

# Ali the Red

It was indeed Ali, Ali the Red – not because he was ever a Communist, but because during the second year of middle school, the last of his formal education, the moniker stuck – as if the sole purpose of middle school for him had been to earn the nickname rather than do any learning. There were other Alis in the class. There was Ali Sadek, Ali Salem Helou and Ali Abdel-Rahman. The first left Basrah with his family for Bayji, up north, accompanying his father who used to work at the railway station in al-Ma’qil; Ali Salem Helou disappeared in the early ‘80s during one of the infamous raids on port workers’ housing by the security forces; and Ali Abdel-Rahman went on to the military academy and graduated as a first-lieutenant, only to be killed during his unit’s withdrawal from Kuwait.

Whether or not there were four students named Ali, what is certain is that over the course of twenty years, three of them vanished into thin air, leaving only Ali the Red to remind us of the middle school sports teacher who had colour-coded them to tell them apart: the first, by his dark-brown skin, the second by his sallow yellowish complexion, the third by his blue-tinged lips, and the last by his ruddy face . . . With the disappearance of their namesakes, I had forgotten the other colours; but red stuck to Ali, the son of deputy police sergeant Jassem Salman, who never tired of boasting that he had scored six women, all of whom had left him – except for Wasfeh, Ali’s short, fat and red-faced mother. Jassem liked to evoke each and every one of his women so that when he came to Wasfeh, he could tell his favourite story of all, the one about her and the robber; I heard him tell it twice during successive holidays, and a third time at a wedding, and once Wasfeh herself told the story, one day when she was over at our house. None of those listening ever objected to the story being retold because they enjoyed hearing about the ill-fated robber who broke in one hot summer night when Jassem was out on duty and the pregnant Wasfeh was at home alone. “I didn’t like sleeping up on the roof the nights Jassem wasn’t home,” she said. “And with the room so hot and my pregnancy so uncomfortable, I was tossing and turning like a fish caught on a hook, but then I heard the lad-

der creak and I stopped breathing altogether . . . I got down on all fours and crawled to where I could look out, and there was this shadow carefully climbing down into the darkened house . . . At that point, I couldn’t think of anything besides the bottle of arak which Jassem always filled with water and left on the window-sill to cool at night, so I grabbed it by the neck and when he was just outside my room, I screamed so loudly every last neighbour must have heard me and hit out at the bastard. I felt his blood spurt hot and sticky onto my face and neck. He was so startled by the blow that he swivelled around and I caught sight of him as his head cracked open like a watermelon and his eyes rolled in their sockets. Now I couldn’t stop screaming, I never imagined the bottle would smash his head open, but as Jassem said, the blows of the terror-crazed are doubly lethal, borne of fear AND madness. I was so crazed with fear that night that I fainted as soon as he fell to the ground; the sound of his groaning as he gasped for breath and the sight of his head cracked open and his eyes rolling in their sockets were so unbearable, everything around me began to sway and I fell unconscious.” Whenever we recalled this story, Ali would chuckle with laughter, saying that he could still hear the bottle smashing against the man’s head from when he was in his mother’s belly. During the condolence gatherings on his father’s passing in the mid-90s, he’d lean over and whisper to his friends that they would never again hear his father tell the story of the robber.

Yes, that’s Ali, I told the man as soon as he drew back the cover from his head. Even though his forehead and half of his face had been gouged by bullets, there was no mistaking him: his one remaining eye, wide-open, the pug nose, the hint of a smile hovering under his slight moustache, and the white hair matted with congealed blood.

The story stopped being told, not only because his father had died, but because after Ali left al-Ma’qil we never thought much about Wasfeh, whom we saw shuffling about the neighbourhood from time to time, bemoaning the fact that her son had left her to go and work as a driver at the Barr al-Zubayr quarries. Once in a great while he’d come home, and we’d hear the racket of his old Chevy pick-up as he rolled in at odd hours, his face wrapped in a faded kuffiya, his eyebrows and moustache encrusted in sand, looking twenty years older than he was. After a bath and a nap,

with the head-wrap gone, he'd roll out a rug in front of the house at sunset the way old men do, looking more like his old self again. The one subject to which he kept returning in our conversations was the vast expanse of sand at Juwaybidda, Bateen and at-Touba, where huge wells were being drilled and constantly expanded; anyone seeing them, he said, would think that they stretched to the ends of the earth. Watching his dry, calloused hands pour our tea, I couldn't help wondering whether this was the Ali the Red that I had known, and listening to him talk about the collapsing well-heads that buried workers in the bore-holes shook me even more.

Placing a glass of tea before me, he asked: "Would you believe that the ground beneath the workers' feet is actually on fire?"

"What ground?" I answered blankly.

"At Juwaybidda . . . there is so much drilling, so many well-heads are burning, that it looks like a river of flames."

"What about the workers?"

"They hop around the edges of the bore-holes with blistered feet."

"And then go back to work?"

"As soon as the fires are put out and the sand cools off."

"What kind of a life is that!?"

"That's life in the sands," he answered as he looked at me with the faint hint of a smile – the first I had seen in a long time, it seemed to me.

And whenever he was gone too long, I thought of that life, imagining that Ali had fallen inside one of the collapsing well-heads.

I've always been fearful when unfamiliar numbers show up on my caller ID, which is why I hesitated to answer the phone. The old fear crept through me when I heard a man asking me to confirm my full name, first, middle and last, and when I told him I was indeed the person he sought, both my hands shook and my voice trembled. I heard him say something about the coroner's office, Ali Jassem, the bridge at al-Zubayr, and since I couldn't figure out what any of that had to do with my phone number, I asked him to repeat what he'd said.

At the coroner's office, they handed me his belongings before I viewed the corpse. His ID card, his driver's licence, odd bits of paper, as well as his small leather wallet, all stuffed in a transpar-

ent plastic bag tied with a piece of tape that had a number printed on it. I took the bag from the top of the bureau where the man had placed it, and saw my name and phone number written on one of the bits of paper, just the way I had given them to him during his last visit.

The man said: "It's fortunate that we found these things on him, we mostly get corpses with empty pockets."

I looked at his ID card and tried to estimate his age in the photo. The man said: "Shall we?"

I followed him down the peeling walls of a long corridor, at the end of which we halted before a metal door. Taking a key out of his pants, he unlocked the door and pushed it open with a shove of his shoulder. He went in while I remained by the door, and I heard him call out to me once he had stopped moving about in the large room. Inside, examination tables were lined up in a row, each laid out with a corpse covered by a sheet or blanket. I noticed that among those with their extremities showing, several were bare-footed. Going to one of these, the man pulled back the sheet and waited for me to reach him before he asked: "Is this him?"

I looked down at the forehead and eye gouged by bullets. The other eye, wide open, was still looking out, its pupil glowing in the half light.

"It's him," I said.

He covered the head again and we retraced our steps down the long corridor.

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