PEARLS AND BLACK GOLD

AYAH ABOELELA

B.A. in Computer Science

University of Massachusetts Boston, Class of 2021

Truthfully, I cannot blame my father for his disappointment. I crushed his dream—and dreams are never to be taken lightly, for realities and legacies and entire worlds are nothing without dreams. And when I say dreams, I mean all different types of dreams—sleeping dreams, waking dreams, dreams that leave you confused about whether you were asleep or awake, dreams from Allah, dreams from shaytan, and dreams from nothing but the seemingly meaningless and mundane bits and pieces of your mind. Now, I don’t claim to be a good dream interpreter—far from it. My wife—Allah’s mercy upon her—and my children and grandchildren all know how indecisive I am about what spices to have in my afternoon qahwa, let alone something as life changing as a dream’s meaning. But I am certain about one thing: that realities are nothing without dreams.

Take those skyscrapers for example—the ones that make us feel so great, comfortably overlooking the coast of the Arabian Gulf from a safe distance. What were they built upon besides dreams? The dreams of one man, the nightmare of another. And lots of sand. And, well, barrels of black gold, of course.

Just imagine, in my old age, how different my reality would have been if I had had different dreams—if I never dreamed of marrying Iqmasha; if my father never dreamed for me, his only son, to become a pearl diver. If I never dreamed to fulfill my father’s dreams.

If I never saw that dream at the bottom of the sea.

That was the dream that led to me disappointing my father.

It came to me the first time I ever lasted on the seabed long enough to grab an oyster—and that was also the last time. I remember the water was very clear that day, its aquamarine ripples dancing through rays of yellow sunshine kissing the sandy seabed. It was beautiful, considering how utterly terrified I was.

I say the bottom of the sea, but that is slightly dramatic. The Kuwaiti pearl farms are shallow, especially the ones my fellow villagers frequented. But one can hardly blame me for being dramatic—the dream was dramatic; it removed me so wholly from the fabrics of space and time that the entire world was below me and above me at once—illogical, I know, but fear doesn’t care for logic, and neither do dreams.

I grew up under two contradictions: my extreme fear of the water, and my seemingly unescapable fate of fulfilling my father’s dream. Which was to follow his footsteps to become a pearl diver.
Every Friday, I was forced to attend his post-khutbah majlises where he and other men his age would tell tales of their glorious days of pearling, over cardamom coffee and squishy dates.

““I was the best diver of my time, Marzuq,” he’d say, and the other men would clamor a bunch of “ay, masha’Allah”s in agreement. “Remember our best year, men? Nineteen twelve: The Year of Superabundance from the Almighty. Remember when our little village sent off dozens of dhows in one season? Dozens! Unlike the meager three this year. We came back with hundreds of pearls. It was the year your brother was born, Allah’s mercy upon him…”

And he’d go on and on, narrating tales three decades old, of one dive or trip or season or another, of fighting sharks and pirates, of meeting merchants from India and Persia and Oman and Yemen and even a few from Somalia and Zanzibar who came to trade pearls with his father, my grandfather.

The other old men in his majlis never bored of listening and adding their own tales. They all loved my father—not just because he was rich and generous, but also because he simply befriended everyone. He was not born into a rich family like the other elite Kuwaiti merchants; he started as a humble pearl diver and worked his way up. He never challenged the other pre-established merchants, nor disdain the pearl divers—indeed, he valued diving, wanting me to dive before becoming a merchant, just as he did. Everyone was welcome at his majlis. And when they were done reminiscing of their past glories, they’d start griping about present miseries.

“What about the merchants from Paris? Didn’t they love pearls?” I remember one saying to another.

“Not anymore. They call it a big depression. Everyone’s losing money.”

“It’s not just money they’re losing,” my father said at that point. “No one cares for sincerity, for honest work, for tradition. They buy the cheaper, fake pearls grown in a farm, instead of the ones born in oysters, through the pure struggle of nature.”

That’s how these majlises would go. Of course, as a kid, I saw these as long bouts of nostalgia aimed at guilting the youth into somehow reviving the pearling industry that was by then in its death throes. But, alas, I am a nostalgic old man myself, and I see now that those men’s nostalgia was just a facade for a deeper emotion. Fear. Fear that their sons’ dreams would be different than their own, that the pearling tradition would finally be buried in the sand, and their legacies along with it.

And though I thought my father was the proudest majlis man at the time, I’ve come to realize that he was also the one with the deepest fear.

He truly was held in high esteem—not only for being the best diver. That job was only a steppingstone for becoming one of the richest pearl merchants in our village. And his reputation only grew when he refused to leave Kuwait in the 1930’s,
staunchly hoping that things would turn for the better, even when all the other prominent merchant families left Kuwait as protest.

This all meant that he had more to lose than the other men—and a higher chance at losing it, considering that I, the youngest of his ten children and his only son, would stay behind with my sisters whenever the other boys would play in the water.

He showed this fear in many ways. In how he demanded I attend all his pearl-propaganda majlises even before I could serve a cup of qahwa without staining someone's white thawb.

In how he would take me on all of his business expeditions, introducing me to all his contacts at the open-air souk, trying to ingrain me with his charisma, reprimanding me when I was inevitably more awkward than him in conversation.

In how he required that I become familiar with pearl classifications to make prices based on shapes and colors and shades of colors.

In how he wouldn’t let me play with my sisters in the beach in front of our house, instead requiring me to play among the waves with the other village boys.

“Don’t push him,” my mother said to him, in one of those rare times we all went to the beach. It was the Quffal holiday, around September, when the summer winds tired of blowing and the villagers eagerly awaited the return of the pearling boats to celebrate. Even though we no longer had family on those dhows, my father was probably the most excited of all—as a pearl merchant and financier, he was quite invested in the reaps of each pearling season. My mother’s metallic battula that covered her face sparkled like the waves in the sun. “You know he’s scared. He remembers what happened to his brother.”

“If he remembers what happened to Sayf, he should be all the more willing to become a diver! To carry his brother's legacy, my legacy, my father's legacy, dreams upon dreams upon dreams!”

But my father had a soft spot for my mother, especially whenever she mentioned Sayf, so he didn’t press me further that day. He only repeated the phrase he’d been hammering into my head even before I could swim (which I should’ve learned to do before I could even walk but was, naturally, delayed). “A man of ambition would only strive to be a pearl merchant, son. And there’s no better way to get there than to start with the hard work of pearl diving.”

Perhaps my father wouldn’t have been so insistent on my becoming a pearl diver if he were born into an elite merchant family instead of working his way up. He credits his pearl diving for his success, which is why he insisted that Sayf experiences pearl diving before becoming a merchant, and why he now insists the same with me.
Sayf was my eldest sibling, the one who gave my parents their kunyas—Abu Sayf and Um Sayf. Allah have mercy upon them all. He died on a pearling trip.

They never really explained exactly how—he wasn’t too deep to be sick from pressure, nor in too long to drown. At least that’s what his fellow sailors told my parents. All they knew was that he returned from one of his countless dives one day, blabbering some frantic gibberish that no one understood, before collapsing and never waking again. There were rumors that the jinn were involved.

My family and I were waiting for him at the Quffal holiday, after the shaykh had sounded the canon to mark the end of the pearl fishing season, and all the village families had gathered on the shore. This was the only day of the year that the dhow-construction yards that filled the shore were silent—there would be no hammering today, as families spotted the little brown dhows appearing on the horizon, running to greet the sailors when they finally harbored, the whole village celebrating together.

I remember I was especially excited—not just because Sayf was a brave, adventurous hero to me and all the other village boys, but because he’d always make sure to bring me a special little gift, like a shark tooth, or a piece of coral shaped like a star.

But he didn’t jump off a dhow with the other sailors. I’ll never forget what it looked like—the big, heavy object wrapped in white cloth, being lifted off of one of the dhows. I was so curious—I almost went to help the sailors lift it for a chance at glimpsing its contents. Was it a large fish, enough for a feast? A giant sack of pearls? Then one sailor after another looked towards where I stood with the rest of my family and said, “We belong to Allah, and to him we return” or “May Allah have mercy on him” or “May Allah compensate you with what is better” and other prayers that I later learned to be condolences. Then my father fell to his knees. Then my mother cried—a sound so deep and guttural that I have never forgotten it to this day, nor have I ever heard anything like it.

I was young—so young that I was still allowed on the women’s side during the funeral later that day, surrounded by my nine elder sisters and my mother and all the other wailing women. It was after the dhuhr prayer, the peak of the day’s heat, and everything was so bright beneath the scalding sunlight that I would have been blinded were it not for the sand of my brother’s grave, loosened up into the air by a frenzy of men in thawbs that were no longer white. Everything was pale, yellow, fuzzy.

That was when I became the sole hope of carrying my father’s dreams.