

# Baghdad

My wife was nailed to the TV that night. They were showing news about the bombings in Iraq again. She was watching the news with her mouth open and shouted "Marcus, come and see! Look! How terrible..."

The TV shows a targeting screen of a missile. You can see the yellowish sand covering the screen, and in the middle of the screen some buildings that could be a residential area. Small houses everywhere. Perhaps a few schools. The missile approaches, adjusts its direction a bit and some kind of a wide building comes to the center of the screen. Closer. Closer. You can almost see people living inside their houses.

And suddenly the screen turns into snow storm noise as the missile hits its target.

My wife's mouth is still open, but her lower lip trembles slightly. She shuts her eyes for a second and goes into a kitchen and fishes a beer from the fridge. Now her eyes are flooded with tears. "I can't believe its happening again", she says.

That night I had a dream about Saddam Hussein.

I wake up in a comfortable, huge bed with a canopy over it and all. The room is perfectly clean and marble walls surround me. By the bedside is a fresh pot of flowers. Close by stands a man that could be my bodyguard. Gentle looking, Arabian man, maybe in his late forties. His expression is sharp, but his body needs a workout.

"Good morning, Sir" he says bowing slightly. He doesn't seem to know which smile to choose. He is wearing a green uniform with purple shoulder marks. No beret. "My name is Rahim."

"Good morning," I say, alerted. "Where am I, if I may ask?"

"You are in the West Wing of the Most Compassionate One's Palace. Perhaps this sounds strange to you, but we also have a West Wing here."

"I do not find that strange at all."

"My name means 'Servant of the Most Compassionate One'. Actually I am his cousin. Too bad he isn't exactly a family man," he says looking sad.

"In fact, He is now having his everyday morning swim. Would you like to join him?"

I nod silently, yawning. *What on earth am I doing here?*

He leads me from the West Wing to a large hall. He is quite a swift walker, this Mr. Rahim. The place has a wonderful scent of some kind of incense and flowers. At every pillar stands a flower pot, filled with blooming flowers with vibrant colours. A cool breeze hits my cheeks.

As we arrive to the olympic sized swimming pool, The Most Compassionate One is having his morning swim. He swims in a strange way, doing backstrokes that look most inefficient. Age is already showing it's marks and his belly is a little on the big side, but otherwise he is not a bad looking fellow.

Rahim whispers to my ear "He has back problems. The pain is sometimes so bad that he screams. Especially at night. He has massage three times per day by one of the ladies, but it doesn't always work. He has tried everything, strong painkillers, even acupuncture, but he seems to find no relief. His morning swim is the only thing that keeps him on his feet."

He rises from the pool, without looking either at me or Rahim. Rahim walks swiftly to him with a bathrobe. The Most Compassionate looks angrily at him and grabs the bathrobe before he has a chance to offer it to him. Rahim does a complicated body movement that is something between a formal salute and a look of a puppy that just received a strong slap.

"Very sorry, he doesn't know how to behave at all." The Most Compassionate One comments. "Have you even had breakfast?"

"I have not, but I'm fine." I reply without knowing what to say.

"Come, let's have some together," he says without looking into my eyes. He shouts something to Rahim with most angry voice and Rahim attempts a salute and looks like an unhappy puppy again.

I realize the bathrobe doesn't quite become him, but soon he changes into his track suit. As I look at him, he smiles at me, "What? Do you think we wear uniforms all the time? You don't know how hot it gets here. You see, we have no air-conditioning at all. My family says air conditioning doesn't suit a palace like this. I don't understand them, such bunch of idiots."

"Quite a guy", I think silently.

After changing into his purple track suit, he leads me to the dining room which is crowded with servants, all of them beautiful western women. He looks at them for a while, and then chooses a seat at a table nearest to the window. Behind him the window opens to a beautiful view of an orchard. It has everything you might imagine. Bananas, apple trees, cherry trees. In the center of the garden is a pond scattered with some Zen looking rocks.

Servants begin to gather around. They are efficient and quick and all of them wear their blond hair tied up, knotted. Then it strikes me that all of them wear nothing but aprons. "Wow... Quite a guy." I think again.

"The scenery isn't so bad, don't you agree, my Marcus?" he says and then bursts into a most heartwarming laugh. I laugh too, without knowing what to say. "Say, why don't you try one of them?" he says to me and smiles. Raising his index finger he continues, "But not before breakfast" and bursts into laughter again.

The servants begin to fill the table with almost all possible foods one could imagine. Various beef and pork, eggs, lamb sandwiches and ham, baskets full of fruits and cream cakes. Sherbet.

A lack of vegetables makes me wonder. Perhaps, he doesn't like vegetables. Servants bring a box of cigars and a cup of steaming strong coffee to him. "Jamaican coffee is the best" he says, lifting the cup to his nose. But he doesn't look happy at all. He sips the thick black liquid, takes a cigar from the box and lights up.

"You might wonder why I invited you here," he says, looking into my eyes. I return a silent nod.

"Most people don't know it. But at the same time, I am an anti-person and a real person. And these two personalities are interlaced. Sometimes I don't know who I am at all." Again I don't know what to say, so I decide to nod.

"I called you here, because only you can solve the puzzle."

"I am not sure if I can do that" I reply honestly.

"Why not?"

"Well, first of all, I haven't studied even basic psychology. I don't know anything about unravelling the knots of the human mind. I have a wife and we are planning to have kids but we have decided to postpone that because I don't have enough income. I feel terrible because she really wants kids and I can't give her what she wants. All I can do is to live a simple life. I work hard everyday at my desk job and in the evening I watch TV with my wife. I'm afraid I have no wonderful insights of the human mind."

"But there you go!" he says, enthusiastically clapping his hands. "That's what I'm looking for. A person like you!"

Again he laughs. This time I get a little tired of his loud laughter.

"A person like you, is what I've been looking for. Only you can let me separate my two halves."

His face gets serious all of a sudden.

Then he smiles again, points at me with his finger and says "I know you, Marcus!" and then he suddenly holds my hand, like studying it. "By the way, you have nice looking skin" he states.

Rahim enters the room and says something I don't catch. This time Saddam says to him imitating American English "*Can't you leave me alone for a while, sonofabitch*" and turns to me.

"He can't tell a horse's ass from it's mouth. He is a moron. I can't understand my relatives at all. They are all idiots. They keep telling me I should follow the old family tradition but I don't care. What's the point?" he says as if to himself.

"Enough", he says and tips the table over, causing a huge rattle as dishes, forks and knives clatter onto the floor.

"Sorry about that. My morning tradition", he says with a blank face.

He smiles again and pats my back, saying "Come on, I'll show you something."

A dozen servants fly to the room to clean up the mess. They work with amazing silence and precision. I note some wonderfully formed legs and thighs and silky looking skin.

"Quite a guy" I say, this time aloud.

I follow him to his personal quarters that are located further up. "As you see, we have no lifts here, either. My family says lifts don't suit a palace like this," he says, looking exhausted climbing the stairs.

"I can understand a little now how you feel about your family", I say, after climbing the hard stone stairs fourteen floors worth.

We enter a simple looking, almost ascetic room.

"First I have to change clothes. Why don't you wait there and have something to drink. Make yourself at home" he says, and leaves the room.

I find myself alone again. I open the fridge and take a bottle of milk and empty it with one single gulp. The cool white liquid tastes fresh and delicious, if not especially sweet.

Outside I see the vast landscape of the desert. Far away the wind is blowing the sand around the dunes, causing a cloud moving slowly to the South. All is silent. Few trees are standing in the distance. The heat in the air causes distortions in the scenery.

A single layer of glass covers the round porthole in the wall. The thin screen looks anything but bullet proof.

A simple, beautifully polished desk. Leather chair behind it. I give it a try. Only one expensive looking gold pen lies on the table. Dunhill. It strikes me odd that there are no national symbols in this room. I feel an urge to look into his desk drawer but decide not to.

The Most Compassionate One comes back with a completely different look on his face. He is wearing his uniform with a beret and a pistol. I stand up from his chair and apologize, feeling a little afraid of his reaction.

"Don't be sorry at all."

He walks to the window, opens it and takes a deep breath of the dry desert air that fills the room. It's getting hot. Sweat is already forming to his forehead.

But now he looks sad. Maybe it's his uniform or beret that causes the expression. He sits onto his wooden chair in the corner, his body collapsing. I realize how big his belly is.

"Can you believe I haven't made love with a woman for over five years?" he finally says, sighing.

"This backache is terrible. I can barely walk." His face looks old and serious now.

"The world is exactly how you make it". And suddenly, a single tear pours down from his eye. His lower lip trembles, just like my wife's.

"And now, it's your turn to act," he cries suddenly, real sharp and his hand seeks his belt with an accustomed action, takes his pistol and fires a single shot at me. The pistol makes a hard, ear hurting boom. The bullet hits me in my chest but causes no pain. I cover the wound with my hands, but realize there is no blood. The bullet went right through me.

"That was a spiritual bullet," he says. "You are now, spiritually considering, dead. I've now taken your soul and you are at a complete loss. You are destined to live in a spiritual desert for the rest of your life.

My mouth drops open and I collapse on my knees. He then walks to me and puts a hand on my head and says "I know how it feels, but you'll get used to it. This is a real world, you see. This is how it feels to lose" he says, putting his pistol back to his holster.

I see waves of white sand flowing into the room through the window. He walks back to his wooden corner chair and sits, this time letting his body relax. "Inside me, there is a small boy talking to me" he mumbles and suddenly he falls asleep, his mouth drooping open. More sand flows into the room covering his legs.

Suddenly, I see something moving inside his throat and his jaw stretches open. His throat swallows and swallows. I hear his jaw displacing with a click and his skin stretches until his lips and cheeks tear. The child has two hands and tries to climb out of his mouth with some speed, like an early black and white comedy. The boy child has an adult face with a child's body.

The head, previously belonging to The Most Compassionate One, is now nothing but a mess of blood and mucus. His uniform is soaked in his own blood. His body shakes like jelly as the boy works his way out.

More sand pours into the room and covers more of the body. The bald boy finally emerges fully, naked. He has perfectly white skin and blue eyes. The child starts running around the room as if looking for something. Then he stops, nailing his huge blue eyes into me and stares.

Suddenly I realize that the child is me. At that moment I'm completely awake. My wife is sleeping next to me, breathing steadily. Her black hair is formed beautifully on her pillow. Her fingers tremble slightly.

Taking a sip of orange juice from the fridge, I turn the TV on. They show news of the bombings in Iraq. I think of all the people fighting and dying. And suddenly I realize that I have died too. I was shot with a spiritual bullet and I'm now in the desert.