

FICTION

The Miraculous Return of Khalid from the Dead

BY DANNY RAMADAN

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TWO MONTHS AFTER the government sent back his identity card in an envelope with no return address, Khalid knocked on his family's door in the wee hours of an early August day. I'm told, by those who claim to have witnessed his unexpected return, that his younger brother found an eerie figure in the doorway that he didn't recognize in the dim lights of the staircase. The brother puffed out his chest and asked the assumed stranger who he was and what had brought him there at that hour.

I'm told that the kid used his newly acquired deep voice, which he had developed on the day of his brother's funeral to replace his childish, more high-pitched voice. I had noticed it for the first time when I finished helping at the funeral and shook hands with him. "Only Allah lives forever," I had said and thought for a second the kid was mocking me when he replied to the traditional condolences in a deeper, more pronounced voice.

Those who recounted the story said that the high-pitched voice was quick to come back on that eventful night of Khalid's return. The young man shrieked when he recognized the fading features of his brother, with

whom he shared a straight nose and high cheeks. He could recognize the brown in his brother's eyes, despite that Khalid's face had thinned since he last saw him and his eye sockets looked like two deep abysses. Some said the brother fainted; others said he embraced Khalid and cried on his shoulders. What all agreed on was that the whole building knew of Khalid's return when they woke up to his mother's ululation, which seemed to have lasted for a minute or two and made many question how long a breath this woman could carry.

By the time the sun brought its harsh August heat upon the sleepy building, everyone was talking about Khalid. We heard that women gathered for their morning coffees and claimed the son had returned by a miracle of God to heal the heart of his weeping mother. Children who watched too much television told stories of Khalid's zombified face and eagerness to sniff people's heads for the scent of their brains. The sheikh in the nearby mosque was surprised by the increase in the number of worshippers gathering for the late-afternoon prayers, as he was otherwise used to having just two or three elders knocking on God's doors. He assured the worshippers that



the dead only come back for judgment day upon the call of God. He added that the earlier reports that Khalid was killed after his arrest were most probably false.

KHALID'S FUNERAL was small and hushed, compared to those I went to before the war. I never got the chance to attend my own father's funeral—I was too young to remember it anyway. But I recall the one for Khalid's father, which I attended four years ago. A large tent was erected at our street entrance and traffic was directed elsewhere; 1,260 chairs were rented, and Khalid, his brother, and I, along with the other men of the neighbourhood, spent hours placing them in large circles inside.

The women gathered in Khalid's apartment wearing black, their hair covered with white hijabs. Everyone could hear them cry from three blocks away. Every once in a while, Khalid's mother slammed her head with the palms of her hands and wept in misery. "You were my anchor and my rock," she howled, calling her dead husband's name. "Who will be there for me after your passing?" The other women held her hands down and told her to wash her face with cold water, to sprinkle jasmine essence behind her ears, and to surrender her fate to Allah. "He left you with two sons," my mother told her, "his blood in their veins, his words in their mouths."

The two women had been friends since before my father's passing; one of them would cross the hallway between the two homes and knock on her neighbour's door around the time the students reached their schools in the morning. They spent their days drinking Turkish coffee and eating maamoul filled with dates while gossiping about the other women in the building.

Khalid's mother passed down some of his clothes to me once in a while. Khalid was a large-shouldered man with a well-rounded chest, and I was a bit smaller compared to him even though we are the same age. When I became too big for the clothes, my mother washed them with rosewater and salt, ironed them with steam, and passed them back

to Khalid's mother to give to his younger brother.

For the funeral of Khalid's father, the mosque filled with men coming from near and far to bid farewell to the man. They stood in line upon line, praying for his soul to rest, and they pushed each other so they would have the chance to carry his coffin to the waiting black car. He was loved for being generous with his time and money, my mother said, and he did not turn away a person who asked him a favour. "His black phone-book included a direct number to the president's office," my mother whispered to me after the funeral. "He could move the whole mountain of Qasioun if he willed."

Six different sheikhs, including our own, volunteered to read the complete Quran suras from cover to cover for the duration of the day of the funeral, and dark, bitter Arabic coffee was poured endlessly into small cups; it left a murky taste in my mouth. Flowers filled the tent, soon to rot away at the end of the mourning, and their heavy fragrance made it impossible for me to smell anything else at all.

During his father's funeral, Khalid looked like he *was* returning from the dead. He escaped the crowds to meet me behind the tent, where we shared three silent cigarettes and a gaze upon the dried river of Barada. "I feel completely empty," Khalid whispered to me, and I looked into his eyes.

Men don't cry—but on that day, Khalid wasn't a man; he was a child longing for his father's embrace. His father had bought us both our first wallets and paid for our argileh as we joined him in Nofara cafe for a night of chit-chat, heavy tea, hakawati's stories, and flavoured smoke. "I'm sorry," I whispered to Khalid and pulled his hand to my mouth and printed a kiss on the back of his wrist. We held hands for a few seconds before breaking away, fearing the eyes of those leaving the tent.

REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I kissed Khalid. I had shown up to school with a face covered in tiny cotton balls dotted with blood. I was a late bloomer,

and while other students in our middle school were exchanging bawdy innuendos in their new deeper voices, my voice didn't crack until a year later, making me the butt of every joke in my all-male class. The military officer assigned to our school to teach us nationalism studies insisted that we all shave our beards and cut our hair to a maximum of four centimetres at the front and two at the back—which wasn't a problem for me until my beard was finally coming to a growth.

A pathetic-looking beard, I thought to myself back then, barely lining my face with fuzz similar to that of a chick that had just hatched. The military officer, always wearing his fake Ray-Ban sunglasses, picked on me for a week until I relented and shaved my beard.

"Did you have a fencing accident?" Khalid whispered to me in math class. "Or ten?"

I didn't reply right away. I was embarrassed. After school, he walked with me back to our building and returned to the topic of my beard. "I don't know how to shave, okay?" I finally admitted in frustration. "I watched the guy in the shaving-cream commercial ten times and tried to do it like he does, but I kept cutting myself."

As I didn't have an older man in my household, Khalid was my guide to the world of manhood. He taught me how to whistle loud enough to stop a cab, how to pass the ball between the feet of another football player, how to jump the school wall and escape through the locked doors of the metal gate, and how to hunt down quails with a slingshot.

"Ah, you silly thing," he laughed, "come by tomorrow or the day after and I will show you how."

A couple of days later, I found myself in his bathroom. He placed a long white towel on his shoulder and brought a chair from the dining room for me.

"Sit with your back straight and try to recline your head," he told me. I kept looking at him in the mirror as he pulled out a new blade from a small yellow package and dipped it in alcohol to sterilize it before expertly placing it in his straight-edge razor. "None of that

supermarket dime-a-dozen bullshit,” he told me, his lips close to my ears. “We will use the manly way.”

I didn’t know why I was uncomfortable as I listened to him explain how to shave in the direction of the hair growth and how to avoid dimples and birthmarks. We had been friends since we played Uno in the hallway between our family homes, but I was awkwardly silent as he foamed some shaving cream between his palms and started to smear it on my face, his fingers tracing slow circles on my cheeks and then massaging my neck gently. The tension building in my shoulders started to dissolve like a cloud on a sunny day, and I closed my eyes, enjoying the tingling cold of the shaving cream on my face.

“Hold your breath steady,” he whispered, so close that I felt the air out of his lungs prickling the back of my ear. “This blade is your friend, but it might cut you if you don’t control it.” He cradled my head in his right elbow, and my nose was by his armpit. I could smell his body odour mixed with the deodorant we both bought at the same place, and the scent felt familiar and inviting. By then, all the uncomfortable impulses in my body had settled down, like a sea untouched by wind. I could feel the edge of his razor sliding down my face. It felt cleansing. He rinsed off the edge of the razor and wiped it on his white towel, and that was when I realized that we had both been silent for a moment.

“Any blood?” I asked, eyes closed. He didn’t reply. I opened my eyes to see his locked on mine. Time froze. He slammed the bathroom door shut with his foot, then went in for a kiss on my lips.

ON THE FRIDAY Khalid disappeared, I was supposed to join him after the midday prayers. I had the protest signs, and I kept the megaphone under my bed. My mother, however, refused to let me leave the house. “You want to die in the streets?” she objected. “You want to break your mother’s heart in two?”

I was going only because Khalid wanted to. The last time, I had returned home with a torn T-shirt as I narrowly

escaped the heavy hand of a police officer, and my mother had freaked out. Honestly, I was scared too; my shoulder had ached under the officer’s grip, I had smelled the cheap cigarettes on his fingers, and I had felt the harsh skin of his palm balling my shirt. I had laughed it off with Khalid so as not to frighten him, but I just wanted to stay home and play a video game.

My mother spoke to Khalid through the closed gate of our home and instructed him to go back to his house. “You are your mother’s oldest son,” she told him. “Your father would have disowned you if he was still alive to see you running like lunatics in the streets. Stop this nonsense and return to your studies!”

Khalid texted me to let me know he was going to the meeting point anyway. “Be careful,” I texted back. “I will see you tonight.” I watched him from our balcony as he left our building entrance, and I was immediately struck with guilt. I could have squeezed past my mother. I could have left the protest signs behind; there were always plenty to go around. He looked up, and I saw his face smiling back at me. He had been waiting for this Friday for a week, ever since he had stood up in the middle of the protesting circle and demanded freedoms and democracy. Ever since he had grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the police officer. He looked back and waved at me, then took a turn around a corner, and that was the last I saw of him.

On that Friday, Khalid’s mother pushed the flowery curtain on her kitchen window multiple times until the late hours of the night and gazed upon the street with eyes searching for her son. She gave me a nervous smile as she saw me standing in the balcony, watching the streets silently, waiting for him to appear. I kept trying to call friends, but like on every Friday, cellphones were down.

On Saturday morning, Khalid’s mother knocked on our door and asked for me, but I was already out searching for him. I looked for him all morning and afternoon. I knocked on friends’ doors, and I went to Mushroom Park, where we used to drink beer and smoke weed. I sat on one of the huge stone mushrooms and took seven deep breaths in a row, gathering as

much strength as I could to avoid crying.

I called a couple of friends, who had been at the protests the previous day, to ask them for information. We used the cryptic language we had developed a while ago in a meeting on the rooftop of my building. They said Khalid had joined them at the morning’s flash protest. They had coordinated the night before and shared the exact time and location via a text from a Lebanese number. The destination for that day was Qanawat Street, busy with passersby and second-hand clothing sellers. They inserted themselves into the crowd and roamed around. One of them pointed out that Khalid had picked up a pair of running shoes he saw and said that he wanted to buy them for me.

At 12:37 p.m., they all gathered at the centre of the street, by the arch of the old house there, and green revolutionary flags came out of pockets and megaphones were pulled from the trunks of cars. “Six minutes until the government shabiha will be here to arrest us,” they said. Phones were ready to film the short-lived protest as men and women covered their faces with their headscarves and chanted anti-regime slogans. Some of the street locals were praising them while others grabbed the hands of their children and ran toward Khalid Bin Al-Waleed Street to avoid the impending conflict.

“The police showed up two minutes too early,” the friend added. He couldn’t get to his car, so he started running in the opposite direction, toward Medhat Basha. Behind him, he heard the loud bangs of metal rods knocking on protection gear, but he didn’t want to look back at those following him.

“I was saved by the glory of Allah,” he said.

The friend felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, and for a second, he thought he was a goner. Turned out, it was the barber who cut his hair once every two weeks; he opened his shop, pulled the young man in, and closed the door hastily. The barber sat the winded youngster in his chair, placed a cloth around his neck, covered his face with foam, and started shaving his beard, uttering no words.

When the police ran by, they ignored the busy barber doing his business.

“I got a free shave,” he added, in Arabic, “but I didn’t see where Khalid went. No.”

BY TUESDAY, Khalid’s mother was on a mission to find her missing son. She pulled out her late husband’s black book and started dialling numbers one after the other. She realized after dialling two or three that an extra digit had been added to all phone numbers in Syria since the last time the phonebook was used. She got a pen and started to update the phone numbers with my help.

Khalid’s mother ended up on the phone with a nearby doctor who wasn’t expecting a phone call from her late husband. She found herself spending the better part of an hour giving a detailed description of her son to a man. She later realized, to her dismay, that the man was a retired police officer who had left the service over five years ago, rendering him useless to her search. She even found the phone number of an unnamed woman who softly gave her condolences on the passing of her husband, without offering much detail on how she knew him, before hanging up. Khalid’s mother looked at the phone for a second, puzzled, then sighed and moved on to the next number.

Finally, hiding between the pages, she found a number written in red digits with no name attached. She asked me to add the appropriate digit at the beginning and then to leave the room. I stood by the door for mere seconds before I heard her calling me back in.

“No one picked up?” I asked.

“The number I was trying to reach is not in service anymore,” she said with a disappointed look on her face.

On Thursday, the retired police officer called back. He had spent two days calling all of his distant friends and relatives and managed to confirm that Khalid had died at a detention camp following an untreated bullet wound and a hasty arrest.

KHALID’S MOTHER asked me to stand by his brother as we received guests in her living room for his funeral. We were visited

by a dozen, maybe eighteen, people, who walked fast, shook hands quick, and removed themselves from the living room sooner than tradition required.

“Everyone fears for their reputation if they visit the funeral of a protester,” I explained to Khalid’s brother in soft words, paying close attention to my facial features, making sure not to allow a single crack on my skin.

“You’re the man of the house now,” I told him that night, on my mother’s instructions. “You stand there for your mother. You hold her hand and bend the will of the trees for her.” He looked at me and coughed twice. “I am,” he said in the new voice he had mustered.

Khalid’s mother remained strong, or so I thought until after the funeral, when I heard her crying the night away through my bedroom window facing that of Khalid’s room. When her howling whispers eventually quietened down, I figured she must have slept cradled by her pain and left me awake for the rest of the night. I spent the hours staring at the ceiling. On it, I could see him sleeping, upside down, his shirt unbuttoned, his eyes muddy, his chest bleeding red drops on my forehead.

When the morning call for prayer came with the light of day, I wanted to scream my lungs out for Khalid, but I felt his index finger placed vertically on my lips, shushing me the way he had shushed my loving gasps once.

We didn’t have a body to bury—which I thought a blessing. I would have been asked to wash it before the funeral, for it’s the work of a man. I couldn’t imagine myself placing his body on a table the way I placed him on his small single bed. I couldn’t picture my hands unbuttoning his shirt the way we did when our mothers went out shopping. I wouldn’t be able to wash the smell of his death off my fingers if I had to wash his hair, his head, his chest, his torso, his thighs.

A WEEK AFTER his return, Khalid hadn’t spoken a word. He sat in his bedroom looking around in disbelief. His mother tended to an ugly scar on his chest and bought him a cane to help him walk. His brother knocked on

our door to deliver the message from his mother that I was invited to visit him. I thought she saw me standing reluctantly outside their door. I wanted to knock, but I couldn’t bring myself to face the shame of my doing. Khalid had pulled me away from the grip of a police officer, and I had sat home watching cartoons and smoking weed while he was shot down and dragged into detention.

Deep inside, I could picture myself pushing past my mother, joining him on that Friday, pulling him at the last minute out of a bullet’s way. I could see myself dragging his bloodied body to a corner and hiding him while applying pressure to his wound. I had believed the story of his death; I had no right to his return.

Khalid’s mother brought three doctors to see him. They each walked in with large black suitcases and walked out shaking the hand of his young brother with a disappointed look on their faces. “His voice box is intact,” my mother passed the message from his mother to me. “He just doesn’t want to say anything.”

My mother reported to me the many ways Khalid’s mother had attempted healing him: she brought him hot tea made with lemon leaves and cardamom; she placed wet towels on his neck and massaged the small of his chest with Tiger balm. She lit incense sticks by the door of his room and spent her nights praying to Allah for the return of her son’s voice. She even invited the sheikh of the nearby mosque to read Quranic prayers while placing his right hand on Khalid’s forehead. The sheikh tried to convince her that there was no such thing as a magical ammal placed upon her son by a genie preventing him from speaking. She pretended to agree, but still she consulted a well-known expert on magical beings.

My mother knocked on my door two Fridays after Khalid came back. By then, the story of his return had evolved beyond him and his mother. It became an urban legend of itself, and people forgot where it all started and slowly moved on to other similar miraculous war stories. My mother brought me Turkish coffee and sweets. She walked in with a black

shawl covering her shoulders, and I could tell from the look in her eyes that she had something to say. I pulled myself up and propped the pillows behind me to turn my bed into a small sofa for us to sit on. She sat next to me, her shoulder touching mine, and we drank the coffee silently, sunrays escaping the closed curtains of my bedroom and shining a thousand bright stars in my sleepless eyes.

“Did you know that Khalid’s mother and I are distant relatives?” she asked me. She wasn’t looking at me at all. She was gazing at the wall calendar where I had marked the dates of each football match in the Syrian tournament, and at the provocative posters of Britney Spears on my walls. I nodded that I knew. “We are so separated by generations, we couldn’t find the actual connection,” she said.

Khalid’s mother and mine were both from the Saroujah neighbourhood in Damascus. People married into families they knew, and women built everlasting friendships and called each other sisters.

“We sat down once years ago,” she continued, “and looked for one single common relative between the two of us—until we found him.”

They were related, by marriage or blood, to this man they both knew as Ayman. My mother told me that he was meek and lonely for many years in his childhood. He wanted to be a journalist or a writer, but his father’s limited livelihood had brought his dreams back to earth and he had settled on being a carpenter.

“He made the most beautiful wood,” she explained. “It’s like the trees whispered to him the shapes of things to make and then melted in his hands for him to bring them back to life in doors and windowpanes and small floral shapes.” Ayman soon opened his own shop, my mother continued, with a business partner he met in the Syrian army during the mandatory service. Ayman brought him to family dinners and invited him to his sisters’ weddings. The two of them continued to be partners throughout the war of 1973.

“Ayman was called back to the army, while his business partner stayed behind,”

my mother said after taking a final sip of her coffee. “He came back missing an arm. The wood in their shop rotted while Ayman mourned his missing limb in his bed.”

Ayman’s business partner moved in with him, in a tiny little apartment in Baramkeh, where the two lived together for the rest of their days. For months, my mother said, no one heard from them, but then Ayman started to show up back at his shop, walking with his business partner. He sat behind the desk, calculating the finances, while his partner moulded the wood into shapes unseen by anyone.

“I recall that Ayman used to whisper in his business partner’s ear instructions on how to make the most beautiful wooden things,” my mother said, taking the coffee cup from my hand and placing it on the tray. “He even made him a wooden arm.”

Before my mother left the room and closed the door behind her, she looked back at me and smiled. “I don’t know why,” she whispered, “but both Khalid’s mother and I recalled Ayman and his business partner this past week.”

THE NEXT DAY, I knocked on the door of Khalid’s home, and his mother answered. Her face lit up when she saw me tapping my foot anxiously outside her door. She invited me in and led me straight to his room. He was lying on his side, his back to me.

“Khalid,” I whispered, but he didn’t turn around. His mother asked if I wanted coffee or tea, and I shook my head. I had tears gathering in my eyes that I didn’t want her to see, but she stood there quietly, waiting for me to speak. I asked for a tissue, which she readily pulled from a box on a table by the door.

“He will be happy to see you,” she said and slipped outside and closed the door.

Khalid remained with his back to me, and I took a small step toward him. He didn’t turn around when I sat by his bed. I could see his face, his eyes open and gazing into an unseen abyss. “Khalid,” I whispered again, but he didn’t blink. I placed my palm on his shoulder and

found it cold and stiff, like a piece of wood. “You need a shave,” I said. His beard was heavy, covering half of his face, while the other half was much thinner than I remembered. “Khalid, talk to me,” I said, but he still didn’t blink.

I pulled a chair from the dining room and went to the bathroom, placing it by the mirror. I went to his bed, to his motionless body, and pulled his arm softly. He moaned. I could see, under his loose shirt, a blue bruise on his side that hadn’t found a way to heal yet.

“Here, here,” I said and helped him rise from bed. He looked at me and blinked twice. Slowly, I guided his limping steps toward the bathroom. I sat him in the high chair and pulled his back straight. He tilted his head away from the mirror, looking elsewhere. I assumed he didn’t want to see the scars on his face or the darkness under his eyes. I touched his cheeks, and he shuddered. I could feel him quivering under my fingertips.

I opened the faucet, and the water started to drip. I cupped my palms together and gathered enough to wash his face. He took a deep breath when it hit his skin, as if he had just surfaced after a dive. I foamed some shaving cream between my palms and applied it in circles on his cheeks, then gently directed his face toward the mirror. I wanted him to see himself through my eyes. I wanted him to look at the miracle that he had become—a mystical man more powerful than death and destruction.

In my mind, I was a mirror for him, and within me, he saw himself blooming like a flower. I pulled out his straight-edge razor, released a blade from the small yellow box, and dipped it in alcohol. Slowly, I put it in place and started to shave Khalid’s face.

“Not that dime-a-dozen bullshit,” I heard him say in a coarse, uneven voice, and I cried, like a lost child, on his shoulder, my tears falling on his face and sweeping the foam away. ♥

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