

PEARLS AND BLACK GOLD

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Every Friday after the khutbah I go to the graveyard to visit my family and contemplate life and death. My other family—the ones still alive—used to join me for a few weeks after my wife died, but one by one, they all got lazy. Or, fine, to be fair, maybe they were just busy. I should know, for I was also once a busy man, working as a government historian to preserve legacies for the future. Besides, though they are younger and full of energy, they do not have the same type of energy as me, the energy that propels me to visit week after week under the hot sun, the energy that blazes from the burning regret of dissatisfying one's dead father. I am, after all, still alive, and so they still have time to gain my satisfaction, and I've never been tough to satisfy anyway. My children know this, which is why, today, since they're too tired or lazy or bored or busy to come with me, they sent Lulua.

My eldest granddaughter. The only one that happily accompanies me on these Friday excursions. What child does this so willingly? Certainly not me at her age, when Kuwait City wasn't called Kuwait City but still Kuwait Town. When we could still see the sea from here, and the beach with its dhow-construction sites before the skyscrapers replaced them and blocked the view. Much has changed since then. And yet the graveyard remains the same—only a few new rows of headstones betray any difference.

I cough when I finally reach Lulua, who has skipped ahead of me to the familiar cluster of headstones. She recites Surat al-Fatihah in the loud whisper of children too young to speak without making sound. We reach my father's headstone, and Lulua, so familiar with my habits, sits down and twirls her fingers in the sand. I sit beside her and cough again—though the sea is no longer visible from here, its salty smell is distinct in the dusty breeze. I am proud of her, and I am satisfied—satisfied that I am not disappointed in her or her siblings or cousins or parents or aunts or uncles as my father died disappointed in me.

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 dhuhur 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.

About a decade later, by the time the last of my sisters was married, my mother became just as pushy as my father, albeit not specifically about becoming a diver. “You cannot be like your sisters, Marzuq. They have men to provide for them. *You must be the man, have the ambition to get a stable, well-paying job.*”

Much as my young self would have hated to admit it, I indeed did not have as much ambition as the other young village men, who by then had all married or had at least acquired a job in some government ministry or another—which, with the new trade agreements with Western companies, were growing bigger and bigger.

My idea for success was to stick with the masjid shaykh and help him teach the children Quran, reading, and arithmetic. Perhaps I assumed that the new reforms that prioritized education would eventually land me a job at one of the new public schools. Regardless, before I got the chance to turn these thoughts into a real dream, which was the prerequisite of turning a dream into reality, the inevitable happened: my father found a way to apprentice me to a diver.

It was a Friday after the asr prayer, when the sun’s golden rays shone directly into our house’s inner room—the part where no visitors would enter, where my mother seemed so lonely sitting without my sisters, mixing cardamom and saffron into a boiling pot of coffee. I sat with her, helping her set dates and little cups on the coffee tray. She thought I was being kind to her, keeping her company, and I wish I had done more of that, but truthfully, I was trying to avoid the majlis, as this was my father’s designated majlis day among the other village shaykhs, and, since it was Friday, there was very little I could do around town to excuse myself from attending. It’s not like I could stroll around the outdoor souk like today’s youth stroll around the high-rise shopping malls that replaced them. Everyone knew everyone else in those days, and the souk men were particularly familiar with my father.

As it turned out, my concerns should have been much bigger than avoiding a majlis.

“There is no power but of Allah!” my father said, storming into the inner room and tossing his headwrap on a cushion. This meant that the majlis was finally over. “The youth these days—our legacies will end with them, Um Sayf.”

My mother sighed and took three little cups out. It was my father’s habit to make just as much time for her as he did for his shaykh friends, so that meant he had two evening coffeetimes every day.

I never minded these family sittings like I did the bigger majlises (men like to talk about *women’s* gossip, but having grown up witnessing both the majlises of men and of women when I was young enough to sit in my sisters’ gatherings, I can confidently conclude that men’s gossip is just as brutal). My father took the coffee pot from my mother and poured it into the three cups—quite confidently, letting the coffee down a whole armlength away from the actual cups, all the while continuing his passionate outburst.

“They’re all trading our legacies for *modern* jobs! Do you know what Abu Umar said just now?”

My mother took the first cup from him.

“One of his divers quit to become a secretary at the governor’s office. Yes, ridiculous—who’d prefer to slave at a desk all day! But no matter—you know what this means, boy?”

I knew what it meant. I couldn’t swallow my coffee; I let it burn my tongue.

My mother answered. “Truly, Allah’s blessings come from unexpected places! This is wonderful, it means that—”

“That our son can finally make us proud!” He crossed his legs on the red cushion across from my mother, slurping his coffee.

“Did Abu Umar already offer Marzuq an apprenticeship?”

Why did my mother want me to go pearl diving, even though her first child died from it? Even though she was the only person in the world that knew just how much I feared the sea? I’ve thought about this. I think it is because she, Allah’s mercy upon her, used to pride herself on rationality, on suppressing whatever counted as silly emotions. She tried so long not to associate the water with her son’s death. To convince herself that it was simply the fate Allah wrote—nothing more, nothing less. I only know this from the poems she used to compose and sing as she worked around the house or put me to bed at night when I was still young. They were never melodramatic or woeful—just simple, about accepting the will of Allah, and that’s what made them so powerful, I think. There were many poets in our village, but my mother was the only poetess that I knew of in those days. I think it was the grief from Sayf’s death that made her poems so loved.

“I will visit him after maghrib prayer,” my father said. “He cannot deny me—he needs my investments for his business, and he already owes me quite a large debt.”

Now *this* is why we had a chance with Abu Umar. Ashamed as both my father and I were of it, my fear of the water was no secret. Combine that with the dying pearling industry, and, well, there was no reason to give me a pearling job at all. Which was perfectly fine with me. But once it was publicized that a shipmaster had one less diver, and that shipmaster happened to owe a huge debt to my father—well, he had no excuse *not* to let me on. Whether I liked it or not.

My parents continued their excited coffee chatter while I just sat sucking a dry, flavorless date on my burnt tongue. “Could you ask for me to be a sibb instead of a diver?” It was a stupid question. Obviously, if a diver left there would be no reason to hire a new sibb—whose job was to pull the divers up from the water when they found an oyster, in addition to some manual labor. But I was desperate. I didn’t care that it was a job for lower social classes, nor that it was lower pay, nor that it was an entirely lower social class, nor that my skinny self seemed too weak to labor all day beneath the Arabian summer sun. I was a young man, and young men tend to think in absolutes, and my absolute was that I absolutely did not want to dive, much less make a career of it, even if that career would just be the stepping stone to becoming a rich merchant.

“You must face your fears of the water, son. You cannot overcome a fear without facing it,” he said. Well, I think we both unwillingly faced our fears—mine of the water, and his of me crushing his dream—but what good did that do for either of us? “You will have unmatched honor!”

“You’ll make a fine, diver, Marzuq, just like Sayf,” my mother said. “Imagine, we can find you a nice bride for you now.” She had a dreamy look on her face. “Back in my time the women would hide their faces behind divers and merchants, as you will soon become. But never the sibbs, because they are less important, less skilled, like that man your sister married. Allah is most generous.”

Perhaps if I’d had more ambition, I could’ve opposed my parents’ dreams for me. But I didn’t—I was just little Marzuq, awkward and uncertain and scared of the water—so not long after, I found myself on a pearling dhow, trying to convince myself that it was only for a short time, just until my father determined I had enough “hard work” experience to start another job as a merchant, and then, trying to distract myself from worrying about how flimsy of a merchant I’d be, considering what little of my father’s charisma I’d inherited.

I quickly learned that “unmatched honor” had a price higher than mere diving. It also entailed being cramped with all the other men, all smelling the same stench of men’s sweat steaming in the summer heat on Abu Umar’s dhow. What’s more is my fellow sailors wasted no time in exploiting my—as a scholar now I am ashamed to say—gullibility. And none loved to fool around with me more than the sibb I was paired with, the one assigned to pull me out of the water: Bilal.

After a few days at sea, we finally reached the pearling waters. It started off as any sailing day would: a communal breakfast of dates, bread, and a choice of tea or coffee.

The divers were apparently not allowed to eat much before a dive because full stomachs made it harder to keep air in. So much for *unmatched honor*. Not that I had much of an appetite anyway. I sat nibbling on the last of my three chewy little dates while Bilal sipped his tea—*milk* tea, made with fresh milk served from the boat's resident goat. He was a large man, and even though we were sitting, his bulky figure blocked the sun from my eyes.

“Ready for the famous monsters of Sinbad?”

The *fool* I was—I nearly choked on my date pit. “Sinbad? From the *Thousand Nights*?”

The sibb guffawed and I realized—too late—that I was the joke, and Abu Umar had to cut the sibb's laugh off. “Quit it, sibb,” he said, then frowned at me. “Our sea is too shallow for Sinbad's monsters. He journeyed further south, in the deeper seas closer to India.”

“But does Marzuq know about the lesser monsters?” the sibb asked. I was surprised to hear a note of concerned seriousness in his voice.

“I've heard of them,” I said. Yes, I was a fool for believing the part about the monsters—but can you blame me after all of the exaggerated tales I've heard at my father's majlises? At least I was well-educated about the many ways a diver could be harmed. “Jellyfish, chicken fish, horse fish, snake fish, sharks, loss of breath, popping ears, hallucina—”

“Yes, yes, all that and a whole lot more if you let your fears drive you,” the sibb said. “The jinn prey on our weaknesses, the ones we acknowledge *and* the ones we deny. The stories of Sinbad are fake, but the jinn stories you've heard at majlises or masjid halaqas...those are the real dangers, son.”

I've heard stories, of course—what kid doesn't grow up hearing jinn stories? Given my condition, I was even given extra access to these jinn stories, from aunts and uncles and cousins who'd generously offer them to imply that the jinn were the cause of my fear.

Abu Umar rolled his eyes. I was quickly learning that he was not a fan of drama. “Bilal is just telling you to seek Allah's protection before you dive. Yalla, let's not dawdle!” He shouted, and before I could even fully calculate whether I should be more worried about the jinn or the chicken fish or the water, the divers were all standing at the boat's edge, ropes tied around their waists, loose ends handed to their sibbs, and I was a jittering mess.

“Yalla, Marzuq!” said Bilal. His big hands squeezed my shoulders, turning me towards the water—calm, sparkling, terrifying.

Though Bilal's hands were very different from my father's—whose perfect pearl-diver's hands were long and thin, like mine—I couldn't help but feel like it was my father nudging me on.

“Say bismillah and go!” he said, as the last of the divers leapt into the water. “Just go—copy them! You don't want to be the only one in by the time they're all already out!” He clasped my shoulders again, and I am convinced that the only thing that pushed me forth was that last worry he imparted to my mind—the worry of diving in when everyone else was going back out.

The water overcame me, and the sibb was no longer my sibb, and the divers no longer divers; I was at our village beach, and my father stood above me, teaching me to swim, the village children splashing around me, and they would emerge laughing at me and my father's face would turn reddish bronze from shame, the village's best diver whose own son feared the water.

But there was no time for useless sentiment—I quickly remembered the sibb's words before the dive and opened my eyes to reality: dark figures slithering through the aquamarine water. I ignored everything else: this, I can focus on. Divers, covered neck-to-ankle in black clothes, to keep the monsters away. The seabed below them, yellow from the sunrays above.

Even today I must admit how impressive it was for me to notice everything so vividly despite my terror.

But then a diver waved me over to the seabed, pointing to a patch of oysters embedded among the seagrass that moved just like I imagined a sea snake to move.

I closed my fingers around an oyster, and it was as though a jolt of power rippled through my arm and into my whole body and I felt that perhaps I could finally leave my aquaphobia behind after this, that maybe I could fulfill my father's dream after all. That's the last clear memory I had from that pearling trip. What happened after, I remember only as a series of nightmares.

I remember waking up on the hard wooden floor of the boat, the face of Abu Shanab the goat drooping over mine. Of course. What better use of my father's investment money than a goat for fresh milk tea? Certainly more useful than a raqi healer to save our souls.

“Now what, Abu Umar!” the sibb's voice boomed. “We should've gotten rid of the damn goat and gotten a real raqi instead!”

“You're the one that insisted we *keep* the goat for your morning milk tea! Now be useful and set sail for the nearest village. Who knows a good raqi nearby?”

The goat was shoved away and the voices faded until I woke a second time beneath a darker, starless sky, shaking to the deep, fatherly sound of Surat al Fatihah and I noticed bulky hands pressed to my forehead and so I knew it was not my father—it was Bilal.

Now, with all these new fancy labor laws, you may be wondering why we didn't have a medic on board, or even a first-aid kit. Well, we did have first aid kits—much more natural and more blessed ones, like pomegranate peels and date juice paste. Besides, we didn't yet have our own Western-trained medics, and only a few shipmasters felt the need to hire professional *raqis*—who knew how to use the Islamic sciences for healing. I didn't always think they were necessary for pearling expeditions. After all, the space on our putrid, tiny, crowded boat can be used in much more effective ways (such as a goat) than a spot for someone who can read Quran—something we could all do anyway. But when I was young, I had a knack for underestimating everyone—not just myself but the *raqis* whom I deemed unnecessary. I know this because it was a *raqi* who saved my life.

Except this one—the one that cared for me after my dive—was unlike any *raqi* I have ever met.

When I fully awoke, the first things I felt were absences—no swaying boat nor burning sun, nor suffocating, closely pressed bodies of men filling the hot air with sweat.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

I became aware of one woman, alone, pestling out some sort of paste on a mortar. A healing paste, I assumed. I nearly yelped when I saw her, right beside me, her face masked in a *battula* like the ones my mother used to wear. But it wasn't my mother—her eyes were lighter, like the color of palm wood in a patch of sunlight, and her gaze was so strong that I had to lower mine. She wore a dark *abayah* with purple and green flower patterns stitched across, glimmering as it caught some sunrays peeking in through an opening behind me.

“Who are you?” I asked, sitting up on the low mat I was on. The room was small and unfurnished besides my mat, the large Persian rug below it, and a low wooden table with the woman's tools and some neatly arranged glass jars.

“*Iqmasha bint Ahmad*,” she said. “I'm your *raqiyah*. My brother Bilal brought you here; I'll go bring him.” With one last stomp of her pestle, she stood to go.

“Bilal—the *sibb*? He's your brother? Wait,” I said before she reached the open door. “You're a—a *raqiyah*?”

Imagine my confusion: how could such a modest woman (she kept her face covered even as I lay unconscious!) be so audacious as to call herself a *raqiyah*! Now, I've met several *raqis* in my life by that point—well-known and dignified *shaykhs*. I never knew female “*raqiyahs*” existed.

“Yes. The sailors think some *jinn* harmed you,” she stated, as though I was confused about why I was there. I wasn't. I was confused about how someone like her could be called a *raqiyah*—about how the term “*raqiyah*” could even be used!

But it is true that I, the pessimistic old skeptic, was once the most gullible youth around. So, naturally, I overcame my confusion and accepted her title as

raqiyah—and I wasn't wrong to do so either. Because that wouldn't be the last time she'd nursed me back to health by, she used to say, "Allah's grace."

"My mother told me not to blame the jinn," I blurted out. I don't know what I was thinking. I suppose I should sympathize with today's youth who must try to charm young women, since I grew up with nine elder sisters yet still nearly jeopardized this fateful conversation from the start. But I am a man of honor, so I have no such sympathy for the men that sought my daughters—nor for the ones that will seek Lulua, should I live long enough.

She quirked her head towards me and I blabbered on. "Some said that the water summoned the jinn to me. But my mother used to tell me to just recognize my own weakness. I have a lot of fear. Of the water."

She used to say that being in water summoned the jinn to me.

"A strange malady," she said. "Even for a diver."

"I was supposed to learn to dive before becoming a pearl trader. But I don't think diving is my calling."

"Clearly."

I know I blushed, and alhamdulillah, before I could say something stupider, Bilal filled the doorway with his frame. "Allahu akbar, you're awake!" he shouted. "Akhi! I thought you'd—I thought you were going to—forgive me, akhi, it was my fault. I should've been softer."

I was confused for a moment—for at that point I hadn't yet grasped what happened—but then with a jolt I remembered the whole dive and my fists clenched as if I were still holding the oyster.

"Marzuq?" said Iqmasha.

"Are you alright, akhi?" said Bilal.

I unclenched my fists. There was no oyster. Bilal kneeled beside my head, his sister standing behind him. "It wasn't you, Bilal. I would've seen those visions regardless."

Now *he* looked confused. "Visions? I thought you just panicked or needed more air. What visions?"

I swallowed, and now the memories poured back to me in a flood, so real that I felt I was drowning again, unable to separate the reality of the dive with the dream—or nightmare.

High rise towers, so high and far from the sea that it seemed peaceful at first, like the description of Jannah in the Quran, high platforms beneath which waters flow, my fears of it kept at a safe distance—but suddenly everything changed into one of those falling dreams, wholly unlike diving, where you know where you're headed and have full control and a sibb to help you up, but no, this was just falling with no control, slicing through the building itself, which was made out of a black, sticky, liquid, too greasy to be water but not thick enough to slow my fall and I fell for so long—too long, as

the distance I fell was even longer than the length of the building, I fell into the belly of the earth itself, which was oozing with more of that thick black oil, the oil that would soon be called black gold.

I wish I had awoken mid-fall, even if it meant waking up to face the reality of my near-drown instead of the nightmare, because what I saw next was even more terrifying and it haunts me to this day.

I became immersed in a chamber of this black liquid, burning, suffocating, trapped, and there seemed to be oysters at the bottom, and I automatically reached out for them—but there were no pearls inside, just more oceans of black gold pouring out instead.

How cruel had it seemed—that my dream started with some respite in the high-rise building away from the water, only for its foundation to be a liquid darker and viler than the water I so feared.

Bilal grasped my shoulders again. He looked at me, eyebrows furrowed, the way my father's furrowed in those rare moments when pride and shame and ambition failed to hide his worry. Iqmasha stood calmly behind him, her gaze sharp above her battula. "Well? What did you see?" she said.

I sat up, crossed my legs, and I told it to them, though perhaps I shouldn't have. Maybe then the dreams wouldn't have become reality.

"It's a vision from the jinn—maybe Shaytan himself," I said when I was done. It was a better explanation than my mother's. I *needed* to believe it was the jinn. Because that would mean I could blame my fear on something, and that I wasn't a weak-minded coward. My fear would have a meaning, and my dream would be the meaningless tricks of the devil.

"No! Could it be the jinn? No, no, no, akhi, it can't be." said the sibb. "It was just your fear. Trust me. It's normal for divers to—"

"You're the one that warned me about the jinn playing on our fears, Bilal," I said.

"Well yes but you're a good lad, the sincerest kid I've ever met, and I said protection prayers over you before you dove, so it *can't* be the jinn, you're genuine, obedient to your parents—"

"Piety," Iqmasha said, "Does not guarantee jinn immunity. Even some prophets were afflicted." At some point while I was telling my story she had sat back down, continuing to grind whatever was in the mortar. She had even started to boil a pot of water, completely undisturbed.

"See?" I said to Bilal. "It *was* the jinn. Even my brother, Allah's mercy—"

"That's not what I said," said Iqmasha. "I don't know whether this is the jinn's doing. Nor do I know if you are pious."

Bilal frowned. "But you're a raqiyah. You should—"

"Then listen to my expertise, *Bilal*." The siblings glared at each other before Iqmasha continued. "I've worked with many jinn maladies. Marzuq does not have the

classical signs of jinn tampering—no animal sounds or different voices or waking hallucinations. *Yet*, anyway.”

“See?” Bilal said this time. “There was probably just too little air. Or too much pressure.”

Iqmasha huffed. “No. You said he wasn’t in longer than a minute. And the waters were shallow. Those conditions don’t seem harsh enough to warrant such vivid visions and a coma.”

“Where else would the dream come from, then?” I asked.

“Allah, of course,” she said. She finished what she was making, and that is when I noticed that it was not a medicinal concoction. The room was so strongly infused with cardamom that I could feel the coffee’s energy surge without even tasting it. It was like nothing was wrong with me—or anything—at all. She scrutinized me so severely that I was surprised that nothing spilled while she poured the coffee.

“Your dream was a message.”

Bilal looked between me and Iqmasha. “What’s the message, then?”

Bilal and I watched her eagerly as she took a sip of coffee. Her metallic battula clouded from the rising steam, which continued to rise until it formed a haze around her eyes, and she looked straight at me. “Marzuq will know.”

I gaze towards the skyscrapers where the sea was once visible. Now they say they want to build even more buildings—taller ones, the tallest in the world, built from the riches our people unlocked with black gold. Just like in my dream.

Who sent my dream, then? Allah? The jinn? Or lack of air, high pressure, my own imagination—mirrors of memories meshed into something bizarre but meaningless—or some other scientific explanation?

I still don’t know.

My questions and worries accumulated, like dust from a sandstorm settling on an uncleaned surface, year after year, all the way until this old age, the age my father was when he died.

I am a worrier—I’ve never had Iqmasha’s calm certainty. I was gullible, once, yes, but that is not the same as coming to confident conclusions with certainty. Perhaps that’s why we married. She truly was my better half, always has been for all of our years together. She was to me as my mother was to my father: both my anchor and my compass. I’d have been lost without her in my life, and I would’ve been lost after her death, too, all these years later, if it weren’t for the children and grandchildren she left behind.

Lulua is still sitting beside me, humming to some tune, tracing twirls in the sand before the rows of stones. Iqmasha beneath the nearest. Some of my sisters beyond her. Then Bilal. My mother. My brother, Sayf. And my father.

Deaths accumulate with age, too, not just questions and worries.

After I left Bilal and Iqmasha, I returned to our village—much earlier than the Quffal holiday as my father expected—and told him I cannot become a diver. He was upset, of course, but once he gave up on that pursuit, he decided that I would become a pearl merchant immediately. And I tried, at first, for his satisfaction's sake, and even handled his finances for a while. But we both knew that, whether we liked it or not, the pearl industry was in its death throes. *No one* was making a living out of pearls anymore. Just black gold—and more and more, I was beginning to see my vision turn to reality. Black gold replacing pearls. The shore of Kuwait Town no longer a dhow-construction yard—a skyscraper construction site instead. There was talk, even as early as then, of removing our home and all the old houses in the first row facing the sea, to make room for the birth of the city.

So I continued to help the shaykh teach the schoolchildren, and, using my father's contacts and connections, was employed in the new Ministry of Education, where I led the design of the history curriculum. After all, the vision confirmed my father's fear of the pearl industry collapsing. I simply acted upon the message, trying to preserve its memory.

Ironic, is it not? That it is both because of my father's wealth and against his wishes that I became a government historian? And that despite a lifetime of studying the history of pearling, tracing its trade, interviewing divers and shipmasters and sibbs, and preserving their legacy for future generations, I would never sail upon a pearling boat again?

Perhaps I am still a coward. Or a hypocrite. Or both.

But I am a grandfather now, the same age my father was when he died, and those names don't matter as much as they did when I was a village boy on the beach. They don't matter as much as my father's last words to me, spoken between the cold white walls of the new American hospital: that I have condemned his legacy to death, just as he feared, by turning it into a history lesson instead of keeping it a reality.

Silly for an old man to put so much weight on another's satisfaction in him, no? But that is why I became a historian. I thought that I could somehow preserve my father's dream of preserving his—our—traditions and customs. Would all my books and courses amount to something? Have I preserved my father's dream, at least in memory, even though I have not *lived* it?

It's hard work, trying to do justice to two generations—the one that left you behind, and the one *you* will leave behind. Especially with the never-ending change of tradition.

But reality didn't turn out to be as scary as my vision would have made me think, for the newer generation is alive and offers the reassurance that the older one cannot. I find this in my children and grandchildren: two studying in America (one, the engineering of petroleum, and the other, engineering of computers), another studying Islamic sciences with psychology, another a public-school teacher of Arabic literature, and others still making their way in the world. Each of them merging our

old traditions with the newness of the world, using their own personalities and perspectives and fears and dreams. Bilal was right—our biggest dangers come from our wretched souls. But with guidance, so does our greatest beauty.

I am indeed quite proud of them all. Especially my Lulua—I don't think she knows how much her company means to me.

“What do you dream to be when you grow up?” I ask her, trying to imagine what I may not live to see.

She grins, her wispy black hair blowing in the wind along with her abaya and the hijab that drapes around her shoulders. “An ice cream scooper! Can we go now, Jaddi?”

I laugh—no, I did *not* bribe her to come along; ice cream started as a treat that turned into a tradition that I, having the decent morality of a grandfather, could not discontinue. I take her hand. “Whatever your dreams are, Lulu,” I gesture to the desolate patches of sand before us. “I know you will make us proud.”

We head to our favorite kiosk on the beach, where we can safely admire the water with its giant cargo ships in the distance, the ones with colorful big containers that replaced the little wooden dhows, coming and going from far beyond the ports my father and grandfathers visited. And we sit and enjoy our ice cream cones, and I listen to Lulua's stories and dreams.

Author's Notes for "Pearls and Black Gold"

Sources Used for Background Research

Farah al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life*. Stanford University Press, 2016.

Sayf Marzuq al-Shamlan, *Pearling in the Arabian Gulf: A Memoir*. Arabian Publishing Ltd., 2001.

Reader's Guide

WARNING: The following guide gives a detailed explanation for certain phrases, events, and references in my story. There are spoilers, so as the author I suggest that you read this guide only AFTER you have read the whole story.

Timeline:

1912: The Year of Superabundance. Abu Sayf (Marzuq's father) is a young man, making his way up the social ladder from pearl diver to merchant.

1918: Marzuq is born.

1925: Sayf, Marzuq's eldest brother, dies.

1930s: Globally, there is the Great Depression, and in Kuwait, pearl industry is dying. Marzuq goes on his first and only pearl fishing trip. The Kuwait Oil Company founded in collaboration with the Americans.

1940s-1980s: Massive transformations to Kuwait's landscape—modernization, new city planning, and urban development begins due to the profits gained from oil.

2008: Marzuq tells the story. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kuwait_City.jpg for a photo of Kuwait's skyline at the time.

A Note on Marzuq's Father:

This was a tricky character. At first, I intended for him to be a rich man solely based on his own pearl diving efforts, and consequently he was supposed to want his son Marzuq to follow the same path. However, after reading *Kuwait Transformed* by Farah al-Nakib and the various social classes that existed in the early twentieth century, I realized that pearl divers did not actually become incredibly wealthy, and it was the pearl merchants who funded pearl expeditions that gained much of the wealth. Because of how I had already structured my story by the time I realized this, I had to slightly modify the character of Marzuq's father. He is probably a rare case, but I don't think it is so rare to become highly impossible or unbelievable. He started off as a pearl diver, and because of his hard work, worked his way up through social classes to become a successfully wealthy pearl merchant. This way, we still keep the conflict of him wanting his son to practice pearl diving to gain the good work ethic that will eventually enable his son to become a merchant.

A Note on Marzuq's Mother:

I mention that Marzuq's mother is a poet. In his memoir, Sayf al-Shamlan notes that he only ever knew one female poet in his life, and she was famous because of her high-quality poems that were filled with grief over the loss of her son to the sea.

A Note on Naming:

All of my names were chosen because they were included the primary source *Pearling in the Arabian Gulf*, a memoir written by Sayf Marzuq al-Shamlan about the time period where my most of my story occurs. From the author's name already, I derived two of my characters' names, including the protagonist Marzuq. Umar, Ahmad, and Bilal were other male names listed in the memoir (pages 96-97). Iqmasha and Lulua are female names which both mean "pearl" and are mentioned on pages 80-81.

I deliberately avoided the use of last names, as I know that some of them refer to tribes with specific social standings and may still be used among some Kuwaitis today. I wanted to avoid mistaking certain social standings or unintentionally writing a picture about a family under a specific name used today.

Other Notes and References in the Story:

Page 3: The Year of Superabundance was in 1912, a boom in the pearl industry, when several pearls were found and sold. This is mentioned in al-Shamlan's memoir, page 99.

Page 4: "...even when all the other prominent merchant families left Kuwait as protest." This refers to a time in the 1930s when highly important and respected merchant families left Kuwait as protest to some of the new governmental changes and economic difficulties.

Page 12: The one exception to my basing all names upon those listed in the primary source is "Abu Shanab," the name of the resident goat on the dhow. "Shanab" means mustache (at least in Egyptian colloquial Arabic; I couldn't figure out for certain if that is the same word used in the Kuwaiti dialect). Some dhows did indeed include goats to be used for fresh milk—see al-Shamlan's memoir, page 78. However, here I must make side note of my use of artistic license and slight conflation between *merchants'* dhows and *pearl fishing* dhows. There is certainly a difference; al-Shamlan notes that the merchants' dhows were much more spacious and comfortable, and they were the ones that sometimes had goats on board. The boat my character Marzuq rides is technically a pearl fishing boat, but I just wanted to add the goat in somehow.

Page 12: Raqis, or Islamic healers, were mentioned in al-Shamlan's memoir, page 147, as "mullahs" who sometimes treated divers afflicted with epilepsy by reciting the Quran upon them. Passing out, epilepsy, and visions at the seabed were apparently

common for divers and are mentioned in the memoir. This is what I based Marzuq's incident upon.

Landscape/Details on Kuwait Town/City:

I have never visited Kuwait and I must admit that I sometimes felt like a fraud when writing this story. But very few people—if any at all—remember actually witnessing the landscape of Kuwait Town during the time period where most of my story occurs. These details are derived from historical documents, accounts, and maps. I know that there were souks and dhow-construction sites using secondary sources that draw upon such documents, namely *Kuwait Transformed* by Farah al-Nakib. This book has also been useful in detailing where key locations were before the massive transformations that turned Kuwait Town into Kuwait City, including the locations of the houses of different social classes or labor categories, dhow-construction sites, souks, and more. It is also based upon this text that I highlight the change from open-air *souks* to huge malls, dhow-construction sites to beaches, and flat homes with courtyards to high-rise towers and apartment buildings.

Glossary

Battula: a sort of face covering used by women in the region. It looks metallic and covers the lower nose and mouth. It was more common in the past than it is today.

Bismillah: literally, “in the name of God,” a phrase often mentioned before starting something

Chicken fish: I could not find the English equivalent of this, but it was apparently a common fish in the Arabian Gulf. It was the size of the hand and had poisonous spikes. See al-Shamlan's memoir, page 121 for more.

Dhow: a small ship used historically in the Indian ocean region

Dhuhr: noontime. “dhuhr prayer” is the noontime prayer, one of the 5 daily prayers.

Halaqa: literally, “circle.” A halaqa at the masjid usually refers to a group of people sitting in a circle to learn from a teacher.

Jaddi: literally, “my grandfather”

Jinn: spirits, or beings made of fire. They are generally invisible to humans, but are believed to be able to see us and sometimes whisper into the minds of humans.

Khutbah: sermon

Majlis: a communal sitting or gathering. Today it is often associated with political national assemblies.

MashaAllah: literally, “this is what Allah willed.” Usually uttered when someone sees, hears, or is presented with something positive or desirable.

Masjid: mosque

Qahwa: coffee

Quffal: literally, “Closing,” the holiday around September when the summer winds would stop blowing and the pearl fishing boats would return to the town. This is mentioned on pages 104-105 of al-Shamlan’s memoir.

Raqi: derived from the term “*ruqyah*,” which means healing, a *raqi* is one who uses Islamic methods such as reciting the Quran, other various prayers, and prophetic remedies for healing. They are often associated with jinn exorcisms but not always; they are known for treating physical illnesses too.

Shanab: mustache

Sibb: lower-class laborers who did the manual labor on the pearl fishing dhows, including pulling up the divers when they gave the tug on their attached ropes. See al-Shamlan’s memoir, page 73 for more details.

Sinbad: Sinbad the Sailor was a character made famous by the *Thousand Nights*, which was set between historic Iraq and Persia. Sinbad sailed around the Indian Ocean region.

Souk: marketplace

Surat al-Fatihah: the first chapter of the Quran, often recited in honor of a deceased person

Thawb: an long-sleeved garment that hangs to the ankles or slightly above them. Often white and worn by men.

Yalla: an exclamation that usually means “come on!” or “hurry up!”. I honestly do not know if the people in this region/time period actually used this term, but I do know that today it is a commonly used term throughout the Arab-speaking world.