

THE 56TH MAN

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ONE

Baghdad, March 27, 2003

The storm receded in the distance, as all storms did. The boy was protected, even coddled. He did not comprehend that this storm, like all the others over the last week, was unseasonal. But he knew few things this thunderous ended abruptly. They faded off, as though the events themselves were aware of their majesty and were reluctant to end the proceedings. Like his father's wrath, which tended to decline into dark mutterings. There was no specific end to his anger; only when a tentative smile flickered across his stern face did the boy know that sweet reason was finally breaking through, however slowly.

But his father was not here now, nor his big brother. They had both been wearing uniforms when they left, leaving him and the middle brother and their mother to huddle in the basement while the storm broke overhead. The biggest storm the boy had ever experienced, big enough to shudder their bones and draw low cries of fear from their compressed lips. It would have been reassuring if his father had been with them. The boy would not have even minded if his father had cried out with the rest of them--though

such a reaction was unlikely.

But now the storm was receding and the boy grew fidgety. He tried to pull away from his mother, who kept him in place with a strong hand.

"Qasim," she commanded her middle son. "Go up and see. And be careful!"

The younger boy fumed as his brother went upstairs. He was more unwilling than unable to understand why he should not take charge of his own destiny.

"Ummi," he complained, squirming.

His mother's grip tightened. "Be still!" She hearkened to her middle son's footsteps overhead. Her mind had become a listening post, her dread a trembling sentry.

The boy hated the cramped basement, so full of family treasures that there was scarcely room for the three of them. Was that why his father and eldest brother had left? Because they would not have been able to squeeze themselves between the antique vases and statuary that they had moved downstairs throughout the previous week? And what was in those crates over in the corner? They had been unloaded from army trucks and carried here by soldiers who had brushed aside his parents' protests with curious indifference. Other men in uniform were highly deferential to the boy's father. But not these. This lack of respect bothered the youngest son. The soldiers laughed idiotically when he openly snubbed them. After they left, the boy was threatened with severe punishment if he went near the crates.

And now they were not ten feet away from him.

The boy stopped fidgeting. "Ummi, I don't hear--"

The door at the top of the stairs.

"You can come up, now," Qasim called to them. "They're gone, for now."

Still holding his hand, the boy's mother rose, lifting him to his feet, and led him up.

"Aoothoo billahi meen ash-shaytan ar-rajeem," the boy's mother murmured. The boy was startled. She was asking for Allah's protection against the accursed Satan. Not typical language in this household.

The boy was intrigued by glass strewn across the front room. Where had it come from? Ah...the picture window. Smashed to smithereens! If he had done that...kicked his ball the wrong way while playing in the yard...he would have feared for his very life. But there was no one here to punish. It seemed to have exploded all by itself, on its very own. How could such a thing happen?

"That's the only damage, Subhan Allah," said Qasim. "We're very lucky."

"Lucky!" his mother scoffed. "This is punishment. No one else has a window like this, where everyone can see in. Lucky!" She paused, looking lost as she stared at the vacant window. "It's your father's...he never went to the mosque...mocked the imam's...he was never a believer...he never bowed his head... Astaghfirullah. Astaghfirullah. Astaghfirullah..."

I ask Allah forgiveness. This was something you said when you feared going to Jahannam, Hell. And an especially horrible fate awaited unbelievers, who would not be rescued from their torments on Judgment Day: Qiyamat.

She seemed to the boy to be saying that, one way or another, they would all spend eternity eating Zaqqum thorns, and they had Baba to blame for it. Were things really that bad? Wanting to judge this gloomy assessment for himself, the boy strained towards the back door. Certainly, his mother would not mind if he went out that way, with a high

wall and locked gate for protection. But she held onto him. He considered the practicality of a tantrum. After all, his father wasn't here.

"Get your father on the phone!"

"The phones aren't working," Qasim reasoned with his mother. The boy watched his brother's Adam's apple shuttle up and down his throat as he confronted an adversary far more tenacious than the manmade storms.

"He has a radio, doesn't he? Call him!"

Qasim walked across the broken glass to a small charger on a side table.

"The power's been off. It may not be charged. The enemy is jamming--"

"Find out!"

The middle son took the radio out of its cradle and tested the transmission button. There was a burst of static, then a smooth electric sound. He pressed the button again and spoke. He released the button. A moment later a man's voice came on. It didn't sound like the boy's father, but it was fuzzy. Hard to say. In her excitement, the boy's mother let go of him and raced across the room.

"Careful!" Qasim cautioned his mother. "Careful! It's not a toy!"

The middle son assumed the authority of an adult as he explained to his mother how to operate the radio. She stopped her frantic efforts to grab it out of his hand and listened with a show of patience, as though heeding a grown man.

The boy skipped out the back door. He was a man, too. Independent. He hopped down the steps and stopped, listening.

The walled garden seemed undisturbed by the storm--except for some unripe fruit that had fallen off the tamarind tree that spread its shade over the far corner. The boy's

mother would not be pleased by that. He had once clambered up a ladder and picked some of the fruit too early in the year. His intent was to be helpful, but his mother had berated him for the waste. The fruit was useless until it dangled in long, plump strands.

Beyond the wall pillars of smoke rose in all directions. The outside world had been churned into noisy chaos. Shouting, cries of horror, pain and astonishment. The boy thought he recognized some of the voices. Could these be his neighbors? He could not say for certain. There was a high pitch in their tone that carried the voices just beyond familiarity. And there were screams. Who could be screaming? It was confusing. The fruit had incontinently fallen, but everything else in the garden was judiciously serene. The boy felt safe, as though snuggled in a nest.

He went to the gate and peered through the bars. People were running back and forth, blindly breaking through thick feathers of smoke. They were throwing up their hands or shaking their fists at the sky. Was the sky the enemy? Had the sky broken the picture window? The boy glanced up. The air directly above the garden showed only a faint trace of smoke. But the smell was strong. He looked out again. Further up the street the haze was impenetrable. A man emerged suddenly out of the smoke, like a genie popping out of his bottle. He rubbed his eyes, then gazed about numbly, as if waking from a long nap.

The boy saw nothing aimless about the people dashing back and forth in the street. They were vibrant, and in his small lexicon of life vibrancy spelt purpose. Even moaning, like the woman who stumbled and fell to the curb, was a kind of decisiveness. She was doing something...even if he could not begin to understand what it was.

Backing away from the gate, the boy stopped midway up the path of slate

flagstones and surveyed the garden. Wasn't there something he could do? Some way that he could be useful?

The opportunity was under his nose. Of course! He would pick up the fallen tamarind fruit. That would certainly please his father and mother. Even when ripe, they never ate it. His father bemoaned the annual mess and the insects the rotting fruit attracted after it had fallen to the ground. Planted long ago by the previous owner of the house, the tree was intended to provide shade, not sustenance. The tamarind fruit the boy's family ate came from India, in a variety of forms. When his mother stormed at him last year for picking unripe buds, she must have been more concerned about the height of the ladder than the loss of foodstuff.

Dragging a reed basket out of the flowerbed, he set to work. As he gathered the fruit, he noticed some branches that had broken loose. Most of them were small, yet still too large for the basket. How should he deal with them? Pile them next to the path, perhaps, so that the gardener could scoop them up for disposal? That seemed an excellent solution. The boy was sure his father would approve.

But after several minutes spent dragging branches across the yard the true magnitude of the job revealed itself to him. There was more here than he had realized. And some of the branches were much heavier than he'd anticipated. He abandoned the pile at the base of the patio steps and returned to his original task. Let the gardener deal with the branches. The fruit was much smaller and easier to handle.

And yet, after several minutes of bending and standing, it struck him this chore was just as tiresome as dragging tree branches. He'd never known the unripened fruit to fall in such abundance. What could have caused it? He raised his eyes to the tamarind

limbs overhead. The tree looked shaggy, weather-beaten. Well, that only made sense after a storm. Especially after a storm that could shatter a picture window into a thousand fragments.

There was something stuck in the lowest fork of the tree. It looked like string or tape. Walking around to the other side, between the wall and the tree, he could make out a knob-like thing, brightly colored. Somebody's toy had been tossed by the storm from who knew where, until it had fetched up here. From what he could judge, the knob was about the size of his fist. The boy glanced about for the gardener's ladder, then paused. The last time he had dragged the ladder against the tree his mother had come roaring out like a dragon in a fairytale. It would be best not to draw attention.

He searched the garden and found a plastic crate behind the mulch pile. The bottom was latticed. He had seen the gardener use it to sift out stones and roots before casting soil and mulch on the flowerbed. It was strong, but light. Carrying it over to the tree, the boy upended the crate and planted it on the garden side of the tree. He would catch hold of the tape and drag the knobby thing down by the tail.

The tape was about six inches long and flapped temptingly against the tree as the boy stood on the crate and stretched up.

Just out of reach.

The boy sighed, looked down for a moment, then raised his head, held out his right arm as far as it would go, and gave a little jump.

Missed.

Instead of being frustrated, he was egged on by failure. He even found it amusing to miss, and began to laugh so hard that it robbed his legs of strength. His jumps failed

by an inch, then several inches. He even fell off the crate once, still laughing.

Eventually, though, the knob and tape took on the aspect of an adversary. Not an enemy, but a prize to be sought and won. His father was a stout believer in excellence. The boy had already learned that goals were not frivolous. Once your mind was set on something, you had to see it through--triumphantly. He had to get the knob. His father would be so proud.

He heard his mother calling for him. She would make him come back inside the house, and all he would have to show for his bad behavior would be a pile of branches and a reed basket half-full of unripe fruit. Perhaps she would forgive the boy if he came back with something valuable. And the only thing that looked valuable to him at the moment was the knob in the tree. He leapt again. The tips of his fingers brushed the tape.

His mother was on the back steps.

"What is that?" she cried out. "Get away from it! No! No!"

He turned and saw her racing down. The boy could not recall ever seeing her run, whether in a dress or in the slacks she was wearing now. It seemed comical--until she reached the bottom of the steps, turned past the well-trimmed bushes that ran along the base of the raised patio, and tripped on the unseen pile of branches he had so helpfully piled up along the path.

She cried out in pain as she fell, cried out again when the boy turned away from her. "No! Get away! No!"

"But Ummi...!"

He was more frightened than ever. How could he explain his actions without

showing their cause? He jumped again, missed again. Then he heard his mother's footsteps. She had freed herself of the branches and was running toward him.

"No!"

"Yes! See? It's a game! It's a prize!"

Desperation lent him strength. He jumped once more--and his fingers closed on the tape. He held on with all his might as he dropped back on the crate, pulling the tape and the knob after it. The knob got stuck, but now the boy had the tape firmly in hand.

"See! A prize!"

His mother had almost reached him when he gave the tape a violent yank.

There was an intense flash.

And then the game was suddenly and horribly over.

TWO

"Hey, don't jump man." There was a trace of sarcasm in the young man's amiability as he guided his bicycle along the curb. He was accompanied by an equally young woman. Ari thought they had the air of college students, sleek and untrammelled in their liberal arts cloud. He noted the flat rear tire of the girl's bike. Neither of them had thought to bring a hand pump. Cycling was not the primary means of transportation in this country. Not yet, at least.

Ari smiled in response to the young man's quip. "It would never occur to me to jump without taking someone with me."

They paused, hesitating to pass him. At a rest stop on the Jersey Turnpike, the pump attendant had shot him an unfiltered scowl through the windshield--a clear reaction to his OPEC complexion. Perhaps this was due to the price of gas. But the young cyclist didn't have the look of someone with the courage of his prejudices. Perhaps Ari should not have made the inflammatory remark. But there it was.

The young man nodded at the girl and they pushed their bikes around the parked car, away from Ari and the bridge rail.

"You're blocking the bike path, man," the young man said over his shoulder as they walked away.

Ari studied the white line that demarked a narrow lane the length of the bridge. A bike path? He had thought it was a parking lane. Where he came from bicycles were an integral part of the traffic pattern, not segregated to the side.

Bracing his back against his car, he propped his feet on the narrow concrete

sidewalk and gazed out at the James River. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a map of Richmond. He quickly pinpointed his location, then traced the line that had been marked out for him. He estimated he was still several miles from his destination. He refolded the map and returned it to his pocket. He stared out at the river a little longer, taking note of people far below, jumping from boulder to boulder like gnats on dirty soap bubbles. Then he hunched back to his feet and turned. And frowned. The car was a Scion xB. Ari had seen dilapidated heaps drawn by donkeys with more flair.

Riverside Drive was a narrow lane that squirted in and out of every cove and cranny on the south bank of the James. Ari drove at what he considered a perfectly normal speed, leaving a trail of swearing cyclists, who used the road to access the state park. After passing an apartment complex near the bridge exit, he saw nothing but residential housing on the bluffs overlooking the river. It was a sedate, older neighborhood, with chrysanthemums, asters and dahlias draped down the slopes like tossed bouquets. Across the road a chain of black-eyed Susans were like token charms on the forest that shackled the river.

He crossed Huguenot Road, collecting one or two irate honks from drivers coming up from the toll bridge. To him, that too was part of a normal traffic pattern.

Riverside continued, sloping down until it passed another park entrance, then flattening along a field that was nearly level with the river. Traffic signs advised Ari that there were pedestrians in the area and that the speed limit was 20 miles per hour. He found them nonsensical--both the limit and the pedestrians, some of whom flagged at him

with their arms. Slow down? Why? This was a nice, clear stretch.

The road turned away from the river briefly. He stopped to check the nearest house number. Getting close.

He took the next curve slowly, keeping half an eye on the addresses. The houses here were larger, with thick borders of hedges and trees, imparting privacy and a sense of country living. He was approaching the river again. He made a right at Beach Court Lane and drove past a man sweeping a wand-like instrument back and forth at the edge of his yard. The man glanced up. Ari suspected traffic was not that uncommon here, but not that common, either.

He stopped at the next house. The number on the mailbox matched the one handwritten on the map. Someone had slapped a SOLD sticker across the FOR SALE sign out front. If there was a mistake, or a misjudgment, it was not his. Two bouquets of mixed flowers lay on the ground on either side of the mailbox post. Ari smirked. Was he being welcomed?

He hesitated pulling into the driveway, instinctively unwilling to stamp it with the burden of ownership. He switched off the engine, got out, and strolled a half dozen yards before stopping. Beach Court ended in a narrow turn-around a stone's throw from the James. A large patch of woods blocked all view of Riverside Drive and the houses further up the hill. All Ari could see of his immediate neighbors were two mailboxes on either side of Beach Court Lane. The man trimming his yard was invisible.

From the front, which faced the river, the house looked deceptively like a split-level rancher. A slight architectural variation became apparent from the road. The garage was tucked into the side. It was much lower than the front lawn, which dropped

sharply to come level with the driveway. The bottom story cut through a small hill, perhaps part of an ancient embankment.

He stepped out onto the immaculate lawn, which swept downward to a narrow beach where several ducks were taking refuge from the rapids downriver. A gazebo, raised on a brick foundation against the threat of floods, provided an outpost of calm near the water's edge. The decorative bushes that dotted the yard were trimmed to an almost unnatural perfection. The real estate people must have hired a professional landscaper to maintain the yard.

The slate roof imparted an expensive patina, while little rustic touches contributed to the air of discreetly advertised wealth. He could just glimpse another house about fifty yards up the river.

He circled around the side, where the true size of the house was revealed--two floors and a basement--and stutter-stepped down a sharp slope to a patio. From this angle, the trees in the back loomed up like deep forest. Taking out a set of three keys, he judged which would most likely fit in the sliding glass door facing the patio and inserted it. He slid the door open and entered.

His shoes clicked on the highly polished tile floor as he crossed to the center of the room. After standing silently for a minute, listening, he called out, "Hello!" He did not expect an answer. He was testing the acoustics, which responded with a muted, hollow echo. He was drawn to a humming sound from behind a pinewood door. Opening it, he discovered a water heater, its PVC piping disappearing into the wall. There was also a washer and dryer.

Returning to the center of the basement, he reflected on its emptiness. This must

have been the rec room. Four indentations in the tiles suggested a pool table. Perhaps there had been a dart board at that wood-pasted hole in the walnut paneling. This would have been an ideal place for children during winter days, isolated as it was from the rest of the house, from parents.

He found the stairs. Swinging open the door at the top, he found himself in a short hall leading to the kitchen. The stove was set against the wall, underneath a row of cabinets. Pots and cooking utensils dangled from a wide brass ring overhead. Plastic shopping bags were strewn across the counter. Ari glanced into several of them, frowned, then turned his back on the counter. He opened the refrigerator. The top shelf was stocked, the lower shelves were empty.

He toured the rest of the first floor. No carpets, not a single stick of furniture beyond the kitchen's small round table and its two ladderback chairs. Nothing but dark olive window curtains to absorb the hollow echoes of his footsteps. In the front room he pulled back the curtain on the picture window for an unobstructed view of the gazebo and the river.

Upstairs was a little more interesting. The bedrooms were without beds, but there was a computer in what Ari presumed had been the home office, or perhaps some kind of studio. Although the windows here were covered with the same thick fabric, a skylight removed the somber darkness. The computer table and chair was the only furniture he had seen outside the kitchen. A cable ran from the wall to the mini tower. Nothing wireless. He sat in the chair and switched on the computer. It booted up quickly, opening onto a screen requesting the user name and password. Ari took out his wallet and removed a slip of paper. He studied the paper, brooded a moment, then returned it to

the wallet. He switched off the computer.

A closet in the upstairs hall contained towels and wash cloths. In the bathroom was a bottle of shampoo, a can of shaving cream, a disposable razor and a bar of soap still in its wrapper.

He was back downstairs, looking out the picture window, when he heard a car door slam shut. Leaning forward, he could just make out the road and the entrance to the driveway. A police cruiser had pulled up behind his Scion. An officer had gotten out on the passenger side and was approaching the box-shaped car. He peered inside. Ari clearly heard his one-word shout:

"Suitcase!"

The driver of the prowler car got out and looked up at the house. Ari did not move away from the window. He was certain he could not be seen from that angle, with the sun reflecting off the glass. Without thinking, he reached across his stomach with his right arm and gripped the left side of his belt. When he noticed what he had done he smiled grimly.

The driver studied the SOLD sticker, then said something to his partner, who shrugged and shook his head, Ari thought, in disgust. He came back to the cruiser and removed a small wreath from the rear seat. He came around and placed it against the mailbox post. The driver seemed to find something aesthetically awkward about the placement and crouched down to align the two bouquets on either side of the wreath. Then he stood and returned his gaze up the hill. His partner said something and he shook his head. Sorrowfully, perhaps.

Both officers got back into the cruiser. Slowly, they circled the turnaround and

were out of sight as soon as they passed the driveway.

Reaching into his pocket, Ari took out a pack of Winstons. He was about to light up when he remembered there was no ash tray on the premises. He doubted there ever had been. There was no hint of tobacco smoke beneath the prevailing atmosphere of pine-scented disinfectant. To his thinking, the house smelled like a hospital ward.

He went outside to pull the Scion into the driveway. The police cruiser had stopped along the grassy curb at the next house. The groundskeeper was leaning on his trimmer as he spoke to the officers, who remained seated in the car. He was pointing down the street. When his eyes followed his arm he saw Ari watching him. He lowered his arm, smiled uncertainly, and nodded. Ari sensed the policemen watching him in their rearview mirrors and nodded back at the groundskeeper.

Getting into the Scion, he pulled up the driveway, stopping a few feet short of the double garage. Taking out the set of keys, he guessed which of them would work on the garage door--the odds were down to fifty-fifty, now that he had used one on the basement--and again guessed right. He heard the bolt click, and he turned the lever. As he raised the door he noted the motor in the garage ceiling. He scouted around for a remote, but could find none.

Once he was parked in the bay, he lifted the car's ash tray out of its slot and took up his suitcase from the passenger seat, placing both items on the steps leading inside. He was about to close the bay door when he heard the police cruiser driving away from the house next door.

He paused, balancing his needs against his curiosity. Curiosity won. Necessity too.

Ari began to make his way through the thick border of trees, then recalled stories of American hypersensitivity when it came to property. He backtracked and approached the house from the road. The groundskeeper had resumed trimming the grass in the shallow ditch. Seeing Ari, he stopped. A tentative moment passed before he managed a smile.

"Hello," said Ari.

"Hey," said the man, maintaining a firm grip on the handle of his garden tool.

"I've just moved into the house next door. I wanted to introduce myself to the owner here."

"That's me." The man stiffened proudly. The sweat on his face and forearms had captured bits of dirt and grass so fine it look like gunpowder residue. A man in mortal combat against his yard.

"Excuse me. I mistook you for the groundskeeper."

"That's me, too." Freeing one hand from the trimmer, he stepped across the ditch. "Howard Nottoway."

Ari took the extended hand and shook it. "Ari Ciminon."

"Most folks around here call me Howie." A half head shorter than Ari, Howie raised a courteous if wary gaze. Sprigs of white hair sprang out above each ear, imparting a cockeyed awkwardness that seemed at odds with his status as a lawn warrior.

"I didn't see any moving vans."

"My furniture will arrive later." Ari maintained a straight face, a lackadaisical assumption of bland truth. Absent the cookie-cutter smile, it was the same expression he had worn in New York, while standing near the PATH station at Liberty Plaza listening

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