

Awakening from a chemically induced slumber his eyes parted with some resistance. A sticky crust had formed along his eyelids, the organic green mortar clinging tenaciously to the lashes. It did not give way easily. Did he really want to open his eyes? Darkness greeted him, yet he knew he was not yet blind. There was something else covering his eyes. A blindfold perhaps? No, it must be a hood of some kind. The coarse cloth weighed itself upon his head like a lead crown. Every slight movement made the cloth rub itself across his face like sandpaper, causing further abrasions and grazing on his sweat drenched skin. No doubt he would have a rash now, maybe blood had been drawn. A sickly, sweet smell clung inside his nostrils, invasive tendrils. It was a smell that he would recognise anywhere. An all too familiar aroma. A local anaesthetic. Judging by the scent, more than likely chloroform. First used in a clinical environment by the dentist Francis Imlach of Edinburgh. He was from Edinburgh too. He remembered that. Francis used it on patients before he wrenched their rotting teeth from red, receding, bleeding gums. Chloroform must have been a deliverance for those souls previously enforced to endure the torture of an orthodontic yanking in full consciousness. There was good reason to fear the dentist in those days. He had a good idea he would be hoping chloroform might yet prove to be a deliverance. More than likely however, it had in fact delivered him.

Robbed of his sight he made full use of his God given senses. A whirring sound reverberated above and around his body. The mechanical vibrations wound their way from the ground, through his bones and arrived at a cadence inside his skull. The noise was consistent and not all unpleasant, a welcome monotony in his disorganised mind as it began its primal induced struggle to something resembling lucidness. The sound was quiet, yet behind it a deceptive speed and urgency could be perceived. A hard floor was his mattress. His limbs contracted. No use, he was bound tight. Around his wrists a cold metal held them taut. His ankles and legs were bound tight with what felt like rope. His restraints gave way slightly. The blood flow returned to his starved limbs bringing with it a stinging sensation; as though one were resting upon a bed of thorns and nettles. It didn't take much guessing to work out what had transpired. He had been taken captive. By whom, or indeed when, he could not yet say or guess at. The residuary effects of chloroform were still numbing his senses. The machinations of his mind were still disorientated and hazy. Fear and apprehension congealed into one vast globule of petrified shock. With a sudden awareness he struggled at his binds with unbridled apoplexy. He must get free. The whirring noise was broken by the sound of a laugh. It was not a laugh in good humour; it barely concealed a palpable malice. It was not a laugh that one instinctively wished to laugh alongside; the ill feeling behind this jeering cackle was unmistakable. The owner of the laugh spoke in a condescending, mocking tone.

"Well, well. Look who's finally smelled the roses huh? How yah feelin' buddy? You've been sleepin' like a baby for the past two days!"

The drawl was unmistakably American. Southern; it sounded like one of the cowboys from the 'Old West', John Wayne come back from the dead. And it was deep, nearly beyond the comprehension of the aural human register. Bass-like, its vibrations overwhelmed the previously all-consuming whirring noise and clashed dissonantly with the previously comforting cadence. The captive ceased moving; the voice seemed terribly familiar, an echo passed fleetingly through the prisoners' mind. Where had he heard it before? The footsteps of heavy boots moved ever closer.

"Hey! I'm talkin' to you raghead! Don't you ignore me! I definitely. Do. Not. Appreciate it!"

The voice was now only a few feet away from him. Loud, uncaring and with more than a hint of menace. A firm grip grasped onto the hood like a vice and pulled up sharply, ripping away with it a large clump of hair. Anaesthetic may have dulled the pain; it did not completely oblivate it. The effects were now beginning to wear off. Light flooded into his retinas, overwhelmingly bright. His large pupils

contracted to pinpoint size, aghast at this sudden eruption of sensation after hours of dormancy. In front of him there was the silhouette of a large man, screened in front of an open cargo door. It appeared that he was travelling on a helicopter. The man was at least six feet in height with square shoulders and a wide stance, the menacing figure began to loom forward, bending at the waist as he did so. From darkness into light the figure made himself fully visible. Cropped blond hair, a wide jaw and a face with what once must have been chiselled, angular features made itself known with all its terrible splendour. The cool blue eyes embedded within stared back with as much life as old puddles. His face had the appearance of a marble statue weathered by the elements. Once proud features were now blunted and blurry, bearing witness to the trials and savagery it had experienced; or indeed inflicted on others.

The captive spoke tentatively, his voice cracking through lack of lubrication, "Who... who are you?"

The gnarled face twisted into a sham of a smile, exposing his teeth; standing like white pillars of salt. "Woo! Oh my God! Holy Jesus! That stuff must've been strong. Don't go tellin' me you've forgotten who I am already?! Come on Paul! Shall I refresh your memory!" He lashed a kick at the body sprawled on the floor. A steel-capped toe connected directly with the gut. The body, deflated, lay like a week-old helium balloon. A cacophony of choking and coughing followed, a not unexpected reaction and one that brought a twinge of joy to the gnarl-faced perpetrator.

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So, my name is Paul. Yes, I remember now. I was named after my father. And what of my mother? Her name was Natara. She was from Mosul. That is why I went. To the birthplace of my mother. She fled because of the bombs and the blood. And that is why I went back. The bombs and the blood.

Paul was a doctor; a healer, someone who saved lives. Watching the streets run red, painted with viscera, ignited that selfless compulsion to do some good. He had returned to the land of Adam; the origin of mankind's original malady. It was a matter of principle as much as he felt compelled by his oath. Indeed, the oath of Hippocrates was inviolable in his eyes.

*'May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.'*

There was no greater calling. And indeed, there was no greater honour than in saving another's life. Life had to be viewed in objective terms. Questions of the soul and morality all too often relied wholly on the subjective. Thankfully, he did not have to deal in such terms. Although wars were often fought along such principles: good and evil, right and wrong, believer and non-believer; these were irrelevant when deciding on the right to life or healing those purveyors of conflict. Patients were sorted according to need, a true meritocracy. Wealth, race, faith or personality, they did not matter. Paul regarded it as a triumph of humanity that the purity and ethereal nature of death had been secured by the miracle of human ingenuity: humanity had conquered its own base nature. Pure objectivity. Paul was as close as someone could come to being God. Although he was careful never to think of himself in such terms. As close as someone could come to being God. He had volunteered to come to this land as part of a Medical NGO. Erecting white canvas tents around the desert, they helped those unfortunate enough to require attention. Many of these tents began to blossom like roses, cream at first before blooming into deep crimson. Following the conflict like a trading caravan, the doctors moved around from place to place. Paul often observed how like the nomadic tribes of Biblical times their travels were? As though seeking some new oasis on which to subsist. A silk road whose common trade was bullets, bombs and life. Even in this age of human invention some things always remained the same; is it not often said that history is merely the reflection of the future?

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“Paul?” Not so much a question as an order to attention. “Paul? Goddammit! Stop sitting there with your head in the clouds? Do you remember me now?”

Paul’s aching belly ensured he would not be forgetting him soon at any rate. But where had he heard that voice before? As every avalanche proceeds from one loose flake, Paul’s memories began to snowball, filling in the previously empty crevices. He had heard the voice just before he had been seized. Indeed, it was the final sound that he had heard before...

“Hey! Do. You. Remember. Me!?” Gnarled-face was standing hand on hips with a face that might have been carved from granite. Paul could only stare back: although the intense eye contact was most uncomfortable. It was the glare of Medusa herself. The man let out an audible sigh. ‘I thought that stuff would have worn off by now.’ This was not directed at Paul. The man was talking to himself in frustration. ‘Oh well’ Striding forward once more, he grasped Paul’s chin in his left hand and sunk his claw like fingers into the cheeks as an eagle snares a frightened rabbit. The talons forcefully yanked Paul’s chin up and his neck jarred. Before he had time to react, the great right hand was clenched in a mean looking fist, flying towards his nose. The fist struck Paul on the face with such ferocity that his head crashed into the back wall of the helicopter. The knuckles had embedded themselves into the bridge of his nose; it offered little resistance. A warm feeling oozed its way down Paul’s philtrum, over his lips and off his chin. At first a trickle, it soon began to cascade down in rivulets. He felt faint and groggy, the last thing he could remember before the descent into blackness was a faint taste of metal.

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Calloused hands pulled on a roughly plaited rope, wrenching with maximum effort. Occasionally the rope would slip from his grasp, and the resulting friction would cause blisters to erupt on his rugged palms. The bucket tied to the end was full to the brim with water. At least 30 feet deep, this well was now the only source of nourishment for miles on end. Paul had made the pilgrimage from the field hospital to the well and back ten times already today, and it was only just past noon. Hard work, but honest. Paul did not grudge this chore. He had after all taken it upon himself to come to this land; on this great pilgrimage. He had known that it would be a hard and mostly thankless task, although Paul knew that happiness derived from fulfilment, not compliments and eminence. Two buckets were filled on each journey. Paul took one in each hand as he began the ten-minute progress back to his place of work, where he knew the injured, ill and dying lay in waiting.

He walked with a steady gait and a self-conscious attentiveness, being careful not spill any of the water that splashed perilously close to the brim. The well was situated in the middle of a khaki hued valley. The hills on either side rose up with broad shoulders, five hundred feet on either side. Directly above, the sun cast its menacing glare on Paul’s neck, searing the skin like bacon. Coarse gravel crunched under foot as Paul made his way through the remnants of a village. The alabaster white buildings appeared derelict, and several of them were missing essential masonry like toothless skulls. On either side of the main road skeletons of apricot trees stood naked with brittle branches ossified by nature’s wrath. The streets lay deserted; shops that had once been bustling now knew no noise. A street, long and broad, ran poker straight through the village. It reminded Paul of Princes Street. Corrugated iron roofs, designed to keep out the sun, rusted into burnt umber and turned to dust. As Paul traversed this tunnel, he caught glimpses of shadows running alongside. Even in this seemingly deserted place, life persisted. The indefatigability of man was undeniable. The indefatigability of children even more so. His forearms began to cramp, and the laughter of kids rose from the shadows. He smiled. Paul heard gravel crunching under feet; the children were getting brave. Before he had time to turn and

chase them off a strong arm had grasped him around the throat and a rag was being placed over his face. That sick, sweetly smell engulfed his lungs and the buckets slipped from his grip with a crash. No matter how hard he tried to fight it seemed that all energy had been sapped from his limbs. He felt faint. The strong arm pulled him backwards and he collapsed; the gravel pierced up and into his back as though he'd fallen on a bed of nails. The mid-day sun was directly overhead; he saw only white as the sun's rays shone around and through him. A man with a Southern drawl enquired contemptuously, "Paul? Why did you lie to us Paul?".

Delirium was taking hold, the sweet smell coating every fibre of his being and will to maintain consciousness. With his last breath he replied, "Who are you?" The response was cold and yet exulting with relish. "Your worst nightmare Paul! Get on your feet and do what we say!".

The children remained watching in the shadows making no sound. They heard the voice but knew not from where the three men had appeared. One had a rifle pointed at Paul's head, while the other two had grabbed an arm each, hoisting him to his feet with little regard for comfort. Paul rose. A sack was thrust upon his head. He was blind. Rocks and stones cut his knees as Paul was dragged to his fate. His consciousness lapsed. The only trace of his presence could be seen on the ground; two buckets lay overturned, and the water seeped into barren ground.

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He woke. His raw knees were being dragged across coarse ground once more. At this rate his kneecaps would be of little more than bloody. He wondered if this was real and not the result of some hallucinogen, or perhaps even a manifestation of psychosis. Madness after all, had a repetitive nature. It was a well-trodden, circular and unkempt path. The kidnappers had delivered him to his destination, the helicopter had been disembarked. When, or how, he was not aware. Even now, perhaps it was hovering overhead, ready to swoop like a falcon on its next victim. Carefully, Paul's eyelids parted a sliver, giving him a view of his surroundings. The sun was bright. From what he could tell he was now in a military complex of some kind. Wire fences topped with razor sharp metal coils ran parallel to him on either side. On one side palm trees leaned luxuriantly, and beyond them, rolling hills carpeted with vibrant green grass and a canopy of forest stretching for miles. On the other side, muddy beige jeeps were parked row after row. He struggled to breathe; blood had coagulated inside his nostrils. He snorted, discharging the bloody goo with some velocity onto the ground. Once more, Paul heard the cruel laugh of his captor. It was joined in dreadful harmony by another laugh. Slightly higher in pitch, but no less callous. Paul found his voice. "Where have you taken me?".

The Gnarl-faced man looked down in disdain. "I can't rightfully tell you that. Classified information you see. Could lose my job if I told you. And we wouldn't want that to happen." He paused for a few seconds; the silence broken only by the sound of Paul's knees grating across the ground. 'Tell you what Paul. I'll give you a clue'. The man began to sing a soft melody.

*'A sincere man am I from the land where palm trees grow. And I want before I die my soul's verses to bestow. I know how to name and class all the strange flowers that grow; I know every blade of grass, fatal lie and sublime woe...'*

Paul recognised this refrain. Clearing his throat, he continued the tune with a hoarse voice.

*'I know when fools are laid to rest, honour and tears will abound. And that of all fruits, the best is left to rot in holy ground. Without a word, the pompous muse I've set aside, and understood: From a withered branch, I choose to hang my doctoral hood.'*

“Aha! A man of letters I see Paul. Good old José Martí, although I’m more of a Kipling man myself. They say Martí was Castro’s inspiration. He didn’t die too far from here you know. About eighty miles to the west. Came back to the homeland to liberate it from the Spanish yoke. He rode into battle on the back of a magnificent white horse and got himself shot clean off! For someone so clever that sure was a damn stupid thing to do! I mean, a horse is about six times the size of a man. You’d have to be a mighty bad aim to miss a beast that size! Besides, you can hardly get a clean shot riding on the back of the damned thing in the first place! Takes enough effort just to cling onto the saddle. You know what I think? I think he had a death wish. He wanted to die a martyr did José. I wonder what he would be thinking if he could hear me right now singing his little tune. Don’t think he would be too happy about it!’ Paul found his feet and began to stumble forwards. ‘I guess you know where you are now then?’”, the Gnarl-faced man concluded gloatingly. “Welcome to Paradise.”

Now that he was on his feet, his captors tightened their grip under his armpits, their free hands pinned to his throat. Any notion of escape seemed futile; not least because the repercussions of an attempt could prove fatal. Paul had the feeling that any execution would not be swift. They turned a sharp corner, steering Paul like shepherds driving a stray sheep. A building loomed into view ominously into view at the end of the pathway. Drab and almost featureless; it was a grey-brick cube with a flat roof, perhaps fifteen feet tall. The exterior was windowless, revealing no signs of habitation. The only apparent signs of life being lengths of brown fungus could be seen projecting up the walls in long, dirty fingers. In the middle of the façade, a single door stood shut. It had not been painted or varnished; the weather-beaten wood was pockmarked where nodules of twisted wood had worked their way loose. They reached the building, and the captor holding Paul’s right arm rapped on the door. After a couple of seconds, it opened inwards, creaking loudly as it did so. A man wearing sand coloured, fatigues revealed himself on the other side of the threshold. Only his eyes were visible, the rest of his face concealed behind a black balaclava. He grunted and gestured towards the darkness lying behind him. Paul took this as a sign that his admittance was approved. Paul’s feet carried him forwards and into the void, a yawning chasm. In the darkness, Paul could make out a set of concrete stairs. They spiralled downwards clinging to the wall at every turn. Breathing became difficult once more; the air was thickly saturated with dust particles. Every breath irritated the lungs and he could feel his nose and throat beginning to coat itself with thick mucus. It proved impossible to hold his cough in any longer; razor wire slashed across his oesophagus with every spasm. Through the dust and darkness his captors guided him through the downward, spiralling descent. Their steps reverberated for a second before the walls of the building absorbed them, smothering them softly before any echo could take form. They fell at first as a dull thud, before dissipating into nothingness. After six flights or more, Paul had crawled to the bottom of the building’s gullet, guided like a convict to the gallows. He now arrived at a door, only visible due to the orange glow which crept its way around the frame; he was ready to be devoured.

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Paul dropped to the ground. His arms had been released. He discovered that his legs could not yet bear his weight. They gave way under him; his calves and thighs feeling feeble and atrophied. The captor to his right raised a leg and kicked the door open with the flat of his foot. It swung open violently, hitting the wall with a bang before it swung back in towards the threshold. Paul felt himself being hoisted unmercifully once more. They dragged him briskly into the room which shone with an eerie, otherworldly glow. Barely twenty feet in length and width and bereft of furnishings. Cracked white plaster clung to the walls, fallen flakes of which littered the floor like piles of dandruff. The air was humid and stale, enveloping Paul’s body like a velvet coffin, oppressive and claustrophobic. Embedded in the ceiling, a sodium-infused lightbulb dangled from a wire, a solitary firefly hovering in

anticipation. Its sanguine tinge reminded Paul of the darkrooms where photographs are developed; where negatives are turned into a climactic positive image; the final form. Directly below the lightbulb was a chair; not unlike one you might sit in at a dental surgery. It had a headrest, armrest and footrest. The cushions were protected with a thin clear plastic cover which glinted in the light giving it a shiny veneer. In the corner to the right, a long thin hose was fastened to a tap, and next to that sat a petrol can. As Paul was flanked to the chair, he became aware of some of its more unconventional elements. Straps and belts were affixed to the footrest, armrests and headrest. Adrenaline surged through his body; his heart groaned under the strain of its own beating. He dug his heels into the ground, spending his final reserves of energy. It made no difference, he slid along the rubber flooring, his heels squeaking as he went. His captors spun him around, pushing his chest as he collapsed into the dentists' chair. One held him down, while the other set to work strapping down his feet. He felt the straps grasping his ankles tightly. Barely a second passed before he felt a stinging sensation in his feet; his blood finding its way barred to the extremities. Once his ankles were secured, they moved onto his raw and blistered hands. His forearms were pinned down while his wrists were fixed in place. It was impossible to move; they might have been buried in cement. Finally, they turned their attentions to his head. The leather strap was lashed across his forehead and yanked through a buckle until taut, a mocking crown. These subdued him, viciously restricting him like an anaconda throttles a wild pig. Sweat trickled down his forehead, soaking his eyebrows before streaming to his eyes. The salt stung. The heat was so oppressive that Paul felt his eyes would become salt pans. He now longed for chloroform.

"Right then!" Gnarled-faced man swaggered towards the chair. The other captor had already slunk away. "Let's get down to business then! We went to some effort to get you here Paul. Had to bend a few rules, stretch a few laws. Whatever, they're the same thing. Both equally irrelevant to your current predicament in any case!" Gnarled-faced now began to pace back and forth across the room, his hands clasped tightly behind his back. "You know who I am now, don't you?!"

"You... you are my worst nightmare!", Paul spat back at him. His jelly-like saliva clung to the back of his throat.

"Oh Paul, I am touched", he mocked. "I'm Malcolm. Well, not really. But I'm Malcolm to you. That's what I've decided you'll call me. I've many names." He paused. "I am also your nightmare. You've got that damn right. I'll make your most horrible nightmare seem like your hottest wet dream by the time I'm done with you Paul." He released an evil chuckle, amused by his own quip. "Oh, lighten up Paul. It's not as if I'm going to kill you... not my intent anyway." Malcolm unclasped his hands bring them to the front; he held a rolled-up piece of paper one. Slowly, he made his way to Paul's side, one foot swinging nonchalantly in front of the other. "So, this is why we're here Paul", he stated matter-of-factly, brandishing the unfurled piece of paper like a prophet's scroll. "This is what it all comes down to. This is why we've dragged you halfway across the world. Hell, even Columbus didn't get this far! I want you to tell me everything you know...", he paused taking a sharp inhale of breath, "... about this man." Malcolm shoved the scroll in front of Paul's face accusatorily. A photograph. It was a portrait of a man in black and white. The cheekbones were prominent and cast dark shadows down his cheeks. Above the right eye there was a prominent scar; the eye themselves were black intense pools. It was a gaunt face, curtained by unruly twisted hair. "Where did you meet him? How did you meet him? Have you ever given each other a foot massage? When did you first hold hands? Everything."

Paul felt his heart sink in his chest. A lump rose in the back his throat, choking him. His stomach flipped, he felt nauseous. "Yeah... Yes. I re-re-recognise him", he stuttered. "He was a patient of mine. I remember all my patients".

“Is that all Paul?”, Malcolm menaced. “Was he just a patient?” Paul heard footsteps drift behind him. He heard the squeaking sound of a long dormant tap being turned on. He heard running water patter on the ground like rain drops. How he longed for the soothing caress of rain. Suddenly, he became aware of an all-consuming thirst. Dragging his tongue around his gums and palate, his mouth felt of leather. The only moisture in his entire body either coagulated in the back of his throat or trickled down his face.

“Please. Please. Water”, he pleaded, against his better judgement. Necessity is the harbinger of desperation and begging.

“Oh. No problem Paul. I’ll give you water.” Malcolm lifted the petrol can unscrewing the lid. He jammed the hose inside the orifice and began to fill it. As he did so, the drumming of the water inside rose in pitch, then disappeared altogether in a silent finale. It was filled to the brim. “Right Paul. You ready?” His heart began to race. Relief and dopamine washed over him, expectant.

Paul croaked. “Yes!” He sat rigid to the chair. Suddenly, the chair reclined backwards; soon he was lying anti-prostrate on his back, exposed to the orange bulb casting its ethereal light over his face. Malcolm scolded him, his terrible voice taking an even more menacing tone. “Tell me everything you know about this man!”, shoving the picture once more in front of Paul’s face. Before Paul had a chance to react, a cloth replaced the photo. It slapped onto his face, enveloping it. A cold, wet sensation, slight at first, then made a torrent. Water soaked through the material, rushing its way down his nostrils like rapids flooding into every crevice in his nasal cavity. His sinuses felt fit to burst through his eye-sockets, the pressure increasing exponentially with every racing heartbeat. Every synapse in his brain cried out in agony, wishing an end to this torment by any means possible. He was drowning. Primal instinct kicked in and his limbs thrashed hard against the restraints in self-preservation, to no avail. Joints cracked, tendons tore, and bones broke such was the ferocity of his resistance. The rapids rushed down his throat, surging like a tsunami into his lungs, submerging the bronchi. A great flood overwhelming and cleansing whatever stood in its path. Time and space began to merge, then began to fade. As the darkness, that perpetual and conceptual nothingness, closed in around him, Paul heard a voice. “You said you wanted water?”.

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The tent had been drenched with various fluids; they melded together into a putrid concoction of misery. Tears, blood and piss mingled with the metallic smell of cordite. The stench hung like vulture. One did well not to ponder what entrails such a vulture feasted on. The field hospital was at full capacity. Indeed, it was now over capacity. Twenty people lay on gurneys, crushed next to each other, like hens in a battery farm. Below them, those other injured, dead, and soon-to-be-dead merged on the floor wherever they could find space. A chorus of wails emanated from them like some ghoulis Gregorian lament. Paul had arrived at the city hastily three days ago, along with the medical caravan. On the outskirts, the tent had been erected with a sense of urgency in anticipation of the casualties that would certainly come. The desert lay behind them, in front a concrete jungle that would shortly be felled; reduced to rubble. In those three days, he had managed six hours sleep. Although one expected casualties in war, this battle had borne witness to a bloodshed hitherto unseen. The coalition had arrived to liberate the city from the barbarian horde who had invaded and established their fiefdom some years before. It had been hard-fought. Every square inch of land had been contested fiercely and purchased with blood. Street to street, house to house, room to room. Women and children arrived more frequently than any combatants. A conveyor belt of bullet wounds, lost limbs, and shrapnel studded skin.

Paul knelt next to his current patient; a young boy with a wound smitten across his forehead. He didn't flinch once as Paul stitched the skin on either side of the gash together. A needle punctured the skin on either side, trailing through tightly knotted thread. Only after Paul said a few comforting words in Arabic did the boy show any sign of emotion; he was surprised at this stranger speaking his language. "My mother", explained Paul, "she was from this land. Her dream was for me to come here someday." The boy furrowed his brow in confusion. "Although not like this", Paul added hastily. He gave the boy a soft clap on the back, then turned to see who required attention next. As he searched, a low humming noise became audible. It rose rapidly with a deafening, high-pitched crescendo. Paul went outside. The sun was just beginning to set. He gazed up at the pink sky. Above, a missile blazed across the heavens, leaving behind a dirty, smoky trail that scarred the cloudless sky. "Woohoo! Go get 'em!" Paul turned. It was one of the hospital guards, a rifle slung across his chest. A detachment of Westerners had been assigned to guard them. Whether they were private, or special forces, Paul did not know. He had the feeling they weren't there purely to guard the hospital either. More than once they had enquired after the names and other details of some patients, seemingly at random. And more than once, some patients had decided to discharge themselves, unaccounted for in the dead of night.

"What are you staring at Doc?" Paul disliked this particular guard. Of all the unsavoury guards, he disliked this one the most. He had cropped blond hair, a wide jaw and what once must have been chiselled, angular features. The cold blue eyes stared back, or rather stared though. A penetrating stare. Paul often got the feeling he was being x-rayed.

"Nothing", Paul answered offhand.

"Look here. That was a friendly missile. On its way to blow up some good for nothin' terrorists. You better believe I'm gonna be cheering that!".

Far above, the sound of the missile faded as it whistled overhead at supersonic speed. As it subsided, the Call to Prayer, began to echo around the city. From their minarets, the mu'azzin summoned the faithful. Their tranquil and unaccompanied lamentations reverberated around the streets.

"Guess you better get your rug out then, Doc".

"I'm not a Muslim." He replied testily.

"Oh yeah. Your momma was though. Wasn't she? That's what they're all saying around here."

"No. She was a Marronite."

"A Marro-what!?"

"A Marronite. A Christian."

"Oh. Right then, ok. You people all look the same to me anyway."

Paul started back to the wards in disgust. These people travelled halfway around the world to fight in a country they didn't even begin, or try, to understand. Better said, they fought for the sake of fighting. On the rare occasions they sincerely believed they were fighting for something bigger than themselves, that justification was formed on the basis of an outright lie. Fighting for freedom. For security. It wasn't true. These people fought for money. They signed up in return for a wage. They fought in the interests of money. Ideas of freedom and democracy were a lie they told themselves in the interests of maintaining superiority. Not just moral superiority; but ideological, religious, and yes, even ethnic superiority. People tell themselves lies so often and so deep they themselves begin to

believe them. And if enough people tell themselves the same lie it begins to permeate society; and, given time, mutates into a horrible form of truth. Like a cancer, it begins with some small blight, in some small neglected corner of our consciousness. Before long, it has metastasised to our subconscious, then the preconscious, before taking over the soul. Seeking comfort in lies is a horrible affliction, and a terminal one when it is a lie that we ourselves come to believe in earnest.

The Call to Prayer ended. As is it did, the earth shook, and a bang could be faintly heard in the distance. Paul looked behind him. A mushroom cloud began to rise a few miles away.

“Bullseye!” The Gnarl-faced guard grinned bearing bine white molar.

For the remainder of the evening, the injured and sick continued to filter through in morbid procession. Paul had no doubt some of them had been caught in the blast that rocked the city only a few hours earlier. Even now the mushroom cloud loomed on the horizon, the smell of sulphur clogging the throat. The young boy with the wounded forehead sat at the mouth of the tent, apparently sleeping. There was no home for him to return to. He sat crossed legged, his head lolling to one side. He didn't stir, even as the freshly wounded were carried or limped, many wailing as they did so. Paul was treating a male patient who had a large shrapnel wound in the side of his abdomen. Despite his relative youth, he had the look of a man who had lived through a thousand years. The gauntness of his face gave was corpselike; skin stretched tight across skull, as though freshly embalmed. Above his right eye, a deep cut slashed above the brow. His twisted hair; matted with blood and sweat clung to his hollow cheeks.

Most of the shrapnel was deeply embedded in the man's midriff; it had lacerated the flesh and penetrated the organs, burrowing inwards like metal ticks. Based on the extent of his injuries, it was clear the man had been close to the blast. Paul's attention was drawn to several healed wounds scattered at random over the man's body. Circular scars pockmarked his upper chest, around an inch in diameter; Paul had seen these injuries before. The unmistakable signs of bullet entry wounds. No one was quite sure how the man had managed to find his way to the hospital. There was no possibility he had done so under his own steam and they had found him deposited unceremoniously a few yards outside the hospital entrance. Whoever had delivered him did not linger long; there were no signs of friends or family. He had arrived not a moment too soon, a few minutes later and any treatment would have been futile.

Paul drenched the open wounds with iodine, the yellow liquid stained his skin and splattered on the floor. The already jaundiced flesh took an even more yellow hue, like aged vellum. At the mouth of the tent, the young boy stirred to attention. Tensing, he now sat bolt upright, steadying himself with one hand on the ground as he did so. His face was scrunched up in an expression of intense recollection. His eyes fixed on the male patient that Paul was treating. Fear emanated palpably from his very person; his limbs went rigid.

“He is one of the barbarians!” He screamed this with such urgency that Paul could scarcely understand a word he said.

“What do you mean?”, Paul replied.

“He is one of the occupiers. I remember him. He is a bad man.”

“You mean he is... one of them?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes. They killed... many of us. My family. My friends...”

Paul glanced at the man who lay unconscious before him, and helpless. A man, he now knew, to be the enemy. A devil intent on spreading devastation. A murderer, a scourge of civilisation. A wrecker of nations and rapist of culture. This epitome of evil now lay at Paul's mercy. Ironic that these barbarians wished to set back several centuries of humanitarian progress, but had no qualms taking advantage of such progress when it suited them.

But surely, Paul thought, he should have no enemy? He was not an arbiter of justice. There was but one purpose for his being here: preserve life. Oaths were made for these very moments when the mind is prone to waiver. Whatever this man had done, he would surely answer for in time, and be judged by those who were fit to judge. Paul was not the person to hand down a sentence; and was certainly not the one to carry it out. That would be his own tribute to human progress. That would be his response to savagery and ignorance: mercy. Arbitration must take place in a transparent process, not through the machinations of vengeance and anger.

"Please! Please! Get him away from me!", the boy cried in horror. Lurching to his feet unsteadily like a new-born deer, he cantered back towards the city with desperate speed. His pleas to God rang out as he stumbled over foot and tripped upon jagged rocks. Paul watched him run until he finally shrunk into nothingness; his silhouette becoming indistinguishable against the grey ruins of bombed-out decaying buildings.

"Say, what was *he* hollerin' about?" The Gnarled-faced soldier had entered the tent. It was "Malcolm". Malcolm was standing there now, looking at him with those cold, dead eyes. "Can't get any shut eye 'round here! What, with all the screaming and the yelpin'? Now we got some baby raghead near enough screaming his lungs up in the dead of night! What's his problem? Did he find out the ho virgins where a lie?"

Paul reflexively glanced at the iodine drenched man. This glance did not escape the Malcom. "What? Something about that lame gimp lying there?" He pointed the barrel of his rifle in the direction of the man ominously as he made to move further inside.

"It's just...", Paul started, his oath weighing heavy upon his tongue, "... this man is family to that child. A cousin. The boy thought he had died long ago. He is going to let the rest of the family know." Paul gritted his teeth, swallowing a thick globule of saliva as he did so. Malcolm lingered for a few seconds; his eyes unwavering from the body of the man lying still on the gurney. He appeared to be scanning this tale for veracity.

"Poor bastard. I'll need to run quick; this sucker's 'bout to shuffle off this mortal coil."

Paul held his breath.

"Just make sure to keep the damn noise down." Malcolm turned quick on his heels and marched back to his post. Paul had not been truthful. He felt for good reason, he was certain he had saved the injured man from execution. Or perhaps a fate that was even worse.

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"You knew that he was a bad apple Paul. And you didn't tell me? Why did you squirrel away that Paul? Why let a bad apple spoil the batch?"

Paul wrenched his eyes. Water still swilled around in his lungs. The sensation made him nauseous. He wretched and vomited loudly, the lukewarm water dribbled down his chin and pooled on his chest. His airways felt as though he had gargled with acid, raw and burned. In his mouth, the metallic taste of blood flowed from burst capillaries and brought with it further overwhelming nausea. Every breath

was replete with an almost inexorable pain. The agony emanating from his diaphragm with each contraction made it almost impossible to inhale or exhale with any great depth. Consequently, he drew short, sharp breaths causing him to hyperventilate and gag on his own oxygen.

Composing himself, Paul uttered in barely a whisper, *'Whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession... as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men... if it be what should not be published abroad... I will never divulge... holding such things to be holy secrets.'*

A wry smirk spread on Malcom's face. "What crap is this?", he scoffed.

"The oath I took upon becoming a Doctor. It is sacrosanct. I live and work on absolute terms. My job is to preserve life by whatever means. It is not my place to cast judgement on who is worthy of keeping it. That is not for me to decide." He drew a deep breath, cursing himself in pain as he did so. "You would have killed that man if I told you who he was. Or perhaps you would have taken him here, to torture him. To maim him. To punish him. I could not allow that. Not at any price, and least of all at the price of my principles."

"Your principles you say?" Malcolm asked condescendingly. "You say you took an oath to preserve life? It is your duty to protect it? Let me recount another part of your oath Paul. Perhaps you forgot this part." Clearing his throat theatrically Malcolm continued, *'Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course.'* He stared at Paul with wild eyes. "You allowed a poison to seep into our midst. You let a contagion wander free; free to infect and destroy whatever it touches. You didn't do your duty; you broke your vow. Are you suggesting that allowing a known bandit P.O.S into society, no, *helping* him back into society was the right thing to do?"

"The right thing to do... was to let him live. He did not ask me for help; the choice was made for both of us. How am I to know what a man will do once given another chance? People can change. I've seen with my own eyes. When faced with the reality of their own mortality, people awake to all that is possible. Our outer nature may whittle and waste away like granite eroded by the wind, but our inner nature can be renewed every day. These things may not be certain, but I know one thing that is. That injured man would have met his death had I handed him over to you. Or it might be him sitting here in my place now, drowning in his own vomit. If I could be sure that you would have treated him fairly. If I could be sure that you would not have harmed him, I would have told you the truth."

Malcom pondered over Paul's words. His tongue pushed against the inside of his cheek and wound its way around his front teeth, scraping plaque off as it did so. Finally, he said, "That 'man' had a name. Hashim. Well, you'll be sad to know that Hashim is no longer with us Paul. And he didn't shuffle off this mortal coil all alone. No! He took about six of my men with him! ...at least we think from counting the body parts. Wasn't much left of them once your friend with his new 'renewed inner nature' decided to take off for Paradise with nitro-glycerine attached to his damn chest!"

Malcom marched to the wall with heavy feet and kicked it with such force that dust fell from the ceiling; it scattered like snowflakes in the dull light. Malcolm stared blankly at the wall for a few seconds before continuing. "So, what whaddaya think of that? Actions have consequences Paul! What a *great* job you did protecting life. Thanks to you six of my people died needlessly! SIX! And you sit there with your morals and your oath. Well, not even that can absolve you. You can sit on your high horse philosophising with your morality and your principles. They mean *nothing*. Ultimately nothing. Look where they've got you! Whose shoes would you rather be in right now? Mine or yours? Maybe it makes you feel superior. Maybe it makes it easier for you to justify the fact that you are responsible for the deaths of my men. And it's all thanks to you letting that monster loose."

Paul lay still, gathering enough saliva in order to deliver his rebuttal through parched lips. "I always intended to return to my motherland. I only ever wanted to help. That was all. It did not matter who the people were. I am under obligation to help every faction; that is to say, all men. To help the wise and the foolish alike." Paul paused and then continued. "And who are you, Malcolm, to judge Hashim a monster?"

Malcolm, snarling his teeth and rose up like some great silverback. "WHAT did you just say to me!? Who am I!?" His hair bristling, stood on end, held up with a pomade of sweat and oil. Steam rose from his person as the sweat evaporated from his shoulders. He did not shout; but lowered his voice to a growl.

"Who decides he is a monster? Who decides I have failed in my duties? We are all reflections of a subjective truth in the minds of other people. We are all changed into that likeness from one degree to another, depending on what people know, and what people think they know. You hate me. You detest me, because you know little of my motives, nor could you understand them. You think that Hashim is a monster. You detest him, because you know little of his life."

Paul finished, laying still as though the gurney was his final resting place. The anguished roar of Malcolm pierced his ear drum like a dagger. Bestial rage filled the room with a terrible malice imbued fog. The rag once more was slapped onto Paul's face. He could no longer see. The water surged towards his lungs again, and consciousness departed once more. Madness was a well-trodden, circular and unkempt path.

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It had taken some days for the injured man to recover. By some miracle, he survived his injuries and had begun to recover some level of consciousness. The iodine still stained his side, although his skin no longer held the sallow complexion of death. Paul had kept a close eye on him, an easily concealed task. After all, a doctor must keep a close eye on their patients. After another few days rest, the man was up, walking with the aid of a crutch. He eagerly accepted any cigarettes offered to him with grace. One day, while he was limping out of the tent to satiate that all-consuming urge for nicotine, Paul followed him outside. As the men stood shoulder to shoulder, Paul caught his eye. Taking the unlit cigarette from his mouth, the man introduced himself. 'I am Hashim.' He extended a hand. Paul grasped it and shook it momentarily before withdrawing. Lifting his hands up, Hashim lit the cigarette and took a deep, contemplative drag. Paul waited for him to exhale the tarry smoke before speaking. "You are from Baghdad? I recognise the accent. What brings someone from Baghdad to a city this far north?"

Hashim merely kept Paul relegated to his peripheral vision. "I came here... for work." He took another drag on the cigarette, more deeply this time.

"I know what work you came for. I know for whom you worked", Paul stated flatly. Hashim offered no reply. "Why?", Paul concluded.

Hashim seemed unfazed, continuing to drag hungrily on his cigarette. He paused for a moment, then began. "Let me tell you a story Paul. I was born in Baghdad 1980. I had four brothers and three sisters." He indicated with his fingers. "Our parents spoiled us, the way that parents are wont to do. They educated us, taught us good manners, and they taught us to be respectful. They taught us how to lead righteous lives: look after the poor, protect the innocent and be kind to our fellow man. My father, he was a pharmacist. And like him, I became a pharmacist also. It was hard work, with hard consequences. We were the biggest pharmaceutical distributor in the whole of Baghdad. We supplied hospital and

kept enough reserves just in case of emergency. Sometimes, we would provide medicine for no charge to those who were most in need. And then came the horde from the West. The Great Whore came to rape our nation. 'Shock and Awe' they called it. They emptied missiles and rockets onto our heads from the safety of their craft, miles above in the clouds. They exploded without prejudice. No matter if you supported Saddam or not; we were guilty of living in Baghdad. It was not enough to murder us with their weapons, they set up cameras to document our destruction. It played on TV for those who were willing to divert their attention from celebrities long enough to witness our murder. They watched, as though watching a movie. They watched for their entertainment. They watched the Great Whore decimate our city like some violent pornography; lustful and salivating. My father, mother, two of my brothers and two of my sisters were killed over a matter of days. Their limbs lay mangled, some torn from their bodies. They lay like offal in the street, flies and maggots devouring their organs. And for what good reason was this death bestowed upon them? None. They died for nothing. They were killed for nothing more than greed. A greed that was justified to the masses by lies. That is mankind's affliction. Why be kind to your fellow man, when that same man treats you as if you were not human? Why show respect to that man, when he would sooner fill your belly with lead than with a meal? I was left with nothing. I vowed to avenge my loss, what else could I do? I would wreak destruction on those who are worthy of my wrath. I am not a madman. I am not righteous. I do not fight for what I believe to be right, nor what I think to be wrong. I fight, because it makes me feel alive."

He spat the cigarette out, crushing it under his heel. It seared the dirt as he did so. He walked back towards his sick bed. At the threshold of the tent, Hashim cast his eyes back at Paul. 'That, is why.'

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His eyes parted; his eyelashes hung damp and limp around his eyeballs.

"Why am I here?" Paul croaked pathetically. "What have I done to deserve this? Telling a lie to save a man's life?" His body hung limp on the gurney like an old scarecrow. "All because of one lie", he cried.

Malcolm snorted snidely. "Don't you see Paul? I'm not mad at you for lying. I lie all the time!" He strutted back and forth in front of Paul's gimp, nearly lifeless body. "I'm mad at the *outcome* of your lies. People lie every day. To their families, to their friends. Hell, lying is a human necessity. Imagine we told the truth to everyone we met! The world would stop spinning. We're granted free agency. It's up to us to use that freedom the best way we can. You could have disregarded your oh so precious oath. You knew what that piece of dirt was capable of. You could have told us." He paused. "You didn't Paul. Just goes to show, absolutism helps nobody. It especially hasn't helped you".

"Are you living your life in the best way?", Paul asked. "Is this really what you think freedom is? The freedom to torture someone. To toy with them for your own amusement?"

"I'm living my life how I want Paul. Ultimately, it's all meaningless. We're born, without being asked. And then we exist. Then we descend to nothingness. I'll face no repercussions for what I'm doing to you right now." He paused for thought. "Certainly not in this life anyway. The best thing I can do is live life on my own terms, on the condition I don't hurt *too* many people. I do my job, keep the bosses happy, then they make a little speech, put out the all clear, and that keeps the masses happy. Everybody wins Paul." Malcolm was now talking to himself, as though reconciling some inner turmoil in his own soul. "Or, *almost* everyone".

"Yet you punish me for making my own free choice?" Paul said. "You have ignored all the commandments of God, those intrinsic values that have given rise to humanity. Nothing now remains except our base nature. We are hollow; little more than husks of our forefathers. If we adopt your

position that one should do as he likes, and live with an absolute freedom, only answerable to a subjective virtue like happiness, then you could not very well condemn the actions of anyone else if motivated by the same rationale. And yet you do. You condemn me. I acted in the interests of happiness. Not just my own, but the rest of society's."

"Oh, so it's fine for you to act in what *you* feel is societies best interests, but not ok for me? You undermine your own argument Paul. Absolutism indeed!", Malcom jeered.

"There is a key difference between you and I Malcolm. You are correct when you say man has free agency. Yet you treat freedom as if it were some mere novelty. You use it as if you were free from any consequences, bar any immediate personal harm that might come to you. Freedom is a set of shackles upon mankind. That is how it should be regarded. A man is responsible for what he is, he shapes his own being. He paints his own portrait. Responsibility for himself is placed like a millstone around his neck. However, in this way, every man becomes Atlas. He carries the weight of the world on his shoulders; he becomes responsible for all men. Every commitment or action made, should be made as if one were acting on behalf of all mankind. One should live and set rules for oneself, as if all other men have to abide by those rules going forward. What we choose is always the better, and nothing can be better for us, unless it is better for all. Imagine living in the world that you have created? There would be no humanity left".

Malcolm stood statue still, eyes glazed. He made no attempt at rebuttal. No attempt to defend himself. It was clear what Malcolm now stood for. Might made right. Nothing more or less. He was right because he had the means to enforce his "truth". The means to disseminate information and the means to suppress information were on his side.

Paul stirred once more. "Malcolm, you know I have done nothing wrong. So, one question remains. Why am I here?"

Malcolm swallowed his rage and began. "You are here, because I need a confession Paul." He spoke now in a whisper, mock sensitive and pleading. "We need a confession. The public needs a scapegoat. A savage mingling around with our soldiers. Six of my men dead, just like that? It just won't do Paul. The higher ups do not accept it. Someone must take the blame, and it sure as *hell* ain't going to be me. The public needs that illusion of security; a little safety blanket. They wouldn't be feeling very safe if they knew one of those barbarians was able to mingle around with our troops in the middle of a hospital, would they? The illusion would be broken. The public needs to be happy, Paul. They need their chloroform".

"Why not just tell them what happened?"

"The truth would *not* set them free. The truth would condemn them to misery, those poor lambs. Judge our actions by how happy they make other people. They are right in proportion to how happy they make people feel. We need *you* to confess your connivance with Hashim, how *you* plotted with him to kill my men. You must confess *your* involvement. I need you to lie again Paul. It's for the best".

Paul considered. "Surely you can recognise that not all pleasures are equal. Some types of happiness are more desirable than others. Why would any human, or an intelligent one at any rate, consent to ignorance? If a fool, or a beast enjoys a fuller allowance of happiness or pleasure, would a wise person reduce themselves to living such an existence in the pursuit of happiness? I do not think so. Ignorance may be bliss, but knowledge is liberation, even though comes at the price of supreme responsibility. Adam paid the price for his lust for knowledge and was cast out from Eden. But would you not say it was worth it? Free agency, and the ability of man to shape his destiny. The man of the past is the man

of the future. A human of higher faculties requires more to make him happy than a beast or savage but is also capable of greater suffering. A being whose capacities of enjoyment are low, has the greatest chance of them being fully satisfied. So, you say you wish to make society happy? I ask why you wish to make them happy when you clearly think so little of them?"

Malcolm defended. "People would exchange their freedom if they were living in a state of extreme unhappiness Paul. They've decided that for themselves. I don't see them putting up much resistance, do you?" He walked towards the chair, carrying the petrol can. It looked heavy, water dripping from the rim. "We need this from you Paul. Truthfully, I respect you. But you're wrong. It is noble to sacrifice your own happiness Paul, as long as this sacrifice achieves some end. If you don't confess, I'll find someone who will. Be a hero, be a martyr, save others from the sacrifice that I want you to make. Lie to me. Confess to me. The happiness you sacrifice will bear the fruit of happiness for others." He began to sing, *'... of all fruits, the best is left to rot in holy ground.'*

"I have shown people the way to life through my living example. They owe their own destruction to the follies and calamities of their own choosing. Do what you must!" Paul snapped at Malcolm.

No rag was slapped over his face this time. The water crashed upon his face in a great torrent.

"Confess Paul! Do you believe me now! I am your worst nightmare! I am your truth!"

This was the third time. This was the third unholy baptism he had to endure. It would be the last.

"Confess! Confess!"

Paul spoke and gargled, although he could project no noise. The orange light shone above him, it penetrated his person, bleaching his retinas a blinding white. "I believe!" He cried. His tears cascaded down his throat. "I confess!"