

THE MEMORY FORGER

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Translated by Simon Pare

I

‘Comes as quickly as you can,’ his brother says on the other end of the line. ‘The time has come. Mum’s in hospital. The doctor says she won’t last much longer.’

Said Al-Wahid is on an Intercity Express train somewhere between Mainz and Berlin. It’s grey and dingy outside, a rainy June day. Said’s mother has frequently been ill in recent years, but her condition has deteriorated in the last few weeks. She has been sleeping almost the whole time and only awake for a few minutes each day.

Said was aware that the time was fast approaching when death – that old, unwanted guest – would be standing there on the threshold. His mother will soon be reunited with his father and sister, their family more numerous in heaven than on earth.

Said has just taken part in a panel discussion in Mainz and he’s on his way home to Monica and his son Elias. He considers whether he should get off at the next station and catch a connecting train to Frankfurt airport. He scrolls on his phone to see if there are any flights he can book.

His brother would never summon him to Baghdad if his mother wasn’t in a genuinely serious condition. But how on earth is he to make it there as fast as possible? All direct flights stopped long ago. Is Baghdad airport even open? During which war was it closed? Will he see his mother again before she departs this world? Will death show some leniency and give her a few more days of life? Will it wait for him?

Maybe his mother is in a hurry to meet up with the rest of the family again in the hereafter. None of the surviving members of their clan has any idea where his father’s corpse is buried, and they found only scant, scattered remains of his sister and her family. Said knows that clock hands in Iraq trace wounds, not minutes.

Luckily he has his passport with him. Had he been lulled by the comfort of the past few years, he would have left it at home when he set off for Mainz.

Said is someone who still isn't capable of trusting the world. There's no reliable compass in a foreign country, as he knows from personal experience. At a moment's notice you have to be ready to beat a retreat or run headfirst into a brick wall. A foreign country is a journey along a hell of a long road that winds its way sharply uphill and ends up leading nowhere.

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It would be very difficult to get a transit visa for Qatar if he still held an Iraqi passport. No country in the Gulf is yet willing to grant anyone from Iraq a visa or allow them to stop over in transit. That hasn't changed in the twenty years since Said Al-Wahid went on the run. He has just landed in Doha for the first time, but now he's a German citizen, which means he requires neither a transit visa nor any other kind of travel permit. At the sight of his red passport the border officials wave him through. Clothes make the man, but so do papers.

It is 10 pm Central European Time – 11 pm Arabic Standard Time. Said has a seven-hour stopover at Doha's giant airport. He wanders around the terminal, looking at the shops that are still open. At the Illy Café he buys a takeaway coffee, vapes in the smoking area, walks some more and stops outside a bookshop. It is closed, unfortunately. Said studies the covers of some of the books in the window. A book entitled *Baghdad – City of Peace*. A thin book called *The Pigeon* by Patrick Süskind, apparently a new translation. Of all the books he should find here! He once bought it in Asia, then lost it in Africa, only to stumble upon it again in Europe for a short while. Neither time did he make it to the end. He only read it all the way through many years later in German when he was studying at university. It strikes Said that this thin book is somehow intertwined with his fate abroad.

[...]

Said spent his last day in Amman alone in a small room in a city-centre guesthouse. He had no intention of staying there overnight, just to rest during the day in a clean air-conditioned room. This luxury was a leaving treat to himself instead of walking around the city under the blazing sun or hanging out in the mouldy shared flat. Before going to the room around noon he had

searched the small bookshop outside the guesthouse for a book to read on the long journey ahead. The bookseller recommended *The Pigeon*, stressing that it had only just come out. The small volume was cheap. Said bought it.

Those were peaceful hours he spent in that guesthouse. He had a shower and sat in bed and watched TV. At some point he got up and through the small window he spotted a female traffic officer at the junction opposite. It was the first time in his life that he had seen a woman working as a traffic officer – a woman wearing a hat and holding a whistle who was directing traffic as she saw fit. Said stared out of the window at her for a long time as she went about her work.

Shortly before midnight Said was standing outside the travel agency at the main station. There weren't many people around, and the station kiosk was shut too. The man from the travel agency was standing next to the bus driver holding a list and asking every passenger for his or her name. If Said got on this bus, his whole life would consist of an endless string of bus stations. He was nevertheless one of the first to board the bus because he only had a small rucksack and no suitcase to put in the hold. Only a handful of people had gathered to wave off relatives and friends, some with a hint of smile, others with tears in their eyes. Back when Said left Baghdad, his mother had handed him the rucksack and whispered in his ear, 'Never come back!' She was standing outside their front door. Pale-faced, without tears, she stared at him like a ghost. By the time he got into the taxi she was already disappearing back indoors. Only his brother and his sister stayed outside to wave him off.

The bus drove off.

Said gazed out of the window at the many lights of the city. He realised that he really hadn't seen or experienced very much of Amman during his time in the city. He had been entirely focused on finding a place to sleep and a job, and applying for a visa.

The Egyptian bus driver obviously travelled this route on a regular basis and was keenly aware of who his passengers were. When they reached the motorway, he put on a cassette of Iraqi songs about loss and homesickness. The only woman on the bus, sitting in the front rows with her child and husband, began to cry. The bus driver put on a different tape – Egyptian songs about love and treachery this time. No one wept.

It was dark and after a while Said could no longer see anything outside, other than the odd light here and there. He dozed off and soon woke up, only to fall asleep again. Did he dream or think of something? Said can't remember now, but what he does recall is that he was happy to put more and more distance between himself and Iraq.

[...]

Said was sitting at a table with a young Iraqi man. They picked falafel because everything else on the menu was overpriced. After eating the two of them went to the washrooms. There were two cubicles. Almost immediately after Said had entered one, the boy knocked on the door.

‘Have you finished? Come on out! Get a move on, man!’

Said hurried up. ‘What is it?’

‘I’m getting out of here. Are you coming or do you want to spend the rest of your life in the Libyan desert? The window in my cubicle is open.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Cairo, man! The mother of the world. You’ve got your rucksack and I’ve got mine, so let’s go!’

The two of them climbed out of the window and jumped down. They sprinted off towards the main road without looking back. They ran towards a minibus that had just pulled up by the verge and leapt on board. The minibus took them straight into the centre of Cairo.

They didn’t manage to stay in the city long, though. The very next day, they were woken and arrested by the police while they were still in bed at the hotel. The owner had clearly passed on to the authorities the photocopies of their passports he had made during their check-in. They were held in custody for several days. After being transferred from one police station to the next in handcuffs, they eventually found themselves sitting on a bus with lots of others and driven hundreds of miles to Sallum on the Libyan border. There they were released. Said had read a few pages of *The Pigeon* in one of those cells on the edge of Cairo, but he forgot the book as the police officers rushed him to board another bus and be carted off somewhere else.

Said Al-Wahid’s mind contains another memory of that time in Cairo. His Iraqi companion is not involved in this version; he doesn’t even exist.

Said ran away from the guesthouse on his own. In the centre of Cairo he found a job in a bakery belonging to Abo Mahmood, who had spent time in Baghdad as an immigrant worker a decade earlier and therefore believed he owed the Iraqi people a debt of gratitude. Said worked for him every day from morning to afternoon prayers and lived in a room on the roof of his house in the Abdin area of the city – not just for one day but for several weeks. Then someone grassed on him to the police because of a girl. Her name was Amina or Nadine, and she and her family lived on the roof too, in another room. Said can’t really remember whether they got together or not, but they definitely flirted. The man who grassed on him – Said has

long since forgotten his name – was known locally to be a spy for the secret police. He would sit around all day in a café, drinking tea, smoking cigarettes and watching people walk past. He must have had a crush on Amina or Nadine and wanted rid of the Iraqi.

One of these two versions could be true. There's even a third, but Said only vaguely remembers it.

After a good three years in Libya and other African countries where he changed towns and villages as others change their shirt, acquiring first-hand experience of a series of police stations and people-trafficking dens, Said happened upon *The Pigeon* again, but this time it was in Europe.

When he made it to Athens there were already lots of refugees there – Iraqis, Iranians, Pakistanis and Afghans. They were camped out on every corner and every wall around Omonia Square, as if the whole neighbourhood were one big bazaar. Some of them hawked bread with boiled eggs, tissues, peanuts and sesame rings or cleaned car windows at red lights; others sat around here and there, waiting without knowing what for. The traffickers were loitering nearby, of course. They had their own street corners. They were mainly to be found on Syntagma Square or in the Egyptian-owned Cleopatra Café. Three or four guys hung around on the pavement outside the Western Union branch, taking care of the money side of things. These were the financial middlemen. They organised for a refugee's relatives or friends in Europe to transfer money to their account, then withdrew it and either gave it to the refugee or paid the trafficker for his services. All for an appropriate fee, of course. In other parts of the city, church charities distributed free food every afternoon, and people were even allowed to take a weekly shower in a monastery. It was hard to find a free table in the Caritas canteen in the centre, though. There were always hundreds of hungry people queuing outside the building. But an alternative did exist: the owner of a snack bar sold gyros wrapped in pita bread, and very cheap vegetarian potato pitas to refugees and the homeless.

The world was more pleasant and safer in Athens during the day than it was at night. Nightfall marked the start of the great exotic gala – the meat market. It took place directly opposite the parliament building on Syntagma Square. Old men came looking for young flesh. It was an international market since the clients were by no means all Greek: there were sex tourists from other Western countries in Athens too. The younger refugees became sex slaves and went along with everything asked of them to earn a quick buck and spend the night in a hotel instead of being easy prey for the bandits and racists outdoors. Most people who were short of money slept under bridges, in parks and in ruined buildings. Bandits roamed around at

night with knives and clubs. Some were even armed with proper guns. They extorted a nightly protection fee. Three groups – Greeks, Arabs and Kurds – had divided up the city centre among themselves. Not that they took much from each individual, but it still brought in a tidy sum whenever they came across a herd of refugees and homeless people gathered in one spot. Said often managed to slip away when he got wind of approaching money collectors. Little by little, however, Said realised that these gangsters were sometimes necessary because they protected their ‘guests’ from being attacked by Greek neo-Nazis. These groups called themselves *Chrysi Avgi* or Golden Dawn. These *Chrysi Avgi* men would turn up in places they knew the bandits didn’t control or didn’t have enough troops, mainly at the weekend. They would bellow as they beat up refugees with their clubs. It appeared to be their Saturday hobby, their form of hockey.

The only refugees who had any luck in Athens were Iraqi Christians. They were allowed to apply for asylum in Greece. They were given beds in asylum centres. They had the right to three meals a day as well as access to showers and toilets. The unbaptised had no chance, as even the Arabic translators made clear before you even entered the asylum office.

‘Are you Christian?’

‘No.’

‘Go somewhere else. There’s no point in asking here.’

Although Said didn’t have any official Greek papers, he wasn’t really scared of being arrested by the police. There were so many refugees in the city that it would have required an impossible number of jails to hold them. All the same, the police would scoop up a few from the streets now and then. And one day, one weekend, the police caught Said while he was standing outside the Arab supermarket on Kotzia Square and arrested him.

He was put in a cell at the police station with two other men, a young Greek and an Iraqi called Samir. The young Greek was very agitated and spent the whole time by the door, talking to the police officers. After a while, the door opened and they led him away. He didn’t come back. Samir the Iraqi had a refugee permit because he was a Christian, but this hadn’t stopped the police from rounding him up. He didn’t give much away about himself. He didn’t say very much at all, in fact. All Said can remember about Samir is that he’d been living in Athens for a year and was waiting for the result of his asylum application. He’d originally planned to go to Amsterdam or Copenhagen, where his aunt lived, but he’d got stuck there in Athens.

That evening a policeman opened the cell door and gave them a few bread rolls and some boiled potatoes. Samir spoke to the officer for quite a long time in a mixture of Greek and English. Said scarcely understood a word. Samir told him afterwards that he had asked the

policeman if he could bring him a book from his rucksack; he'd like to something to read. A few minutes later the man actually came back.

Before handing Samir the thin book he asked, 'The Qur'an?'

'Όχι, όχι! I'm Christian. This is a novel. From Germany. Name is "peristeri".'

'OK,' the policeman said, giving him the book and then shutting the cell door again.

Said was stunned. It was Patrick Süskind's *The Pigeon* – again! Samir read a few pages before passing the book to Said and closing his eyes.

Said lay on his mattress. That night he didn't have to run from the money collectors or the racists. He was protected by the police here. He was safe. Savouring this fact, he made the most of the time to read. Now and then he drank some water from the tap and chewed on a potato or a bread roll before continuing his reading. It was his most comfortable night in Athens so far – free from fear and on a real mattress, in the company of a fictional character who suddenly finds a pigeon sitting in the hallway outside his flat and is plunged into anxiety and horror. At some stage, though, he fell asleep, having once more failed to finish the thin book. The next morning the two Iraqis were released and each went his own way.

After four years on the road, Said reached his provisional destination – Munich. Some years after his arrival there, during his studies at Ludwig Maximilian University, he was sitting in the university café on Ludwigstrasse with three fellow students, two men and one woman. Said was making fun of a piece of news he'd read in the paper. Munich, the Bavarian capital, had devised a plan to combat the pigeon droppings that sullied facades and corroded the city's monuments. The idea was to install an efficient electric pigeon deterrence system on the roofs of the historic buildings. The pigeons found electric shocks so unpleasant that they were bound to avoid the buildings and their wider surroundings in future.

'In Bavaria people are tortured with paragraphs and animals with electric shocks,' he railed. But as he went on, the old story of *The Pigeon* came to his mind and he told his friends about it.

One of the male students said, 'Oh, you Orientals are all such fabulists!' The woman made a mental note of this story, however, and made him a surprise gift of the German edition on his birthday.

And this time he managed to read it all the way through.

Said Al-Wahid hopes that this whole story about the book in Amman and Cairo, that Athens jail cell with Samir and *The Pigeon*, and the woman student in Munich is not one of those strange tricks his mischievous memory likes to play on him. He hopes all of it really did happen.