

At the Devil's Service

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“At the Devil’s Service” is a real story, with some character names altered. It occurred between 2004 and 2006 across four Arab nations: Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Kuwait. The story blends thrilling moments and vivid recollections of 2004 before plunging into sudden shocks and surprising developments in 2006.

Part One

In the summer of 2004, Salem was at the threshold of a decisive stage of his life, contemplating the next step of his academic and personal journey. A few months ago, he obtained his bachelor's degree and since his early university days, he has been dreaming of an overseas opportunity for pursuing his higher education in English literature. When he obtained his degree from Damascus University, he took a significant decision to continue his education abroad through joining an MA program in one of the Arab neighboring countries. The destination that sounded possible for him was Egypt. For him, it was a country known for its rich cultural and historical heritage with multiple universities and promising opportunities. Salem's interest in Egypt wasn't spontaneous. It was a well-planned choice for many academic and personal reasons. Egypt had long been a beacon for knowledge seekers and a significant destination hosting various academic fields including literature and history. Its academic institutions offered multiple academic programs that completely align with Salem's interests. In addition to the availability of the required fields,

Salem admired many other things about Egypt connected with the familiar Arab cultural environment. The country's deep historical roots, ancient buildings, and dynamic cities attracted Salem's attention more.

Before taking any concrete steps, Salem began searching for convenient programs in English literature at Cairo universities. He spent hours surfing universities websites, brochures, and various publications about academic programs. What encouraged Salem more to choose Egypt was the strong connections with his Egyptian colleagues, Ehab and Khairy. Like Salem, Ehab was passionate about English literature and had already graduated from one of Egypt's leading universities. They met a year earlier while working in Kuwait for the same institution along with their friend Khairy.

The friendship between the three young men: Salem, Ehab, and Khairy was strong and built on mutual trust, shared ambitions, and respect. Although Khairy remained in Kuwait that summer, he was an integral part of the bond. He also used to encourage Salem to pursue opportunities that would broaden his knowledge. Knowing that Ehab was available in Cairo at that time and he could provide not only guidance but also access to

academic institutions, Salem felt glad about choosing Egypt as his upcoming educational destination. Ehab had connections with some professors and even had the ability to facilitate Salem's enrollment process. These connections made the prospect of studying in Egypt more viable for Salem.

Salem's view about the Arab world contributed to shaping his worldview and academic interests. He was born in Deir Ezzor, a city located in the eastern region of Syria along the banks of the Euphrates River. The city is known for its rich archaeological sites and lush green fields that flourish in the spring. It is a place of contrasts in which the surrounding deserts bloom with wildflowers such as chrysanthemum, anemones, and cloves, painting the landscape with vibrant colors each year in contrast with the hot months of summer.

The geographical and climate conditions also played an important role in shaping Salem's passion and desire for history and nature. When compared to Damascus, where Salem moved to in 1999 to start his university studies, Deir Ezzor experiences hotter weather, affected by the

vast desert around it. Damascus, by contrast, is surrounded by mountains which allow the city to enjoy cooler breezes and occasional snowfall in winter. This diversity in addition to the archaeological sites in the city gave Salem deep appreciation for his homeland's geography and culture and increased his passion about history and literature as well.

As summer approached, Salem began to plan for his expected journey from Damascus to Cairo. He preferred to travel by bus to travelling by plane to have an opportunity to experience the landscapes and cultures along the way. That ambitious journey spanned nearly 1,000 kilometers, requiring crossing multiple check points, border crossings and modes of transport such as a ferry while crossing of the Red Sea from Jordan to Egypt, a stretch of approximately 70 kilometers.

The journey promised to be both physically demanding and rewarding. Salem understood that traveling by land through Syria, Jordan, and finally Egypt would take around 30 hours due to the numerous border checkpoints, customs procedures, and the busy travel season. He was prepared for the challenges ahead, viewing them as part of the adventure

and an opportunity to witness the daily life and scenery across three distinct Arab nations.

In preparation, Salem reached out to various transport companies for advice and schedules. He had been told that there was indeed a bus service that connected Damascus to Cairo via Jordan, making the journey feasible and relatively straightforward. This news was a relief, and he quickly proceeded with booking his ticket. As he arranged his travel documents and finalized the details, Salem's excitement grew. He was not just embarking on a physical journey but a transformative academic and personal quest.

Salem had booked his ticket through a reputable transport company, one that specialized in cross-border travel between Syria and other neighboring Arab countries. The company had given him clear instructions: he was to be at Al-Qadam Bus Station in Damascus on the evening of 23 July 2004. Al-Qadam was not just any station, it was a vital hub in the region's transportation network, a bustling intersection where countless travelers converged, connecting Syria to destinations

throughout the Arab world. For many, it was the first step on a long journey to new opportunities, to dreams, or sometimes just homecomings.

As the date approached, Salem found himself reflecting on the significance of the trip. He headed to Egypt, a country he had long admired for its universities, history, and the vibrant culture that attracted scholars and dreamers alike. He hoped to secure a seat at one of the universities there, where he could pursue higher studies and deepen his knowledge of the world. This journey felt like the start of something important, both exciting and uncertain.

On the day of departure, Salem packed his bags carefully, ensuring he had all necessary documents, books, and personal items. He was mindful of the long hours ahead and the uncertainty that travel by land might bring, but he was also eager to explore such a journey.

On the evening of 23 July, the atmosphere at Al-Qadam Bus Station was alive with the energy of movement and anticipation. Damascus itself was cloaked in the quiet charm of a late summer night. The weather was mild, cool enough to provide relief from the daytime heat, yet gentle enough

that the night felt inviting rather than chilly. A soft breeze drifted through the station, carrying with it the subtle fragrance of blooming trees lining the nearby streets. Mixed with this natural aroma was the unmistakable scent of traditional Syrian perfume wafting from the small offices and kiosks scattered around the station, an olfactory tapestry that instantly evoked a sense of place and culture.

The station bustled with activity: groups of travelers gathered in small clusters, bus drivers called out destinations, and the hum of engines punctuated the conversations. Salem's heart beat a little faster as he made his way to the waiting area, ticket in hand, already imagining the long journey ahead.

Before boarding the bus, Salem found himself among a group of young Syrians who were also bound for Cairo. They were a diverse mix of personalities, each carrying their own dreams and stories. Eager to connect with fellow travelers, Salem introduced himself and soon found himself in conversation with five of them.

The first to speak was a young man named Marwan. He said that he was living in Damascus, the sprawling capital city that pulsed with history and modernity. Marwan also said that he was working for a heavy machinery company, a steady job that took him into the world of industrial contracts and business negotiations. “His trip to Egypt was for business, a chance to meet partners and clients on behalf of his company”, Marwan added.

He was a man of respectable stature, standing about 170 centimeters tall, with a calm demeanor and an open, friendly smile. His speech was measured and polite, embodying the kindness and hospitality for which many Syrians are known. It was clear that he valued human connection, eager to make new friendships and networks wherever his travels took him.

Next to introduce himself was Hassan, a young man from Aleppo, Syria’s historic northern city known for its industrial spirit and thriving manufacturing sector. Hassan had already earned a diploma in dentistry, a field that fascinated him deeply. He spoke passionately about his love for the profession and the opportunities ahead. His attachment to the overseas

course in Egypt was a source of great pride. Hassan saw this as more than just a study program, it was a chance to expand his horizons, to bring back knowledge that could help his community. His eyes sparkled with a blend of excitement and determination, and his voice carried the unmistakable lilt of someone who valued learning.

Beside Hassan sat Ahmad, also from Aleppo, and he was travelling to attend the same dentistry course. Ahmad was proud of his city's rich heritage and natural beauty. He described Aleppo with affection and how its climate was pleasant throughout most of the year, though winters could be harsh and cold. Ahmad's tone was warm and reflective, his connection to his hometown was perceptible. Like Hassan, he was motivated by the promise of education and the hope of a brighter future.

Two other young men, Mahmoud and Ammar, came from Qamishli, a city in northeastern Syria known for its cultural diversity and strategic location. Unlike the others, Mahmoud and Ammar were more reserved, their conversations guarded. They revealed little about their personal lives but hinted at plans that went beyond education or business. After leaving

Syria, they said that they would attempt immigration to Germany, a journey that was expected to be filled with uncertainty and risk. Their silence on the matter spoke volumes, a quiet acknowledgment of the precariousness of their dreams and the dangers involved. The gravity of their intentions added a somber note to the otherwise hopeful group.

As the clock edged closer to 10 pm, the station's touts began calling passengers to board. One by one, travelers rose, gathering their belongings and moving toward the bus. Salem and his new acquaintances took their seats together, eager to share the journey ahead. The bus was a good one with very clean and comfortable seats.

As the engine roared, the bus slowly pulled away from Al-Qadam Bus Station, slipping into the night. The route ahead led toward the Nasib Border Crossing, the gateway into Jordan and further on into Egypt. The city lights of Damascus faded behind them, replaced by the dim glow of roadside lamps and the deep, rich hues of the Syrian countryside. Outside the window, the earth took on a reddish tint, an indication of the famous red soil found near the city of Daraa, a city nestled not far from the

borders. The landscape was both familiar and foreign, bathed in the soft moonlight and punctuated by the shadows of trees swaying gently in the night breeze.

Inside the bus, the conversation continued, sometimes drifting into silence as the hum of the road and the rhythmic motion of the vehicle lulled some passengers into quiet reflection. For Salem, the journey was more than just physical, it was a passage into a new chapter of his life, filled with aspirations. The faces around him, each marked by their own stories and aspirations, reminded him that he was not alone in this quest. Together, they were bound by hope, by the desire to explore, to learn, and to find their place in a rapidly changing world.

As the bus sped onward through the cool night air, Salem gazed out the window once more. The scent of the trees and the perfume lingered, mingling with the faint sounds of whispered conversation and the soft rustling of pages as some passengers pulled out books or notes to prepare for what awaited them in Egypt. It was a night of beginnings – silent yet profound – etched into the memory of a young man from Deir Ezzor, who

was about to cross borders not only of land but of opportunity and aspiration.

During their bus journey, the six companions found themselves immersed in lively conversation, sharing their excitement and aspirations for the tasks they planned to undertake once they would reach Egypt. Each friend took turns explaining the projects they were passionate about, some spoke of academic goals, others of business ventures, and a few shared personal dreams they hoped to realize in other countries, namely Europe.

It was just past midnight on 24 July 2004, when the bus crossed the border into Jordan through the Jaber Cross Point. The atmosphere was friendly; the friends were wide awake, energized by the adventure ahead. The bus ride, instead of being tiresome, turned into a memorable experience. Time seemed to slip away unnoticed, as the group engaged in animated discussions, teasing each other and telling stories that ranged from humorous to profound. Despite the long hours on the road, boredom was an alien concept to them. The miles between Damascus and the Jordanian border melted away under their laughter and chatter.

Outside the windows, the landscape shifted continuously, offering an ever-changing panorama. They passed vast stretches of desert where the golden sands shimmered under the moonlight, mysterious and serene. The occasional shape of distant hills and rocky formations added depth to the barren beauty. Then, they drove through small Jordanian towns whose architecture reflected a blend of traditional and modern styles, interspersed with bustling marketplaces alive with colorful lights and the soft murmur of evening life. The diversity of the scenery was a silent companion to their journey, giving each friend moments to reflect, and appreciate the world beyond their conversations. During this relatively long journey, the friends had a break inside the bus and slept for a few hours.

As dawn broke, the bus pulled into the Port of Al-Aqaba, marking the end of the first stage of their trip. Al-Aqaba was a significant transit point and the only seaport of Jordan, located on the northeastern edge of the Gulf of Aqaba. The port bustled with activity, a gateway between continents and

cultures. The companions gathered their belongings, stepping out into the cool morning air filled with the tang of the sea.

However, their wait here would turn out to be long. It was the peak of summer, and travel during this season was at its highest. The port was crowded with other travelers, many of whom, like them, were heading toward Egypt. The ferries, the main vessels for crossing the Red Sea, were packed to capacity. Despite the lengthy delay, the companions didn't allow impatience to sour their spirits. Instead, they found ways to pass the time while soaking in the vibrant port atmosphere. The steady flow of ferries arriving and departing created a rhythmic backdrop to their wait, as seagulls circled overhead and the waves gently lapped against the docks.

To keep themselves entertained, the friends pulled out a deck of cards and started playing various games, their laughter mixing with the calls of vendors and the hum of port machinery. Between rounds, their conversations deepened. They spoke about their shared history, childhood memories, school days, and the moments they spent with each other. Each

one revealed more about their hobbies and passions. Salem, for instance, expressed his fascination with history, particularly ancient civilizations. His eyes lit up as he described his eagerness to explore Egypt's rich archaeological heritage once they arrived. Marwan, on the other hand, talked about the machinery projects his company had executed. However, he had a habit of misusing the word "regime" in amusing ways, often leading to good-natured teasing among the group.

When they needed a break from cards and conversation, the friends wandered around the port area. The marine landscape was fascinating – the Red Sea stretched out like a vast sapphire canvas, its waters sparkling under the summer sun. Boats and ferries of various sizes bobbed gently at their moorings, their colorful hulls contrasting beautifully with the deep-sea water. The sight was both calming and inspiring, and Salem felt an indelible impression was being fixed into his memory – moments of friendship and wonder that would remain with him forever, as surely as they would with the others.

As the day edged toward evening, the excitement grew more and more. Finally, around 6 pm, the ferry prepared to depart. The friends boarded the vessel bound for Nuweiba Port, located on the Egyptian shore of the Red Sea. This marked the second and final maritime stage of their journey before the land route resumed. The four-hour voyage ahead promised stunning views and a chance for the companions to enjoy each other's company in a different setting.

The ferry moved through the calm waters steadily, carrying them deeper into the heart of the Red Sea. The sky began to transform as the sun descended, casting hues of orange, pink, and purple across the horizon. The friends stood together on the deck, marveling at the spectacle of the sunset. The warm sea breeze mingled with the fading daylight, creating an atmosphere both serene and exhilarating. It was a perfect moment – a shared experience that seemed to strengthen the bond between them even further.

The nighttime voyage was truly unforgettable. The gentle rocking of the ferry and the soft sounds of the water created a peaceful rhythm as the

friends talked quietly about their ambitions. Respect and affection underpinned every word; there was a deep understanding among them that this trip was more than a journey, it was the beginning of a new chapter in their lives. Around 10 pm, the ferry docked at Nuweiba Port, marking their arrival on Egyptian soil.

Despite the late hour, Nuweiba greeted them with a warm, inviting night. The desert heat of Egypt was noticeable but not oppressive, a dry warmth that contrasted with the cooler coastal breezes of Jordan and Syria. The companions felt a surge of happiness and anticipation. Cairo was near now, and with it, the realization of their goals felt within reach.

They disembarked from the ferry with a mix of tiredness and exhilaration, ready to embark on the final stage of their journey. Yet, there was a brief delay, the bus from the same transport company that had carried them from Damascus to Jordan, was not ready. The friends settled in at the port, their patience tested by the wait that stretched on for a few more hours. Still, their spirits remained high, lifted by the knowledge that the end of the trip was close.

When the bus finally arrived, they climbed aboard with renewed energy. The final land journey to Cairo would take approximately five hours. As the vehicle sped through the Egyptian desert roads, the companions took stock of their adventure so far, the long chats, the shared laughter, the fascinating sights, and the moments of quiet reflection by the sea. Each passing mile was a step closer to their destination, a reminder that journeys – especially those taken with friends – are about much more than a mere travel destination.

Part Two

The morning sun rose gently over Cairo, painting the cityscape with a soft, golden glow that touched every minaret, palm tree, and bustling street corner. The historic heart of Egypt's capital stirred slowly awake under the warm, crisp air – a refreshing contrast to the relentless desert heat that would soon take hold. As dawn slipped seamlessly into mid-morning, the city's pulse quickened with the familiar symphony of honking cars, merchants' calls, and the chatter of pedestrians weaving through alleys and wide avenues alike.

At the city's edge, near the congested bus station, a rumbling coach came to a halt. The tires hissed on the asphalt as six figures gathered their belongings and stepped down. Salem, Marwan, Hassan, Ahmad, Mahmoud, and Ammar – friends shared recent memories – emerged from their long journey, their faces marked with travel fatigue but alight with eager anticipation. It was around 10 o'clock, and the promise of Cairo's wonders lay just ahead.

The bus station thrummed with life. Travelers in hurried steps passed by, some clutching backpacks, others navigating families with lively children. Vendors hawked their goods with practiced enthusiasm: colorful scarves, steaming cups of mint tea, and bags of roasted nuts. The cacophony was a reminder that they had arrived not just in a city, but a living, breathing mosaic of humanity.

As the friends gathered in a small circle beside the station's entrance, the weight of their journey began to lift. Smiles broke out, and voices raised in conversation as they debated their next move. Where would they stay? What part of the city should they explore first? The thought of settling into a hotel was quickly dismissed. The sterile anonymity of hotel rooms held little appeal; what they desired was freedom, intimacy, a space where they could truly live as locals rather than tourists.

Marwan, ever the pragmatic thinker, spoke up. "Why don't we find a flat? Rent a place together. It will be cheaper, and we'll have the privacy and comfort we want."

The others nodded in agreement. That idea felt right – something more genuine, more connected to the rhythm of the city.

Their conversation caught the attention of a nearby man leaning against his taxi. His skin was deeply tanned and creased from years under the blazing sun, and the cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. The driver had been idly watching the group’s discussion, and now he stepped forward to tell them something.

“You want a flat?” he said in accented, yet clear Egyptian Arabic. “I know a place in a calm residential area, near Sheraton Hotel. Good flats, quiet, safe.”

Salem exchanged glances with his friends. “Where exactly is this place?”

The driver’s face lit up with pride. “Sheraton Residence. It is close to many shops, restaurants, all you need. Not noisy like downtown with peaceful and friendly neighborhood.”

The group considered the offer. A calm residential area sounded like the perfect place from the city’s relentless pace, while still keeping them close

to its vibrant life. After a quick consultation, they agreed to trust the driver and go with him there.

The taxi moved through Cairo's streets, the sun climbing steadily higher, casting long shadows beneath the palm trees that lined Sheraton Residence's avenues. The neighborhood was exactly as promised: whitewashed buildings, modest and well-kept, with leafy sidewalks and the occasional sound of children playing in the distance. Locals moved at a leisurely pace, greeting one another with nods or brief hellos, while a few expatriates could be seen sipping coffee at small cafés.

The taxi stopped in front of a mid-rise apartment block. The driver led them up a short staircase and pushed open a door to a good flat on the third floor. The friends entered, scanning the rooms eagerly. Cool tiled floors, white paint on the walls, but spacious and inviting – this could be their home away from home.

But then, unexpectedly, a young woman emerged from the shadows of the hallway. She was slender, with dark eyes that held a mix of curiosity and

caution. “I’m sorry,” she said softly, “but I live here. I am the caretaker. I look after this flat all the time.”

Salem and Marwan exchanged a quick, surprised glance. This was not what they had expected.

Politely, Salem asked, “Is there any chance you could move somewhere else? We want to rent this flat while we’re in Cairo.”

The woman shook her head firmly. “I cannot leave. This flat is my responsibility. It’s where I stay to keep everything safe.”

Outside, the friends gathered to discuss their options. They respected the woman’s dedication, but they needed to find a way forward. After a brief but earnest negotiation, they offered her a sum of money to cover her temporary absence. The woman considered quietly, then smiled faintly. “Very well. I will leave now.”

With the caretaker’s reluctant blessing, the friends finally settled into the flat. The rooms were simple but comfortable, with large windows that invited the warm afternoon light and opened to the quiet street below. The

tile floor felt cool beneath their feet – a welcome relief from the heat outside.

After unpacking and a much-needed rest, the group decided to explore their new neighborhood. They stepped out onto the tree-lined streets, where small shops beckoned with bright signs and inviting aromas. The air was fragrant with the smell of fresh bread baking in a nearby bakery, mingling with hints of spices like peppers and pickles from the open markets. They passed by stalls where vendors grilled skewers of meat wherein their smoky scent was tempting.

At a bustling corner grocery, they selected fresh vegetables – tomatoes, cucumbers, and loaves of warm bread. They also picked up some chicken and soft drinks to have their meal with each other.

Back in the flat, the six friends gathered around the small kitchen table. Laughter filled the air as they prepared the lunch, their camaraderie united them after the long journey. Stories were shared – tales of their travels, memories of home, and dreams of what the coming days in Cairo might hold. The clinking of knives, the sizzling of chicken in the pan, and the

shared joy of breaking bread together created a sense of belonging that felt profound and rare.

For a moment, the vast city outside their windows faded away, leaving only the warm glow of friendship and the simple pleasure of being together in a place that was, at least for now, their own.

Among the circle of friends who had come together in a new and unfamiliar land, Salem and Marwan quickly made a close and meaningful bond. Their friendship was one of the rare connections that blossomed effortlessly amidst the uncertainty of their shared journey. As the days passed, their companionship only deepened, nourished by the mutual need for understanding and solidarity in an alien city.

Each morning, they set out together to explore the Egyptian capital, its vibrant streets filled with the sounds of street vendors, the scent of fresh spices, and the laughter of children playing in courtyards. They visited the famed landmarks including the Egyptian Museum and the pyramids, enjoying great views of different areas especially those along the Nile's banks. These excursions were more than mere sightseeing; they became

shared rituals of discovery in a place where past and present meet with each other to form a fantastic tapestry of contemporary life.

Their conversations were rich and varied, a true meeting of minds from different backgrounds. Salem, with his quiet intensity and earnestness, often spoke of Syria with a mixture of hope and sorrow. His words painted pictures of a homeland along with memories of family and tradition. He was reflective and frank about his fears for what lay ahead – fears rooted deeply in the miserable political circumstances and dictatorship that paralyzed the country.

Marwan, on the other hand, came from a Christian background and approached their discussions with open curiosity. His questions were thoughtful, never judgmental, and his willingness to listen without prejudice fostered a safe space between them. The differences in their faith traditions did not divide them; instead, they became points of connection and learning.

One warm afternoon, while sitting in a shaded garden near the tranquil waters of the Nile, their conversation took a more intimate turn. The gentle

breeze rustled the leaves above, and the distant hum of the city seemed to fade away. Salem looked at Marwan with calm seriousness and shared something deeply personal.

“Marwan,” he said softly, “I have found peace in Islam. It is something that has helped me hold on through the hardest times. If you ever want to learn more, or just talk, I am here.”

Marwan nodded slowly, absorbing the offer with respect. Their discussions about religion soon became a regular part of their friendship, carried out with a mutual openness and respect that allowed both men to explore their beliefs without fear of misunderstanding or offense. They spoke of philosophy, spirituality, and the meaning of life itself, their words weaving a tapestry of shared humanity regardless of having different views about certain points.

Despite the relative safety of their new surroundings, Salem and Marwan’s thoughts frequently drifted back to Syria, a place where their freedom to speak openly was severely restricted. Salem, in particular,

carried the heavy burden of memories where even the simplest expressions of dissent could result in dire consequences.

One quiet evening, as the two sat side by side in their modest flat, the city's distant sounds filtering through the open window, Salem confided in a low voice. "In Syria," he said, "we cannot speak freely about our government. Even a simple complaint can put you in jail. Sometimes worse."

Marwan listened carefully, the weight of Salem's words sinking deep. It was one thing to hear about such repression and another to see it in the eyes of someone who had lived it.

"We must trust those we speak to," Salem continued, "because even a whisper can be dangerous. You never know who is listening."

Their conversations often ventured into these once-forbidden territories – politics, justice, human rights – topics that were taboo back home but discussed openly in the cafés and parks of Cairo. This newfound freedom was both comforting and strange for Salem, who had grown accustomed to living under constant watchfulness.

The next morning, Salem awoke with a sense of purpose. He had arranged to meet his Egyptian friend, Ehab, who had promised to help him pursue a master's degree at Zagazig University, a prestigious institution not far from Cairo. Education was a vital step for Salem, a way to rebuild his life and carve out a future beyond the shadows of miserable political circumstances.

Taking a crowded bus eastward through the big metropolis, Salem absorbed the lively chatter around him. Unlike the fearful silence he was used to back home, the passengers discussed their government policy openly, sharing frustrations and criticisms with candor. This freedom of speech struck Salem deeply – both inspiring and bewildering.

In Zagazig, Ehab greeted Salem warmly, the warmth of Egyptian hospitality after multiple hardships. Together, they walked through the university's leafy campus and met with Professor Ismael, a scholarly man with kind eyes who assured Salem that international students were welcomed and supported.

“You must attend all your courses,” Professor Ismael advised. “Especially in your first year. This is essential for your success here.”

Salem expressed his concerns about balancing work and study, explaining that he currently worked in Kuwait and might find it difficult to commute regularly.

The professor nodded thoughtfully, a gesture of understanding. “We would find a way to make it work. Your education is important.”

After meeting Professor Ismael, Salem got convinced that he would never get an opportunity to pursue higher studies in Egypt because he must have chosen either joining his higher study program or quitting his job in Kuwait. Salem chose the latter and postponed his higher studies program until further notice.

Ehab was also sorry for that and invited Salem to his nearby flat, where they spent the late morning sharing stories, easing some of the tension caused by the meeting with Professor Ismael. As noon approached, Ehab asked Salem to join him at his family’s home for lunch – a gesture that

deeply touched Salem. This afternoon meal was a celebration of Salem's visit to Egypt.

As night fell and Salem returned to the flat, he carried with him a sense of cautious optimism. Despite the challenges ahead, the bonds of friendship, the pursuit of knowledge, and the simple kindness of strangers made the vast, unfamiliar city feel a little more like home.

Back in the bustling heart of Cairo, the group eagerly made their way in the next morning to the Egyptian Museum, a treasure trove of antiquities that promised a journey back in time. As they stepped through its grand entrance, they were immediately struck by the sheer scale of the collection housed within its historic walls. The museum was an overwhelming mosaic of ancient history: rows upon rows of artifacts, each whispering stories of a civilization that had flourished thousands of years ago along the banks of the Nile.

The friends wandered slowly through the yellow lit halls, their eyes wide with wonder as they encountered mummies of long-deceased Pharaohs, their wrapped forms still displaying an odd aura of mystery and power.

The dazzling jewelry on display glittered under soft lights – gold necklaces, rings, and other pieces that once adorned kings and queens, testaments to the artisanship and wealth of ancient Egypt. Each exhibit seemed to pulse with the life of an era that was at once alien and familiar, a civilization whose achievements in art, architecture, and spirituality still resonated today.

Hours slipped by unnoticed as the friends immersed themselves in the splendor of this ancient world. They moved from room to room, occasionally pausing to discuss the significance of what they saw – the complex burial rituals, and the religious beliefs. The visit was more than a sightseeing trip; it became a profound reflection on the passage of time, on the resilience of culture, and on the human desire to create something eternal. The museum's vast collection was a silent dialogue across ages, inviting the visitors to contemplate their own place in history.

For Mahmoud, Ammar, Salem, Marwan, Hassan, and Ahmad, the Egyptian Museum offered not just artifacts but a mirror to their own identities as Arabs, linking them to a shared heritage that transcended

national borders and modern politics. The richness of Egypt's past stirred in them a deep appreciation for the achievements of their ancestors and an eagerness to carry forward those legacies of knowledge and cultural pride.

As their days in Cairo unfolded, the group dedicated themselves to exploring more of the city's historic sites and cultural landmarks. They marveled at the timeless beauty of ancient buildings and architectures – wandered through busy bazaars filled with textiles and sampled the vibrant street food that brought together centuries of culinary tradition. Each experience added new layers to their understanding of Egypt and its people, enriching their perspective on the Arab world as a whole.

Yet, amidst the excitement, time was moving forward. Mahmoud and Ammar were preparing to leave for Germany, where new opportunities and challenges awaited them. Their departure was bittersweet – the friends gathered for heartfelt farewells, sharing wishes for success, happiness, and safe travels. Though separated by distance, the bonds they had established promised to endure, carried by memories and mutual respect.

With Mahmoud and Ammar gone, Salem and Marwan remained in Cairo, their friendship growing ever stronger as they continued their explorations together. One morning, eager to experience one of Egypt's most iconic wonders, the two set out for the Pyramids of Giza. Their taxi driver explained that vehicles were not permitted close to the site, so he dropped them off at a designated point nearby. From there, Salem and Marwan hired two horses to complete the journey, the rhythmic clatter of hooves and the desert breeze heightening their anticipation.

The ride was brief but thrilling – about ten minutes through sandy terrain, with the monumental pyramids rising before them like colossal guardians of history. The sight was breathtaking. Standing at the foot of these ancient structures, the friends felt a mixture of awe and humility. They ventured inside, descending narrow passageways that had been carved thousands of years ago, their footsteps echoing in chambers once sealed to protect the Pharaohs' final resting places. The cool, shadowy interiors contrasted sharply with the bright desert sun, and each turn revealed another secret of ancient engineering creativity.

The experience left Salem and Marwan both exhilarated and contemplative. Walking through the corridors, they were reminded of the impermanence of human life and the enduring nature of legacy. These pyramids, built to honor rulers long gone, still spoke volumes about the values and beliefs of a civilization that had profoundly shaped human history.

Back in Cairo, with Hassan and Ahmad moved to stay in a different area close to their own academic pursuits, Salem and Marwan spent their remaining days in the flat together. They settled into a quiet routine at the flat, taking long walks through nearby parks and neighborhoods, savoring the everyday moments of life in a foreign city. Their conversations deepened, touching on various topics such as religion, politics, the struggles of their homeland, and the hopes for a better future.

Salem often spoke of his fears and uncertainties regarding Syria, a country gripped by political suppression. He trusted Marwan about the risks he took in expressing dissent, noting that criticism of the Syrian regime was harshly punished and had to be carefully guarded. Marwan, in turn, shared

his reflections on faith and friendship, offering a listening ear and thoughtful perspective. Their dialogues were not just exchanges of ideas; they were acts of solidarity, helping each other process the complexities of identity, belief, and belonging in hard times.

On the day before Salem's departure for Syria, the two friends spent a few quiet hours in a park near their flat. Surrounded by the greenery and the hum of Cairo's life, they discussed a wide array of issues – including some social problems, future challenges, and the possibility of having a brighter future. It was a conversation marked by honesty and respect, underscoring the deep trust that had blossomed between them over the course of their shared journey.

In the afternoon of 29 July 2004, Salem said goodbye to Marwan at the flat. They exchanged contact information and promised to keep in touch, aware that their friendship was a rare and precious connection bridging cultures and social disparities. Marwan would hand over the flat later that day.

At the airport, as Salem prepared to board his flight back to Syria, he was flooded with a mixture of emotions. Sadness at leaving behind the friends and experiences that had enriched his knowledge – yet hope for the future and the possibilities ahead. His journey had been transformative – filled with new friendships, challenges that tested his determination, and opportunities that expanded his horizons.

When Salem arrived in Damascus that evening, the familiar views and sounds of home greeted him warmly. Yet, he was no longer quite the same man who had left weeks before. Carrying the memories of Egypt and the bonds created there, he felt a renewed sense of purpose and reflection. From Damascus, he traveled onward to Deir Ezzor, his hometown, where he stayed many days in that city. There, in the quiet moments away from the bustle of cities, Salem contemplated his journey and prepared himself for the next stage of his life – a stage shaped by history, friendship, and the enduring hope for a better future.

Part Three

On 8 August 2004, Salem left Syria, embarking on a new journey toward Kuwait after an impeccable vacation. The trip included unforgettable experiences, where he had wandered through ancient streets, tasted the flavors of distant lands, and formed bonds with new friends. Those days, packed with discovery and companionship, lingered in his mind like the faint echo of a beautiful song – impossible to forget, yet impossible to fully grasp.

The memories clung to him persistently, like gentle haunting. Each evening, after the day's duties ended, he found himself revisiting those moments: the warmth of the desert's sun on his face, the excited chatter of his travel companions, the colorful tapestries of bazaars, and the quiet comfort of shared silence under starry skies.

He tried to keep in touch with the friends he had made on the trip, but the technology of the time made it a slow and often frustrating endeavor. Mobile phones were not yet widespread, and few of his companions owned one. Instead, they relied on email – a method that felt more

intimate but also more distant and delayed than the constant, instant connection so common today. Most of them were reluctant to share their landline numbers, convinced that email was a sufficient and even preferable means of communication, capable of carrying longer, more thoughtful messages.

As Salem stood on the threshold of this new chapter, the profoundness of what lay ahead was still unclear to him. He was leaving behind the streets of Damascus – a city that hummed with life from dawn to dusk – to face a future shrouded in uncertainty and hope. That morning, the city was alive with the sounds and smells that defined its character: vendors calling out their wares, the scent of freshly baked flatbread wafting from neighborhood bakeries, the distant but steady call of the muezzin from a nearby mosque.

It was a world Salem had known intimately since childhood, and yet as he loaded his bags into a taxi, the familiar comforts seemed to blur at the edges, as if the city itself was holding its breath.

Salem's heart was heavy with mixed emotions. The vacation he had just returned from was unlike any other experience in his life. For nearly one week, he had traveled with a close-knit group of friends, each day unfolding like a new chapter in an epic tale of youth and discovery. Their adventure had been filled with laughter that echoed through ancient alleyways, spirited debates about everything from politics to poetry, shared meals that deepened their camaraderie, and long walks beneath foreign skies that felt expansive and full of possibility.

Back in Damascus, as Salem prepared to leave, these memories and connections weighed on him. The city around him was alive with its usual rhythm, but he was poised to step into a different world – a world of new challenges, new hopes, and new responsibilities. The taxi moved through the morning traffic, past familiar landmarks that now seemed like relics from a life he was about to leave behind. With each passing mile, the streets of Damascus faded into the background.

Salem reflected on the bittersweet nature of departure. Leaving meant growth and opportunity, but also loss and uncertainty. The friends he had

met on the trip, the places they had explored together, had become a part of him. Yet now, separated by geography and the limitations of communication technology, those bonds felt fragile – treasured but distant.

Despite these challenges, Salem felt a glimmer of hope. The connections made on that trip had shown him the richness of human experience beyond his immediate surroundings. They had expanded his world, teaching him the value of friendship, the excitement of discovery, and the beauty of shared moments. Though the means of staying in touch were imperfect, he resolved to nurture those relationships as best he could, believing that the effort itself was worthwhile.

As the taxi approached the airport, Salem took a deep breath, steeling himself for the journey ahead. The scent of Damascus, the voices of its streets, and the warmth of its people would remain with him – a comforting backdrop as he ventured into new horizons. His vacation had ended, but the stories it inspired were only just beginning.

The plane touched down in Kuwait a few hours later, and Salem found himself greeted by the city's glittering skyline. Tall towers gleamed like polished silver under the afternoon sun, a testament to rapid modernization and economic prosperity. Yet beneath the shine of glass and steel, the city carried its own quiet contrasts – a blend of old and new – traditions and modernity. Kuwait was a city caught between worlds, much like Salem himself – rooted in tradition but reaching toward a fast-changing future.

But as the days stretched on, an insidious sense of loneliness crept into Salem's life. The vibrant energy of travel was replaced by the monotony of routine, and the absence of his friends felt like a hollow ache. Determined not to let the bonds dissolve, he resolved to keep the connections alive.

Night after night, after a long day at work, Salem sat composing emails to each friend. His words were filled with questions and memories, attempts to rekindle the warmth of those days. He wrote about the places they had visited, the jokes they had shared, the hopes they had whispered to the

desert stars. He asked about their lives, their families, their dreams. With a hopeful heart, he clicked “send.”

After countless attempts to reconnect, Salem’s hope of reaching out to the friends who had journeyed alongside him gradually faded. He had sent email after email, written messages, yet each one was met with silence.

Days turned into weeks. Weeks stretched into months. The initial glimmer of hope, bright and alive when the emails first went out, began to dim like a candle caught in a cold draft. Doubts crept in. Had something changed between them? Had circumstances rendered their friendship obsolete, swallowed by distance and time? Or was there something more profound – something unspoken – that had driven a wedge between them?

Salem wrestled with these questions late into the night. Maybe his friends had moved on, consumed by their own lives, their own struggles and triumphs. Perhaps the gulf of geography, culture, and daily realities were simply too wide. In that time, when technology had not yet woven a web of instant global connection, keeping in touch demanded conscious effort – and maybe that effort was no longer there to be made.

He tried to console himself. Friendships, after all, evolve and shift. The people we meet on a journey may only be companions for a season. Maybe the shared laughter and conversations were meant to be treasured memories rather than ongoing dialogues.

Eventually, with a heavy heart, Salem let go. He stopped sending emails. The memories – the late-night talks about politics and poetry, the laughter echoing under the moonlit sky – retreated into a private sanctuary in his mind. They became a sacred place he visited quietly, rather than a story he shared aloud.

Nearly eighteen months later, in January 2006, Salem found himself back in time, reconnecting with old friends from his university days. These were colleagues from the literature department, people with whom he had studied and debated ideas, dissected novels, and shared youthful idealism. They gathered in a small flat where other friends stayed. Among the friends were Nasser, Khaled, and Hamad.

As they talked, their conversation drifting to mundane topics and old memories, a sudden shift interrupted the calm atmosphere. The television mounted on the room's wall flashed a breaking news banner in bold.

Salem's attention snapped to the screen. At first, he could only catch fragments – a place name, a date, something familiar but just out of reach. Then, faintly, a voice emerged from the background noise. The voice was distant, but unmistakable once he focused. It was a voice from the past, one he had known intimately, the voice of Marwan.

His heart pounded as he leaned closer, eyes fixed on the screen. An audio recording played alongside, capturing the voice of Marwan – the young man Salem had once traveled with, the same quiet companion who had seemed so unremarkable back then. But now, hearing his voice in this new context was shocking.

Marwan's tone was serious, laced with an undercurrent of desperation as he defended himself against accusations that could destroy a man's life, and indeed, a nation's fragile hope for peace.

Below the video, the caption scrolled slowly as Marwan attempted to deny all accusations of being involved in assassination arrangements. He was accused of being a member of a team that was watching the motorcade of a leading Lebanese figure beloved across the Middle East for his relentless efforts to broker peace and rebuild a nation ravaged by war. His assassination had sent shockwaves through the world, an act so brazen and catastrophic it had reignited regional tensions and drawn international condemnation.

The room was deathly silent. Nasser, Khaled, and the others who had gathered around the screen shared the same expression: disbelief mixed with a profound sense of unease. Their eyes, wide and fixed, betrayed the internal turmoil each was trying to suppress. For Salem, the situation was unbearable. How could the man whose quiet demeanor and cautious kindness he remembered now be involved in such a notorious crime? The friendly companion from their shared days in Egypt was now revealed as a figure involved in one of the darkest chapters of Middle Eastern history.

Marwan's voice continued, steady but strained, as he spoke directly to the public looking for assistance. "I admitted my involvement," he said, "but only under pressure. There was pressure, threats against me. I was coerced to admit involvement through monitoring the motorcade – gathering information, nothing more. I relayed this information to operatives who coordinated the operation." He paused, swallowing hard: "I worked in coordination with a Syrian Intelligence Officer." Marwan asserted that he admitted all of that because of the great pressure had had encountered while interrogation in Lebanon.

The weight of those words was unbearable. Salem felt a cold shiver run down his spine. Syrian Intelligence – a name whispered with fear and loathing throughout the region.

Nasser finally broke the silence, his voice low and suspicious, "Do you really know this man?"

Salem swallowed, his mind racing to piece together memories. "Yes. We traveled together to Egypt once. For around one week, we shared a flat in

Cairo.” His voice was slow, as if reluctant to dig into the past. “He was quiet, reserved, but always kind.”

Khaled, “You know what he really was? A Syrian agent sent to watch you and the others in Egypt.”

Salem’s head shook sharply in disbelief. “I don’t know if that’s true. If he was an agent, why didn’t he report on what we talked about? I was openly critical of the Syrian regime. I spoke against oppression, dictatorship... I thought I could trust him.”

Nasser scoffed. “Trust? Come on! Apparently, Marwan wasn’t just watching idle chatter. His job was to identify political threats, intentions for acting against the regime, foreign collaboration – anything that could undermine the regime’s grip. Syrian intelligence doesn’t send someone abroad to watch minor issues.”

Salem frowned deeply – his voice quiet but firm. “So, you’re saying he was working for the devil?”

“Exactly,” Nasser replied with a grim nod. “The devil’s disciple. He was at the devil’s service.”

Salem's heart resisted. "Maybe we can't be so sure. He insisted he was innocent, that he only admitted things because he was under immense pressure. And he never harmed me. The only odd thing was when he was suddenly woken up – he'd sometimes shake, almost like he was haunted by nightmares."

Hamad nodded thoughtfully. "People who serve regimes like that – as brutal as Syria's – carry heavy burdens. The psychological toll can be devastating. The things they've done, the things they've seen... they live in constant fear and guilt."

Salem sighed, as if trying to stave off a splitting headache. "If they were sane, they wouldn't serve such evil. The Syrian regime wasn't normal a regime – it's a gang, a criminal enterprise that has hijacked an entire nation for decades. They crushed everything, destroyed lives, and poisoned everything including thoughts of people."

Salem's mind drifted back to that trip to Cairo, to the few days he had spent with Marwan and the other friends. He remembered late-night conversations in their flat, the laughter that seemed to break through the

weight of their fears, the quiet moments of reflection. How could someone so gentle become part in such a ruthless machine?

The truth was a bit complicated. Marwan's story wasn't clearcut – he claimed he was forced, admitting monitoring the motorcade under pressure and denied participation in the assassination itself. If that was true, then what was he doing in Egypt? Why didn't he attend meetings there? Why was he haunted with nightmares? Why didn't he harm Salem? Too many questions left unanswered!

During their stay in Egypt, Marwan stayed with Salem and the other friends. As far as they knew, he didn't attend any business meetings with other companies – if he had, he would have told them and been away for at least a few hours.

“Do you think he could have been playing both sides?” Hamad asked, breaking the silence.

Salem pondered the question. “Maybe. But what hurts most is the silence. The lies. The lives lost. The death of that figure wasn't just a political act; it was a blow to all those who believed in peace.”

Khaled leaned forward. “It’s a reminder, though. How deep and twisted the networks of power run. How even the quietest among us may hide the darkest secrets.”

Nasser exhaled sharply. “And how fragile trust is in these times. You think you know someone, but the reality is another world entirely.”

Salem looked at the screen one last time as the recording ended. The image of Marwan faded away, leaving only a haunting silence behind. In that silence, Salem felt the weight of history bearing down on him – the complicated intersections of friendship, betrayal, fear, and survival.

The assassination was not just an event from the news. It was a tragedy intertwined with the lives of those who lived under the shadow of authoritarianism, those who had to navigate a maze of secrets and lies just to survive.

Salem came to understand an important truth about human interactions: while some individuals earn our trust, others may not be as reliable as we expect. In our dealings with people, it is essential to approach every interaction with respect and courtesy. However, showing respect does not

imply that we must unconditionally accept or believe everything we hear. Words can carry both truth and falsehood simultaneously, and discernment is key.

Each chapter of our lives offers valuable lessons – some joyful, others painful. These experiences shape our character and deepen our understanding of the world around us. Despite the challenges we may face, it remains our responsibility to strive to be kind, ethical, and thoughtful individuals, making conscious efforts to avoid causing harm to others.

By this point, Salem had completely put behind him his journey to Egypt, a chapter that had unfortunately concluded in disappointment as he was unable to continue his higher education there. Despite numerous efforts to reach out, he was unsuccessful in reestablishing contact with any of his friends from that period. What initially sounded like a hopeful and promising endeavor is fueling a stronger determination to pursue aspirations, regardless of all obstacles ahead.

About the Author

Yusif Elias Abdullah is an author and scholar holding a PhD in English literature from Karabuk University, Turkey. In addition to his academic education in literature, Yusif demonstrated a commitment to religious studies by completing a 4-year Islamic studies program at "Dar Al-Quran".



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