



# The Test

'Nature rampaging on the islands, everywhere else cemented over,' Ahmad says: 'It's a good remedy. It shows – we aren't just idiots.'

'There's other questions,' says Noura, 'Me, for instance. I love being alone, isolated, in solitude. You can't be – unless it's for a bet. Everybody is watched, replaceable, tested. Each person has their squad, their backing, colleagues who envy and record. Families who count you like you're on their hand – a finger.'

'They say everything written, passed on,' says Ahmad, 'Should be an act of political resistance – unless, I suppose, you're on the other side, an other side. We've had this one out before: 'commitment'. No one understands it now, unless they were there, or read the history. The history is always more interesting anyway – but it's gone. Not there, not anywhere, to resist.'

'I know being with me makes you suffer,' Noura says, not telling Ahmad how he's missed the point and not wanting to follow the argument herself : – 'You just need say.'

There's a slide of shale beside them. There are lots, so many – they don't want to move. They aren't being logical.

She says, 'Would writing include graffiti? And resignations? Love letters and dear johns? Orders of the day – menus and rules of engagement? Only profs read other profs nowadays: – most people only read their friends.'

'In some countries, poetry counts much more than here,' says Ahmad.

'They're always burning, down there,' Noura says, peering down at the ochre village, its ochre plots: 'Halms, or thatch: – in the fall, when the thatch is full of larvae, insects of all types ... up it goes. On with a new roof.'

Patches of smoke go looking for their lookalikes, join up, make a dark low cloud.

'People come here when there's trouble, to do good. Some to be good. Then, there's those who want to do and be: saints. We're near the top of the slope,' says Ahmad: 'We could go up to the ridge, over – and leave the fighting and the feeding to the other guys, the ones who seek a beginning, or an end. The self-fulfilling.'

'The boys on the other side bring their guns and shoot,' says Noura: 'Those trail-bikes! All wild! And what if they rape me? What would you do then?'

'Not much,' says Ahmad: 'I'm useless in such situations. Besides, there is no protocol. I run when everybody runs, and if someone doesn't run, it's too



bad for them.'

'Exactly,' Noura says: 'When we left home, we should have gone straight on. Instead we took a left, and down the hill, they're Buddhists, they have anger management from their birth. It isn't wanted, it gets you nowhere. But we've got no context, no one is interested, no one feels a duty – not of any kind, except maybe to those gold statues. I hate this place, and the place we left, and the journey was shit too. I'm not used to all the drinking and fighting. I'd like to meet good people who aren't peaceful with it ...'

And they laugh, but not so much.

'There was war, remember, when we left,' says Ahmad, 'And from the start we were on the losing side, us, the good guys. I had no choice, I was well-known for being good.'

Noura laughs, she says, 'I should have stayed. I thought I'd be safer out – but for a while; then going back.'

'You know I'm a coward,' Ahmad says, 'So – I brought a pistol. It only kills one at a time. It's archaic – you'll have seen it in the movies. It sticks out, digs in, so you can't sit. It's your libido, always rampant, always urging on. What would a rifle do, I wonder?' And he laughs.

'Let's get a bonze to bless us,' Noura says: 'Perhaps they sell armour too.'

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The Black Sea,' Ahmad says, 'Was called that because of the dark fogs. Now, it's oil. My family went there before the dictatorships – I have photos of them, happy as seals. The men, naked like the Russians, like the tsars. A fiasco – my cousins, free and fresh of face, unveiled, or wearing a niqab and nothing more, or covered in cake deco – sugar roses and peonies....'

'In memory,' says Noura, 'We're all romantics – think of Goethe, displaced by three wars, in a tent for decades, crawling with cholera and buboes. Schiller too, backing the wrong side, and Marx with his flintlock, on the barricades; Munich, the revolutionary city ....'

'You're a compendium, Noura,' Ahmad says, 'When you're not a thesaurus. If you were an emporium, we could get something on a bun. Fried things: dripping, at the least.'

'Being chased out, bombed and martyred – it's part of life's cycle,' Noura says: 'A rite. Don't think about it when it happens, but take notes to compare, when you are out and a celebrity.'

'I understand why everybody does what they do,' says Ahmad: 'Understand – it's a killer. You lose everything you ought to be, what you are. We're free to wander round, looking in the windows of other people's houses. Not everybody suffers: if you're not poor, you're rich. If you don't lose, you win. If you don't believe lies – you know the truth.'

'Pelicans fly half-way round the world,' says Noura, 'Each year. Naked, just feathers. They know the world is round, they fly back with their kids; no one helps them, no one shoots them down. They're citizens of everywhere. Once, we would be asked in. Now, it's hard. The plan should be to stay until the last instant. If nothing happens, it's because you're doing nothing, knowing

nothing.'

'Rich people leave,' says Ahmad. Some stay, if they've got big families. Most people, people who are poor, or getting so – they stay – send out someone, maybe they'll be saved, maybe pull everybody out. But mostly – it's going on and struggling, and mostly waiting, clinging. If you're us, Noura, you understand, and you've lost everything. You're not a pelican, although you know the earth is round. The birds, up high, can see where to avoid, and where is flourishing. Even when everywhere is getting hot.'

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