. His eyes were watchful; Mary-Beth

hardly met my gaze at all. What had Ijaz told her? That he was taking her to see a woman who was something like he'd like her to be? It was an unhappy afternoon. I can only have got through it because I was buoyed by an uprush of anticipation; my bags were packed for our flight home. A day earlier, when I had gone into the spare room where I kept my clothes, I had met another dismaying sight. The doors of the fitted wardrobe, which were large and solid like the other coffin lids, had been removed from their hinges; they had been replaced, but hung by the lower hinges only, so that their upper halves flapped like the wings of some ramshackle flying machine.

On 1 August we left King Abdul Aziz International Airport in an electrical storm, and had a bumpy flight. I was curious about Mary-Beth's situation and hoped to see her again, though another part of me hoped that she and Ijaz would simply vanish.

I didn't return to Jeddah till the very end of November, having left my book with an agent. Just before our leave I had met my Saudi neighbour, a young mother taking a part-time literature course at the women's university. Education for women was regarded as a luxury, an ornament, a way for a husband to boast of his broadmindedness; Munira couldn't even begin to do her assignments, and I took to going up to her flat in the late mornings and doing them for her, while she sat on the floor in her negligée, watching Egyptian soaps on TV and eating sunflower seeds. We three women had become mid-morning friends; all the better for them to watch me, I thought, and discuss me when I'm gone. It was easier for Yasmin and me to go upstairs, because to come down Munira had to get kitted out in full veil and abaya; again, that treacherous, hovering moment on the public territory of the staircase, where a man might burst through from the street and shout 'Hi!' Yasmin was a delicate woman, like a princess in a Persian miniature; younger than myself, she was impeccably soignée, finished with a flawless glaze of good manners and restraint. Munira was 19, with coarse, eager good looks, a pale skin, and a mane of hair that crackled with static and seemed to lead a vital, separate life; her laugh was a raucous cackle. She and Yasmin sat on cushions but gave me a chair; they insisted. They served Nescafé in my honour, though I would have preferred a sludgy local brew. I had learned the crude effectiveness of caffeine against migraine; some nights, sleepless, pacing, I careened off the walls, and only the dawn prayer call sent me to bed, still thinking furiously of books I might write.

Ijaz rang the doorbell on 6 December. He was so very pleased to see me after my long leave; beaming, he said: 'Now you are more like Patches than ever.' I felt a flare of alarm; nothing, nothing had been said about this before. I was slimmer, he said, and looked well: my prescription drugs had been cut down, and I had been exposed to some daylight, I supposed that was what was doing it. But: 'No, there is something different about you,' he said. One of the company wives had said the same. She thought, no doubt, that I had conceived my baby at last.

I led Ijaz into the sitting-room, while he trailed me with compliments, and made the coffee. 'Maybe it's my book,' I said, sitting down. 'You see, I've written a book . . . ' My voice tailed off. This was not his world. No one read books in Jeddah. You could buy anything in the shops except alcohol or a bookcase. Yasmin, though she was an English graduate, said she had never read a book since her marriage; she was too busy organising supper parties every night. I have had a little success, I explained, or I hope for a little success, I have written a novel you see, and an agent has taken it on.

'It is a storybook? For children?'

'For adults.'

'You did this during your vacation?'

‘No, I was always writing it.’ I felt deceitful. I was writing it when I didn’t answer the doorbell.

‘Your husband will pay to have it published for you.’

‘No, with luck someone will pay me. A publisher. The agent hopes he can sell it.’

‘This agent, where did you meet him?’

I could hardly say: in the *Writers’ & Artists’ Yearbook*. ‘In London. At his office.’

‘But you do not live in London,’ Ijaz said, as if laying down an ace. He was out to find something wrong with my story. ‘Probably he is no good. He may steal your money.’

I saw of course that, in his world, the term ‘agent’ would cover some broad, unsavoury categories. But what about ‘Import-Export’, as written on his business card? That didn’t sound to me like the essence of probity. I wanted to argue; I was still upset about Patches; without warning, Ijaz seemed to have changed the terms of engagement between us. ‘I don’t think so. I haven’t given him money. His firm, it’s well known.’

‘Their office is where?’ Ijaz sniffed, and I pressed on, trying to make my case; though why did I think that being on William IV Street was a guarantee of moral worth? Ijaz knew London well. ‘Charing Cross Tube?’ He still looked affronted. ‘Near Trafalgar Square?’

Ijaz grunted. ‘You went to this premises alone?’

I couldn’t placate him. I gave him a biscuit. I didn’t expect him to understand what I was up to, but he seemed aggrieved that another man had entered my life.

‘How is Mary-Beth?’ I asked.

‘She has some kidney disease.’

I was shocked. ‘Is it serious?’

He raised his shoulders; not a shrug, more a rotation of the joints, as if easing some old ache. ‘She must go back to America for treatment. It’s OK. I’m getting rid of her anyway.’

I looked away. I hadn’t imagined this. ‘I’m sorry you’re unhappy.’

‘You see, really I don’t know what’s the matter with her,’ he said testily. ‘She is always miserable and moping.’

‘You know, this is not the easiest place for a woman to live.’

But did he know? Irritated, he said: ‘She wanted a big car. So I got a big car. What more does she want me to do?’

6 December: ‘Ijaz stayed too long,’ the diary says. The next day he was back. After the way he had spoken of his wife – and the way he had compared me to dear old Patches from his Miami days – I didn’t think I should see him again. But he had hatched a scheme and he wasn’t going to let it go. I should come to a dinner party with my husband and meet his family and some of his business

contacts. He had been talking about this project before my leave and I knew he set great store by it. I wanted, if I could, to do him some good; he would appear to his customers to be more a man of the world if he could arrange an international gathering, if – let's be blunt – he could produce some white friends. Now the time had come. His sister-in-law was already cooking, he said. I wanted to meet her; I admired these diaspora Asians, their polyglot enterprise, the way they withstood rebuffs, and I wanted to see if she was more Western or Eastern or what. 'We have to arrange the transportation,' Ijaz said. 'I shall come Thursday, when your husband is here. Four o'clock. To give him directions.' I nodded. No use drawing a map. They might move the streets again.

The meeting of 8 December was not a success. Ijaz was late, but didn't seem to know it. My husband dispensed the briefest host's courtesies, then sat down firmly in his armchair, which was the one that had tried to levitate. He seemed, by his watchful silence, ready to put an end to any nonsense, from furniture or guests or any other quarter. Sitting on the edge of the sofa, Ijaz flaked his baklava over his lap, he juggled with his fork and jiggled his coffee cup. After our dinner party, he said, almost the next day, he was flying to America on business. 'I shall route via London. Just for some recreation. Just to relax, three-four days.'

My husband must have stirred himself to ask if he had friends there. 'Very old friend,' Ijaz said, brushing crumbs to the carpet. 'Living at Trafalgar Square. You know it?'

My heart sank; it was a physical feeling, of the months falling away from me, months in which I'd had little natural light. When Ijaz left – and he kept hovering on the threshold, giving further and better street directions – I didn't know what to say, so I went into the bathroom, kicked out the cockroaches and cowered under the stream of tepid water. Wrapped in a towel, I lay on the bed in the dark. I could hear my husband – I hoped it was he, and not the armchair – moving around in the sitting-room. Sometimes in those days when I closed my eyes I felt that I was looking back into my own skull. I could see the hemispheres of my brain. They were convoluted and the colour of putty.

The family apartment down by the port was filled with cooking smells and crammed with furniture. There were photographs on every surface, carpets laid on carpets. It was a hot night, and the air-conditioners choked and gurgled, spitting out water, coughing up lungfuls of mould spores, blights. The table linen was limp and heavily fringed, and I kept fingering these fringes, which felt like nylon fur, like the ears of a teddy bear; they comforted me, though I felt electric with tension. At the table a vast lumpen elder presided, a woman with a long chomping jaw; she was like Quentin Massys's Ugly Duchess, except in a spangled sari. The sister-in-law was a bright, brittle woman, who gave a sarcastic lilt to all her phrases. I could see why; it was evident, from her knowing looks, that Ijaz had talked about me, and set me up in some way; if he was proposing me as his next wife, I offered little improvement on the original. Her scorn became complete when she saw I barely touched the food at my elbow; I kept smiling and nodding, demurring and deferring, nibbling a parsley leaf and sipping my Fanta. I wanted to eat, but she might as well have offered me stones on a doily. Did Ijaz think, as the Saudis did, that Western marriages meant nothing? That they were entered impulsively, and on impulse broken? Did he assume my husband as keen to offload me as he was to lose Mary-Beth? From his point of view the evening was not going well. He had expected two supermarket managers, he told us, important men with spending power: now night prayers were over, the traffic was on the move again, all down Palestine Road and along the Corniche the traffic lights were turning green, from Thumb Street to the Pepsi flyover the city was humming, but where were they? Sweat dripped from his face. Fingers jabbed the buttons of the telephone. 'OK, he is delayed? He has left? He is coming now?' He rapped down the receiver, then gazed at the phone as if willing it to chirp back at him, like some pet fowl. 'Time means nothing here,' he joked, pulling at his collar. The sister-in-law shrugged and turned down

her mouth. She never rested, but passed airily through the room in peach chiffon, each time returning from the kitchen with another laden tray; out of sight, presumably, some oily skivvy was weeping into the dishes. The silent elder put away a large part of the food, pulling the plates towards her and working through systematically till the pattern showed beneath her questing fingers; you looked away, and when you looked back the plate was clean. Sometimes, the phone rang: 'OK, they're nearly here,' Ijaz called. Ten minutes, and his brow furrowed again. 'Maybe they're lost.'

'Sure they're lost,' sister-in-law sang. She sniggered; she was enjoying herself. Nineteenth Lesson, translate these sentences: *So long as he holds the map the wrong way up, he will never find the house. They started travelling this morning, but have still not arrived.* It seemed a hopeless business, trying to get anywhere, and the textbook confessed it. I was not really learning Arabic, of course, I was too impatient; I was leafing through the lessons, looking for phrases that might be useful if I could say them. We stayed long, long into the evening, waiting for the bottled-water impresarios; in the end, wounded and surly, Ijaz escorted us to the door. I heard my husband take in a breath of wet air. 'We'll never have to do it again,' I consoled him. In the car, 'You have to feel for him,' I said. No answer.

13 December: my diary records that I am oppressed by 'the darkness, the ironing and the smell of drains'. I could no longer play my *Eroica* tape because it had twisted itself up in the innards of the machine. In my idle moments I had summarised 40 chapters of *Oliver Twist* for the use of my upstairs neighbour. Three days later I was 'horribly unstable and restless', and reading the *Lyttelton/Hart-Davis Letters*. Later that week I was cooking with Yasmin. I recorded 'an afternoon of greying pain'. All the same, Ijaz was out of the country and I realised I breathed easier when I was not anticipating the ring of the doorbell.

16 December: I was reading *The Philosopher's Pupil* and visiting my own student upstairs. Munira took my 40 chapter summaries, flicked through them, yawned, and switched on the TV. 'What is a workhouse?' I tried to explain about the English Poor Law, but her expression glazed; she had never heard of poverty. She yelled out for her servant, an ear-splitting yell, and the girl – a beaten-down Indonesian – brought in Munira's daughter for my diversion. A heavy, solemn child, she was beginning to walk, or stamp, under her own power, her hands flailing for a hold on the furniture. She would fall on her bottom with a grunt, haul herself up again by clutching the sofa; the cushions slid away from her, she tumbled backwards, banged her large head with its corkscrew curls on the floor, and lay there wailing. Munira laughed at her: 'White nigger, isn't it?' She didn't get her flat nose from my side, she explained. Or those fat lips either. It's my husband's people, but of course they're blaming me.

2 January 1984: we went to a dark little restaurant off Khalid bin Walid Street, where we were seated behind a lattice screen in the 'family area'. In the main part of the room men were dining with each other. The business of eating out was more a gesture than a pleasure; you would gallop through the meal, because without wine and its rituals there was nothing to slow it, and the waiters, who had no concept that a man and woman might eat together for more than sustenance, prided themselves on picking up your plate as soon as you had finished and slapping down another, and getting you back as soon as possible onto the dusty street. That dusty orange glare, perpetual, like the lighting of a bad sci-fi film; the constant snarl and rumble of traffic; I had become afraid of traffic accidents, which were frequent, and every time we drove out at night I saw the gaping spaces beneath bridges and flyovers; they seemed to me like amphitheatres in which the traffic's casualties enacted, flickering, their final moments. Sometimes, when I set foot outside the apartment, I started to shake. I blamed it on the drugs I was taking; the dose had been increased again. When I saw the other wives they didn't seem to be having these difficulties. They talked about paddling pools and former lives they had led in Hong Kong. They got up little souk

trips to buy jewellery, so that sliding on their scrawny tanned arms their bracelets clinked and chimed, like ice cubes knocking together.

On Valentine's Day we went to a cheese party; you had to imagine the wine. I was bubbling with happiness: a letter had come from William IV Street, to tell me my novel had been sold. Spearheading his Edam with a cocktail stick, my husband's boss loomed over me: 'Hubby tells me you're having a book published. That must be costing him a pretty penny.'

Ijaz, I assumed, was still in America. After all, he had his marital affairs to sort out, as well as business. He doesn't reappear in the diary till 17 March, St Patrick's Day, when I recorded: 'Phone call, highly unwelcome.' For politeness, I asked how business was; as ever, he was evasive. He had something else to tell me: 'I've got rid of Mary-Beth. She's gone.'

'What about the children?'

'Saleem is staying with me. The girl, it doesn't matter. She can have her if she wants.'

'Ijaz, look, I must say goodbye. I hear the doorbell.' What a lie.

'Who is it?'

What, did he think I could see through the wall? For a second I was so angry I forgot there was only a phantom at the door. 'Perhaps my neighbour,' I said meekly.

'See you soon,' Ijaz said.

I decided that night I could no longer bear it. I did not feel I could bear even one more cup of coffee together. But I had no means of putting an end to it, and for this I excused myself, saying I had been made helpless by the society around me. I was not able to bring myself to speak to Ijaz directly. I still had no power in me to snub him. But the mere thought of him made me squirm inside with shame, at my own general cluelessness, and at the sad little lies he had told to misrepresent his life, and the situation into which we had blundered; I thought of the sister-in-law, her peach chiffon and her curled lip.

Next day when my husband came home I sat him down and instigated a conversation. I asked him to write to Ijaz and tell him not to call on me any more, as I was afraid that the neighbours had noticed his visits and might draw the wrong conclusion: which, as he knew, could be dangerous to us all. My husband heard me out. You need not write much, I pleaded, he will get the point. I should be able to sort this out for myself, but I am not allowed to, it is beyond my power, or it seems to be. I heard my own voice, jangled, grating; I was doing what I had wriggled so hard to avoid, I was sheltering behind the mores of this society, offloading the problem I had created for myself in a way that was feminine, weak and spiteful.

My husband saw all this. Not that he spoke. He got up, took his shower. He lay in the rattling darkness, in the bedroom where the wooden shutters blocked out the merest chink of afternoon glare. I lay beside him. The evening prayer call woke me from my doze. My husband had risen to write the letter. I remember the snap of the lock as he closed it in his briefcase.

I have never asked him what he put in the letter. Whatever it was, it worked. There was nothing – not a chastened note pushed under the door, nor a regretful phone call. Just silence. The diary continues but Ijaz exits from it. I read *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Present and The Past*, and *The Bottle Factory Outing*. The company's post-office box went missing, with all the incoming mail in it. You

would think a post-office box was a fixed thing and wouldn't go wandering of its own volition, but it was many days before it was found, at a distant post office, and I suppose a post box can move if furniture can. We drifted towards our next leave. 10 May: we attended a farewell party for an escapee whose contract was up. 'Fell over while dancing and sprained my ankle.' 11 May: with my ankle strapped up, 'watched *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*'.

I had much more time to serve in Jeddah. I didn't leave finally till the spring of 1986. By that time we had been rehoused twice more, shuttled around the city and finally outside it to a compound off the freeway. I never heard of my visitor again. The woman trapped in the flat on the corner of Al-Suror Street seems a relative stranger, and I ask myself what she should have done, how she could have managed it better. She should have thrown those drugs away, for one thing; they are nowadays a medication of last resort, because everybody knows they make you frightened, deaf and sick. But about Ijaz? She should never have opened the door in the first place. Discretion is the better part of valour; she's always said that. Even after all this time it's hard to grasp exactly what happened. I try to write it as it occurred, but I find myself changing the names to protect the guilty. I wonder if Jeddah left me for ever off-kilter in some way, tilted from the vertical and condemned to see life skewed. I can never be certain that doors will stay closed and on their hinges, and I do not know, when I turn out the lights at night, whether the house is quiet as I left it or the furniture is frolicking in the dark.

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