

compelled in the old man's direction. As he approached, the old man turned and fixed his eyes on the young fighter. Kahlil realized the shepherd was not as old as he'd first thought. The shepherd suddenly got to his feet and extended a hand in greeting.

"My name's Nassir," he said. "I was sent to talk with you."

Kahlil found his heart beating fast. "I'm sorry," he said. "You must have the wrong person."

"No, you're the one."

"But you don't know me."

"That's what you think."

With a jolt, Kahlil wondered if this was a spy sent from the Beirut cell.

"You need not concern yourself. I'm not a spy," Nassir said with a humorous smile.

Kahlil felt disoriented. How could this man know what he was thinking?

He looked at Nassir and immediately felt at ease. He was surprised; he realized he had nothing to fear from this man.

"Would you join me for coffee?" Nassir asked.

Kahlil agreed, and within a few minutes they were seated at a small table. They were in the very same place Nassir and Hafaz had first sat so many years ago. Nassir put his cup down and looked directly at Kahlil.

"Kahlil, there's a heaviness in your heart and a disturbance in your mind. In such a state, a great opportunity awaits."

"How do you know my name?"

"I don't know. I just do."

Kahlil's mind was swamped with questions. "I don't understand," he said, shaking his head.

"You don't have to."

"What makes you think I have a heavy heart, and that my mind is disturbed?"

"I see it, that's all."

“See what?”

“The violent death of your brother, a death brought about because he questioned what he was doing, as you have now begun to do.”

Kahlil found himself shaking. “Who are you?”

“I’ve told you, I’m Nassir.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You’re right.” Nassir paused for a moment and looked at Kahlil, assessing him.

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve known things about people. At first I thought everyone had the same ability. Only as I grew older did I learn this was not the case. From time to time I find myself drawn to places where I meet certain people. When I see them, I know things about them. All of them are hungry for the truth and weary of deception. I live and work as a shepherd in the mountains with my brother. For years, I fought the Israelis. One day, sickened by the violence and bloodshed, I turned my back on it and went into the mountains to be alone, to think and to find the truth I needed to find.”

“You just walked away from it?”

“Yes.”

“And you never went back?”

“No.”

“Didn’t anyone try to track you down and bring you back?”

“No. Our unit was small, and made up of Lebanese who’d suffered at the hands of the Israelis. We were like a family.”

“It’s not that way anymore,” Kahlil said. “Now we have Iranians with us. They speak the truth for all Muslims who are engaged in the struggle against the ungodly. They direct us, and they’ll tolerate no doubt in the word of God. My brother’s misgivings led them to kill him.”

“What makes you think that what they say is the word of God?” Nassir asked.

“They say God doesn’t compromise with evil, and that evil should be destroyed using any means necessary. If the destruction

of evil means dying in the process, then it is better to die than to live in such an unholy world. Besides, if we become martyrs for the cause, the members of our families will be ushered into Paradise when the time comes, and we will be looked after by the virgins.”

“What do you think?”

Kahlil looked around, suddenly nervous.

“You’re safe here,” Nassir assured him.

“My brother was a good man. I think he’d begun to question whether the killing was accomplishing anything. He could see it was destroying the young men of our country, while the Israelis seemed to grow in strength and numbers. He also began questioning what he was taught by the Iranians. He asked me once if I had any idea how some men seemed to know so clearly what God wanted when he didn’t. I couldn’t answer his question. I’d never really thought about such things.”

“What do you think now?”

“I’m not sure. I certainly began to think about it after he raised it, but we never spoke of it again. What they did to my brother is no better than what the Israelis have done to the other members of my family. My brother fought and killed for what he believed in. How could anyone doubt him? And yet, these men held a gun to his head and shot him in front of me. That I cannot accept. These last days have been terrible. I used to be glad of the guidance of those who told me what to do, those that quoted the holy Koran and explained it’s meaning to me. I was glad I didn’t have to think and make up my own mind. Life was easier when I only had to follow instructions.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m not sure anymore. Could it be that the enemy we face is not really the enemy of nations and race, but the enemy of hatred, of power and unquestioned allegiance to our religion? Perhaps the enemy lies within us.”

Nassir looked at Kahlil and smiled softly. “You have said it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that your mind has begun to voice the questions that arise in your heart. Your doubt is the stirring of a desire for freedom. When that occurs, there’s a turning inward and the true meaning of religion may at last be known.”

“I want nothing else to do with religion!”

“I understand your feelings, but don’t allocate the meaning of religion to the narrow-minded and bigoted. As you realized for yourself, these people appear to be the most pious of men. Such piety is anathema to the teachings of the masters. These men are in the very hell they speak of, the hell they claim to avoid. They have no idea about what they’re doing, no idea about what they are teaching. They are the blind who lead the blind and as such are dangerous.”

“Why dangerous?”

“Somewhere deep within them is the knowledge that they’re asleep, that they don’t understand. That knowledge is the beginning of freedom. Those who are afraid cannot tolerate even the hint of such a thing. So, like sleepwalkers who give the appearance of being awake, they hurt themselves and others. Among them walk the masters who are awake. From time to time, the masters feel the stirring of the sleeper and are drawn to shake him into wakefulness.”

“Are you saying that all those involved in religion are asleep?”

“No, but perhaps most are.”

“How could that be? What about the mullahs, the holy ones, the wise teachers, those who are there to guide us and interpret the sacred words to us?”

“None are the true masters. There are exceptions, but they are so rare they are almost nonexistent.”

“And yet religion is supposed to be where truth is.”

“Why should it be?”

“I don’t know. It’s what I’ve been told.”

“By whom? A thief will try and convince you of his honesty, but are his words the truth?”

“Of course not.”

“So what is your own experience of these men, what they say and how they live?”

“I’m beginning to think that what they profess is not true; their hearts are cold while their words are on fire. Growing up, my brother and I knew some good mullahs who were our teachers.”

“I’m sure there are many good religious men. They do the best they can, but most of them are not awake; they’re not the masters I’m speaking of.”

“I still don’t see why.”

“When you look carefully, you’ll discover the religion of your forefathers is made from beliefs, some of which condone killing, torture and destruction. This should be an indicator that they did not understand what they were talking about. No master would advocate killing and torture, only the misguided and ignorant advocate such things.

“Belief is belief and has nothing to do with reality or the truth. It doesn’t matter what those beliefs are and how long they’ve been held, they are merely beliefs. What master would be interested in living and working within the constraints of an institution that professes to know things, when in fact it does not? For these reasons, the masters go largely unnoticed. They are found by those who are ready to awaken. They remain unknown to the sleepers.”

“Wasn’t Jesus a master?”

“Probably.”

“And Mohammed?”

“Who knows?”

“How can you tell?”

“It’s impossible to tell for sure. We have to go by what they say and by their actions, but even then there’s no way of knowing for certain. As I see it, truth is simple, not complex. Those who are asleep turn the knowledge of a master into beliefs. The beliefs are handed down through the generations and undergo changes that

take them further and further away from the original insights of the master. It could be said that masters know, while sleepwalkers wander lost in their illusions, lost in their beliefs. There's a danger in being a great teacher such as Jesus."

"Why?"

"When a teacher becomes well known, many seek him out. Amongst the sleepwalkers some are destined to awaken, others are not. Those who aren't become afraid of him, afraid of his power, afraid that his light will expose the pettiness they feel in themselves. Sometimes the fear becomes so strong that the most fearful will seek to destroy him. Most masters are not well known. They function best in obscurity, and their teachings are handed down in secret."

"Why in secret?"

"When the master speaks, those who are not close to awakening will not understand the teaching. So it remains hidden, hidden by ignorance.

"The master sees that life has an intrinsic harmony. It's a great dance, perfect in every way. That harmony, however, is not readily apparent to most people. Yet, when the time is right, there are those who go looking for someone who knows. Then, the open heart is rewarded with the guidance it seeks. Awakening, like everything else, is a matter of destiny. Awakening blossoms as the spiritual seeker matures, and then it ripens, ready to be plucked by the hand of the Creator."

"Are you suggesting that the spiritual seeker should make every effort to practice the teachings of a master?"

"No, the teachings are not meant to be followed or practiced at all. They're merely descriptions of an inner process, understood by those who are ready."

"I get the feeling you think beliefs are not useful."

"True. When a master speaks the truth, his words are merely a description of a process. All too often, the words are misinterpreted as instructions to be followed. These instructions become codified

into beliefs. The world is then divided between those who believe and those who don't. Belief is a source of conflict and bloodshed. Some of the worst atrocities the world has ever known were perpetrated by those who claim to follow the teachings of a master."

They sat quietly for a few minutes sipping coffee.

"I don't know what to do," Kahlil said. "My brother's dead, and he was the last of my family. I believed in what I did; now I'm not sure anymore. It's hard to keep focused on what's to be done. I feel hatred for those who killed him. For days, I've thought of how I could kill them. At the same time, I feel a strong bond with those in my cell. We've fought together and learned to depend on each other. I feel an allegiance to them. I can't let them down."

Nassir listened quietly; knowing there was nothing he could say. Kahlil would discover for himself what to do.

In the years that passed since that first meeting, they'd met twice in Tyre. Several times Kahlil had sought Nassir in the hills. The young man always came when he had questions. They'd sit and talk for hours and then he'd leave. Once in a while, he would bring friends with him. Nassir watched now as the two men made their way toward him.

Kahlil introduced his friend Tariq. Nassir greeted them then passed them a water skin. With practiced ease, they aimed streams of water into their mouths and slaked their thirst. For a while they sat quietly, the two younger men catching their breath. Nassir sat enveloped in the silence and the approaching darkness. The branches above stirred in the freshening breeze. Kahlil spoke.

"Our unit is moving from Tyre to Bent Jebail. Iranians and Syrians are joining the cells, and we're being divided. With the added numbers, we can launch concerted attacks from many locations at once. They've equipped us with more hand-launched rockets. There's talk of taking hostages and killing those of our own people who favor peace with the Israelis."

"Sounds like an escalation of hostilities," Nassir responded.

“Yes, there’s fear that peace negotiations are going on. They intend to make them unsuccessful.”

“What makes them think negotiations are going on?”

“The Israelis suddenly stopped their attacks a week ago without achieving an end to the rocket strikes across the border. For them to do so under these circumstances is unheard of.”

“What else?”

“There’s a lot of pressure on the political cells of South Beirut.”

“Where did it come from?”

“We don’t know for sure, but some think it’s from the Syrian government.”

“Why?”

“There’s a rumor our rocket attacks have upset something that’s under way. What could that be but peace?”

“Why are the Syrians and Iranians getting involved in the local cells?”

“The Iranians are hardliners; they don’t want any compromise with Israel or any of its allies. They’re afraid we’re getting soft, like my brother. By working with us directly in the field, they can keep an eye on us, keep us on track. They’re fanatics!”

“It makes us nervous,” Tariq said quietly. “They constantly quote the Koran, and we must study with a mullah who travels between the cells on a regular basis.”

“I see.”

“The Syrians who’ve joined our cells are also hardliners; they want nothing but the annihilation of Israel. Hizballah, the Party of God, is dependent on Syria for supplies and arms. So it must listen to the Syrian government, which is sometimes more moderate in its approach. Hizballah will not, however, always follow instructions.”

“Syria does not have complete control over us,” Kahlil added.

“What else?” Nassir asked.

“As I understand it, we’ve been told to ease up, reorganize, reconnoiter, and get in position to launch hit-and-run rocket attacks. We know very little beyond the activities of our own cell, but we’ve heard we’ll be working more closely with Hamas. They’ll work from inside Palestine while we work from outside.

“This gives us time to re-provision with rockets and other supplies. But if there’s any truth to the rumors, there may be something else behind Syria’s instructions to lay off for a while. There’s talk the American President may eventually come to Israel to address the Knesset.”

“I see.”

Once more they were quiet, each absorbed in his thoughts.

“You’ve been wondering how much longer you’ll stay.” Nassir said, voicing the question in Kahlil’s mind.

“I don’t know what to do. You are my teacher, and what you teach makes sense to me. But I’m not quite ready to give up what I’ve lived for, for so long.”

“If you’re meant to leave you will; if not, you won’t. No anxiety on your part can change what is to come. The grass does not resist the wind. And I am not a teacher, Kahlil.”

“You are to me!”

“No, I merely direct your attention to that which you already know. A teacher is someone who helps others learn something; knowledge is acquired. Look closely at our interactions. Nothing new is learned; nothing is acquired.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You’ve come here when you felt the need to do so. Usually, a question was present. A question arises in the mind and seeks resolution. There’s no resolution when you believe. The tension of the question still exists, while doubt remains at the heart of belief. The question is answered only when understanding dawns. That understanding is the recognition of something that has always been. And that which has

always been is truth.

“We’ve spoken of belief before. When you believe, you mistake words for reality. Truth, which always is, remains forever obscured by the beliefs we hold so firmly. Therefore, the understanding that is truth comes when beliefs fall away. This is the reverse of what teachers do.”

“So when you talk with us, you already know what we don’t?” Tariq asked.

“You think there’s someone over here who knows something. That is not the case. There is no one here, there is only the awareness of truth.

“So a true teacher,” Tariq continued, “if I understand you correctly, draws the student to the edge of understanding, and then somehow tickles the awareness into existence.”

Nassir chuckled quietly. “As I said, I don’t like the term ‘teacher’ because it has connotations not applicable to what we’ve been engaged in. Nevertheless, Tariq, you’ve put it well. We must be aware that words are merely vehicles to convey what lies beyond them, the reality itself. I have no interest in discussions about words, only the understanding to which they point. What you’ve said, however, is accurate.”

They talked for a while longer, then shared the meal Shamir had prepared. Before leaving, Nassir gave instructions on how to find him from Bent Jebail.



Ghost from the past

Jennifer Ramirez?” David was incredulous.
“Yes,” Jonathan said
“Are you sure?”

“Yes. She held a press conference in San Francisco an hour ago; it’s all over the news. The press is clamoring to hear from you. The switchboard is jammed with calls.”

David slowly spun the chair around, leaned back and looked out the window. His mind drifted back to the day he’d first met Jennifer Ramirez, some twenty one years ago. He’d been on holiday in San Francisco. They’d carried on an affair for two years. It had been one of the contributing factors in the demise of his first marriage. David had broken it off with the hope of working out the differences with his wife, but it hadn’t helped. That was the last time he’d seen Jennifer. He’d tried to get in touch with her, but had been unsuccessful. Once he had reached her mother, and she had simply told him that Jennifer had gone away. He had no idea that she’d had a child—his child. He was stunned.

“What are you going to do?” asked Jonathan.

David turned to face his friend. “I’ll talk to the people through the press,” he said quietly. “Let them know. Schedule it for seven this evening.” He wanted to talk with Sandra before then. “See if you can get in touch with Jennifer for me, will you? I’d like to speak with her. Let me know what you find.”

Jonathan nodded and left the office, closing the door

quietly behind him. David turned back and gazed into the world beyond the window, wondering about the daughter he'd never seen.

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Two hours later, David and Sandra sat across from each other in the library.

"Have you tried getting in touch with her?" Sandra asked.

"Jonathan couldn't get through to her. All communication is being routed through her lawyer. I want to talk with her and find out what happened. I'd like to help her in any way I can. I don't want to make it difficult for her or her daughter. The press is reporting that she left after our affair because she was pregnant and deeply hurt at the sudden end to our relationship. It was hard to leave her."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure. I want to talk with her and our daughter if I can. But, we'll have to see whether that's possible."

Sandra took David's hand. "My heart is with you," she said.

"Thank you, Sandra." He lifted her hand to his lips. "I want to know your feelings, any thoughts you might have. I want to be sure you're alright."

"It took place a long time ago," she said thoughtfully. "What happened, happened. Nothing can be done to change it. Besides, who am I to judge anyone? Your relationship with Jennifer was part of your life. She was someone you loved and, it seems, someone who loved you in return. How could I not understand?"

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Jennifer sat on the edge of her seat and watched the television. Her heart was beating fast, and she felt a lump of fear in her throat.

What had she done? She watched as David stepped to the podium and listened as he spoke.

“Twenty one years ago, I had a relationship with a woman named Jennifer Ramirez, a woman I loved. For two years we were lovers and friends. I cared for her deeply. But I was married at the time and my behavior, by the conventions of society, would be considered immoral. My actions hurt my wife deeply and brought suffering to all involved. I left Jennifer to try and restore the relationship with my wife, but that didn’t happen. When Jennifer and I parted I didn’t know she was pregnant. I didn’t know until today. If I had known I would gladly have supported the raising of our daughter. I don’t have anything else to say but will take some of your questions.” Yes,” Tremaine pointed to a young man in front of him.

“I imagine you have regrets...”

“If I have any regrets,” Tremaine interrupted, “it is that I didn’t know until now of my daughter’s existence and I was not able to be a father to her while she was growing up. Those years are gone and nothing can bring them back. Perhaps now I can help make up for that lost time in some small way.”

“Your behavior has brought embarrassment on the government and the people your represent. What do you have to say to the American people?”

“I’m sure there are some who will feel embarrassed by my behavior, but why should they? Think about it. What does my behavior have to do with them? It is certainly not a reflection on them in either a negative or positive manner. They are not somehow less because of what I did, nor are they better for things I’ve done. They are the way they are, that’s all. There are things I’ve done that some consider immoral. There are others who hold the opposite view. There is no single standard of acceptable behavior that all can agree with.

“What happened with Jennifer happened. It cannot be

changed; it's a fact of life. Life has many twists and turns, we never know what's going to happen and yet through it all, hopefully, we become more relaxed, less judgmental and better able to enjoy life."

"I suppose you think your actions show that you've learned from that experience."

"I would hope so."

"I think your argument is self-serving," a reporter yelled above the shrill of questions.

"You're welcome to think what you wish, but don't be deceived by outward appearances."

Members of the press strained forward, microphones thrust toward the podium, flash bulbs popped. A barrage of questions and shouts filled the pressroom. "Yes." Tremaine pointed to a woman reporter on his left.

"You got this woman pregnant and failed to provide for your daughter. What makes you any different from any other deadbeat father who refused to take care of his kids?"

"Call me what you will. The fact is, until today, I was unaware that Jennifer had a child. I am happy to contribute to the expense and care involved in the raising of my daughter. Had I known, I would have done so earlier."

"Your offer comes a little late, don't you think?" the woman persisted above the shouts around her. "With all due respect to the office you hold and on behalf of single mothers everywhere, this is not acceptable behavior."

"I agree with you. This is an issue of great concern to women and, I would suggest, it is also an issue of concern to men. The fact of the matter is that I did not know of this child, and now that I do I will do everything within my power to make up for all the years that have gone by. This is not an issue that can be resolved with heated emotions or through sound bites, but rather one that deserves whatever time it needs and whatever action required and

that, from my part, it will get.”

Tremaine pointed to a young man at the back of the room.
“Yes?”

“I assume you’ll make arrangements for blood tests to determine whether you are the father or not, so my question is, will you make those tests public?”

“Your assumption is incorrect.”

“You mean you’re not going to have a paternity test done?”

“That’s correct.”

“Why not? Are you not interested in finding out for sure whether the child is yours or not?”

“If Jennifer says that I’m the father, that’s good enough for me.”

“And what if you’re not?”

“We’ll never really know. What I do know is, I loved Jennifer, she was my friend and we were lovers. Why would I not accept her word for it?”

“Will you remain in office, or will you step down, as some are urging?”

“As you suggest, there are those who will urge me to step down. But, how can I do that? I pledged myself to serve the people to the best of my ability through the office of the presidency. I am still the same man I was during the last election. That hasn’t changed. The commitment made then remains, and it’s what I’ll continue to do.”

“There are those who will argue that you should step down because you set a bad example to our youth. After all, you are a role model whether you like it or not.”

“Yes, a role model, no doubt. But what kind of a role model? Not a role model that fits everyone’s picture, that’s for certain. If you’re suggesting that in order to serve in a position of leadership one must not have had an affair, had a child out of wedlock, used drugs, gotten divorced, or opposed the war in Vietnam and so on

then I would disagree with you. The problem is with those who judge, not those who are judged.”

“So may I ask what you consider a good role model?”

“As far as I’m concerned a good role model is someone who was dishonest and learns to be honest; someone who was judgmental and learns to let go of it; someone filled with pride who learns first hand the need for humility; someone who knows a lot and learns how little he really knows. These attributes are more important to me than the popular pictures we hold, the conventional wisdom, so to speak.”

“There are those who hold strong Christian views who make up a large portion of the electorate and do not agree with what you’ve done. In their minds to have an affair, a child out of wedlock, all the things you mentioned, would be reason enough for you to step down.”

“I would suggest that those who truly understand the teachings of Christ will not have a problem with my behavior. Why? Christ was criticized by the Pharisees for consorting with the impure, those who did not follow the letter of the law, the outcasts of his society. Christ looked on the inside, he went by what was in the heart not by appearances. One of his disciples, Mary Magdalene, is believed to have been a prostitute. What did Christ say to those who tried to stone the woman caught in adultery? ‘Let he that is without sin cast the first stone.’ No one moved, not a single stone was thrown. Why? Because they knew that they were really no different from the woman they sought to kill.”

“Are you not concerned about the next election? You could lose it.”

“I’m not concerned. Whether I’m re-elected or not is of no concern to me. My sole interest is to do the best I can to represent the people who elected me, not in their pettiness but in their magnificence as human beings. To me the beauty of a

democracy is that it promotes a good exchange of ideas, we can disagree and argue with each other, and in the end it is we the people who express our collective opinion on what transpired. I believe that most people can distinguish between someone who is trying to con them and someone who is telling the truth. That, as far as I can tell, is one of the underlying premises of a democracy. At the next election, the people will render their opinion on how I've done.

“If we do not allow for the fact that human beings learn from mistakes, then we're lost, there is no hope. Not one of you here, not in the entire country for that matter, can claim to have lived a life without mistakes. But there are many who have lived exemplary lives by learning from their mistakes, and it is this that counts more than anything else.”

Through the clamor, Tremaine noticed a woman at the back of the room. She appeared to be in her late fifties, neatly dressed and unassuming. He pointed to her.

“I wonder, sir, what you mean by an exemplary life?”

“An exemplary life is a life in which honesty, integrity and accountability exist side by side.”

“How can we know whether you live an exemplary life?” she pursued.

“First, I would ask you to think about what I say. Weigh my words with an open mind and an open heart. Second, put yourself in my place. Would you stand in public and admit to the things that you've done, things deemed by some of your fellow citizens to be immoral or wrong? And, if you did, what words would you use? And to those who don't believe what you say, how would you respond? Ask yourself why they don't believe you when you know you've told the truth.”

“Your affair with Miss Ramirez brought an end to your marriage. It would appear that learning did not take place.”

“My relationship with Jennifer did indeed contribute to the

demise of my marriage. What was learned, and is still being learned from an event like this, cannot be judged from outer appearances. There's no doubt in my mind that the things I experienced as a younger man serve me well today."

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Jennifer remembered the last meeting with Tremaine. He'd flown down to San Francisco for the weekend.

On that Saturday, they'd they wandered along the beaches looking for shells. It was autumn, and there was frost in the air. They stopped for lunch, their faces burning in the warm air of the little restaurant still open on the strand.

Afterwards they'd walked in the park, stopped for tea and then headed back to the apartment. It was evening when they arrived. They showered and made love. It was wonderful. Afterwards, she'd slept. When she awoke, supper was almost ready, just enough time for a glass of wine. Over dinner, he told her about his wife.

"Jennifer, I don't know how to say this."

Her heart sank. She knew what was coming.

That night had been their last in each other's company. After breakfast, she'd driven him to the airport, wished him well and meant it, even though she was so miserable she wanted to die.

She had walked the beaches all day and in the evening gone to a bar and gotten horribly drunk. She had awakened the following morning in a young man's bed. As she lay there, the memory of the preceding night came back to her. She'd made love to a stranger and had done nothing to prevent pregnancy. Nine months later, Susan was born. Jennifer wished the child was Tremaine's, but knew it wasn't. When her mother and friends jumped to that conclusion, she'd not dissuaded them. She'd almost come to