

## GEORGE AND MARIAM

SHARIF GEMIE

George got up quietly. He wanted to do the washing up without Judy hearing. He imagined her in an hour's time, after he'd gone: she'd wake and find the kitchen clean and spotless—just the way she liked it. But George faced a problem: he was used to dishwashers, while Judy always did the washing by hand.

He'd waited in the kitchen many times, late at night, after one of Judy's meals, ready to go to bed, while she insisted on washing up *before* sleeping. She hated to come down in the morning to the sight and smell of dirty dishes. Last night, she hadn't washed up because they'd argued.

How was he to do it?

There was the sink. What did she clean the dishes with? He found a blue sponge and the washing-up liquid on the white windowsill. He turned the hot tap on slowly, trying to make as little noise as possible. Then, in a hopeful sort of way, he squirted some liquid into the blue plastic bowl. Was that too much? He didn't want Judy to accuse him of being wasteful. Next, he squirted some more liquid on the sponge—didn't she normally do that?—and carefully picked up a grubby plate, still caked with last night's lasagne. A pang of guilt struck him: she'd made it specially for him! A few swipes with the cloth, and the plate looked mostly clean. But it wasn't perfect. Despite his best efforts, bits still clung on to it. He rubbed furiously, but the plate slipped from his hand, then fell on the counter, clattering out his incompetence.

#

The digital clock next to the display board read 16:53. The main thought on George's mind was whether he'd be able to buy a regular cappuccino with a raspberry and white chocolate muffin before Judy arrived. The queue at his usual café in the arrivals lounge was slower than he'd expected. A small group of Asian teenagers were conducting a bewildering conversation with the barista in an approximate but complex form of quasi-English. The discussion seemed to be about different types of soya milk.

George sighed, and looked up: 16:54. Judy had been nagging him about his weight. Flying always made her tense, and if she found out that he'd been scoffing, she'd complain, he knew she would. He wasn't feeling good: he'd rushed to the airport, found a parking space far away from the arrivals lounge, and then marched in quick step to make sure that he wasn't late. (Judy hated it when he wasn't there as she emerged from customs). Sometimes he liked waiting for her in the arrivals lounge: he could enjoy its gaudy, shiny, plastic environment, its bustling shops and its buzz of excited, transient people. Some days, just for fun, he strolled through the counters of giant chocolate bars, apparently useful travel aids, unlikely-sounding liqueurs and enormous teddy bears. But today all he wanted to do was sit down.

The Asian teenagers left, white polystyrene cups in hand, and the queue inched forward. He glanced again at the display board: 16.55, flight XY375 from Barcelona on time. In front of him, a tall, olive-skinned woman in a striking blue hijab paid for a large latte with cinnamon and sprinkles, and then George was served.

By 16.57 he was sitting down, sipping the rich, hot, frothy liquid. In truth, it wasn't very pleasant, just a bit bitter, as always, but once he'd added some sugar, and bit into the muffin, all was well.

He sat back and looked again at the display board. Strange. XY375 was now delayed. He sensed, rather than saw, a ripple of concern pulsates across the lounge. Some people in the café near him pointed at the display board. It *was* strange: he knew from experience that if the Barcelona flight was delayed, then the delay was usually announced before its departure, not five minutes before its arrival. Normally, when this happened, Judy would send him an exasperated text, complaining about how long she'd had to wait. He looked again at the board and noticed something else unusual: there was no revised arrival time. A thought bubbled up in his mind: maybe he could have ordered a tuna melt panini as well. But this bubble burst and sunk away. He chewed at his muffin mechanically, without any real enjoyment.

17:03. He could stay in the café and read his book, but he felt he ought to find out more. He knew the stand for what he thought of as 'Judy's airline': on previous occasions he'd had to call there to check details. He'd just wander over and see...

17:06. A group of worried people were gathered at the stand. There was the blue hijab lady; a few Spaniards talking with each other; an elderly couple hanging on to each other, arm-in-arm; a little cluster of teenage girls; plus a large, red-skinned man in a grey suit. As he approached, he saw the Spaniards eyeing the hijab-lady suspiciously. Knowing that she had just ordered a large latte with cinnamon and sprinkles somehow made him feel affectionate towards her. She was at the front of the crowd, shouting, really shouting at the uniformed woman at the desk, whose badge told them she was Gemma.

‘I want to know where my son is! Where is my son?’

Gemma looked momentarily flustered, and then said: ‘I’ll phone to check for you.’

The little crowd grew closer to the desk and watched as Gemma phoned.

‘Hallo, it’s Gemma at the desk... Yes... Yes, it’s about XY375...’

The crowd stared intently at her. Gemma’s bright, business-like look suddenly changed.

‘What is it?’ asked the hijab lady.

Gemma continued to speak into the phone: ‘Yes... I see... Oh... Okay, I see...’ Then she put the phone down.

‘What’s happened?’ asked the hijab lady.

Gemma looked at the anxious people in front of her, took a deep breath, and then began to speak in slow deliberate terms, like a nervous teacher talking to troublesome schoolchildren.

‘There is no new information about the arrival time of flight XY375. We invite you to gather in the reception room, where we will update you about events.’

Gemma led them to a room at the end of the airline booths that George had never noticed before: it was brightly lit, with plain grey walls, and had three long rows of blue chairs picked out with yellow patterns. There was a metal water fountain in one corner, and no windows. George paused at the entrance. There was something that he didn’t like about this room. He wondered about this, and then realised what it was: outside, he was a man waiting for his girlfriend. Once he entered this room, he’d be re-defined. He’d become a man confronting something serious, something unexpected, something which was starting to frighten him.

He went in, and then looked at his new companions. The blue hijab lady was on her own, and the others were still staring at her suspiciously. Why? Then he understood: they thought that her hijab linked her to terrorism. But that was absurd! After all, why would a terrorist wait for her son at an airport?

George sat down at the end of one of the rows of blue chairs, as far away as possible from everyone else. He wanted to think. How had he got into this situation? It started when Judy's parents moved to Spain four years ago. At first, the deal was that they flew back to Britain every couple of months and stayed in a nearby B-and-B when they wanted to see Judy. But soon they complained about this arrangement: it tired them out, it was difficult to plan the journey, and Britain was too cold, too wet. On the other hand, Judy seemed more and more willing to travel to them. She worked freelance in web-design, and it was easy for her to find free days. She could pick and choose between flights, avoiding the expensive Friday evenings, travelling at odd times. She enjoyed seeing her parents, and she loved a day or two at the beach. And so, an arrangement was established. Judy flew out almost every month, and George travelled to meet her at the end of each trip, usually on a Sunday. The only drawback was Judy's nervousness about flying. To George's surprise, this grew worse the more she flew. He'd try to reassure her by texting funny messages just before she left: this time he'd told her that he'd heard that the pilot was going to play Mozart as they took off. She hadn't replied: maybe his joke had fallen flat.

George realised that someone was standing close to him. He looked up: it was the blue hijab lady.

'Do you mind if I join you?' she asked. She wasn't shouting anymore.

‘Please do,’ he replied.

She wanted to tell him something, but as she began to talk, Gemma walked into the room with an important-looking man in a dark suit.

‘Can I have your attention please?’ Gemma called.

The room was crowded: more people had come in while George had been thinking.

‘Everybody...’ Gemma called. ‘Can I have your attention?’

The talk subsided. Gemma introduced them to Mr Waddington, an expert employed by the airline. He spoke in a slow, forceful manner, and his words somehow occupied the entire space of the room. While his voice was clear, the meaning of his words was difficult to catch. George strained to listen but was left puzzled. It seemed that XY375 had left Barcelona normally. The plane had recently been inspected and was in good condition. The flight across Spain had also been normal, but then something had happened over the Bay of Biscay. Mr Waddington’s voice grew tighter and more awkward. Radio messages from XY375 had been confused with those of another flight, and Air Traffic Control had lost track of the Barcelona flight.

‘I assure you of the company’s deepest concern,’ Mr Waddington told them.

‘But what’s going to happen?’ called out one of the teenage girls, almost in tears.

Mr Waddington assured her that as soon as there was any news they would be informed. Meanwhile, the company had secured a suite of rooms in one of the airport hotels, and all of them were invited to stay at the company’s expense.

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For the next three days, George lived in the hotel at the airport. Mr Waddington spoke to them several times: they met in a large room on the upper floor of the arrivals lounge, with a barrage of press photographers and journalists present. The photographers were instructed not to take pictures of the friends and relatives, and the journalists were told not to interview them. They mostly respected these rules. George appreciated the journalists' presence: they shouted out questions at Mr Waddington, which often surprised him or annoyed him. But the story stayed the same: there was no news. No trace of XY375; no trace of its black box.

George lived these days like he was in a dream. He'd go to brush his teeth, and then realize that he'd been standing for fifteen minutes in front of the bathroom mirror, a toothbrush in his hand, unmoving. His mobile was clogged with unanswered calls and unread texts. Sometimes he ate ravenously, shovelling food in, and then he would go for hours without eating or drinking. At night he would lie in bed, motionless, unthinking, still and silent, but not asleep. One day, a counsellor asked him how he felt: George answered that he didn't know. On the fourth day, when he left his room to go to breakfast, he stumbled into a priest walking along the corridor. The priest recognised him. He looked at George closely and then told him:

'Go home, son. There's no point in you staying here'.

George stared at him for a few moments, not saying anything. Then he went back to his room, gathered his few belongings into a plastic bag, and left the airport. He was no longer a man waiting for his girlfriend.

#

The dream continued when he returned home. His movements were mechanical and unthinking. He found a pile of Judy's clothes in the dirty washing basket: he washed them, folded them, and placed them in her wardrobe. He hoovered the stairs and kitchen. He put dirty cups and dishes in the new dishwasher. Sometimes he spent hours flicking through TV channels, stopping for a few seconds whenever he found a news programme. Sometimes he answered the phone, sometimes he ignored it, sometimes he didn't hear it. He called no one. He learnt that he'd been given time off work: he said nothing. Judy's parents phoned repeatedly, with increasing panic and despair in their voices. One day when they called, he got angry, and shouted at them to leave him alone. He knew this was wrong of him, and he would regret it later. He began to sleep at nights.

One morning he got up and learnt from the calendar that it was the first of the month. Did this mean that anything had changed? It was now three weeks since he'd gone to meet Judy at the airport. He was conscious of changes within himself: he'd been through incomprehension, fear and despair. Now he was living in a new, strange sort of normality. Maybe he should go back to work? The thought lay in his mind, a thick, uncomfortable slab, obscuring all other questions. He sat at the kitchen table, silent and motionless, turning the matter over.

A loud rap at the front door made him jump. When George answered it, he found a policeman. George led him into the kitchen, and mechanically asked him if he'd like tea or coffee. The policeman chose coffee, with one sugar and no milk.

George made nothing for himself. The policeman asked a series of questions about Judy's movements. The questions grew more detailed: on exactly which dates had Judy travelled to Barcelona? George found his diary: he'd marked 'J. Airport' on various Sundays. What luggage did Judy take with her? What luggage did she have on her return? Did he see her unpack? At first, George answered these questions unthinkingly, as if they were an unusual sort of mental arithmetic. But, eventually, almost despite himself, he grew interested in what the questions implied. There was a pause, and he looked straight at the policeman.

'You think she was smuggling something,' he said. 'You think she was smuggling drugs.'

The policeman looked embarrassed and told George that they had to consider all lines of enquiry.

'But Judy couldn't have been a smuggler,' said George. 'She hated drugs.'

In fact, he remembered her enthusiastically puffing at a joint at a party, but quietly decided not to share that particular memory with the policeman. The policeman reminded George that drug smugglers didn't necessarily take drugs themselves. Their motivation was usually financial.

'But Judy didn't need money!' George protested.

However, even as he spoke, he remembered her complaining about how she couldn't work properly unless she got a new computer with more advanced software. Other thoughts accumulated: Judy's willingness to visit Barcelona frequently, her nervousness about every flight, her bad temper as she came through customs. He fell silent.

‘Did you ever actually see her unpack her suitcase?’ asked the policeman again.

George didn’t answer: in fact, on her return, Judy had usually said that she felt tired, and she’d unpack the next day. She must have done it after he went to work.

‘Can you think of anywhere where she might have hidden a package about this big?’

The policeman’s hands hovered over the table, sketching out a shape about the size of a large paperback.

It was a moment of revelation. George looked at the shape traced out by the policeman’s hands, and remembered, weeks ago, seeing Judy pushing a wooden box back towards the bottom of her wardrobe, where she kept her shoes.

‘What’s that?’ he’d asked.

‘Never you mind,’ she’d said with a strange smile.

Without saying anything to the policeman, he ran upstairs to the bedroom. Everything was now clear. He threw open the wardrobe door, knelt down, pulled out Judy’s shoes and grasped the box. Then he ran downstairs to where the policeman was still sitting at the kitchen table.

‘This is it!’ cried George.

He was sure that the contents of the box would explain everything. It had an elaborate gold clasp on one side, with a little keyhole inlaid in it. George fumbled at it and realised he couldn’t open the box without the key. He grabbed a large breadknife and pushed it between the clasp and the box. Then, placing the box upright on the table, he raised his fist to hammer down on the knife.

‘Now, just a second, sir,’ said the policemen.

George ignored him. He hit the knife handle with his fist. It hurt, and the clasp didn't budge. He hit it again, and the delicate golden clasp fell from the box, bounced on the table and then tumbled to the floor. Fumbling, George tore open the box. Inside was an old notebook and some faded photos. No little plastic bags filled with drugs, no used banknotes. What was the book? George flicked through it, and then realised the truth. It was a diary that Judy had kept as a teenager when she fell hopelessly in love with a boy living on her street. She used to talk to this boy, but never told him about her feelings. The photos were all of him. She had told George the whole story months ago and had even confessed that she had kept her diary from that time.

George sat down. He realised he was out of breath. He looked at the broken box and the little diary and began to cry. Great sobs shuddered out of him, and tears ran down his cheeks. How could he have suspected Judy? How could he have been so stupid? He cried so hard it hurt.

'Now then, now then...' said the policeman.

He made a cup of tea for George and stirred in two sugars. (George didn't like tea and never took sugar.)

'Drink this, sir.'

George made a plaintive, animal-like noise.

'Come on now, sir, just a sip.'

George looked at the policeman and wailed: 'What will I tell her if she comes back?'

The policeman reflected for a moment, and then said, 'Tell her I did it.'

The policeman stayed for half an hour. He spoke to George in a changed tone, gently but firmly. He said the same things over and over again in different ways: George had to realise that he would never see Judy again. George also had to see that his life would continue: he must begin thinking about his future, without Judy. George sipped the hot, sweet tea, and listened. His sobs died away. He knew the policeman was right.

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Three weeks later there was an important press conference at the airport, to which all the relatives and friends were invited. It was in a room that George had never seen before: it was bright and airy, with white walls, rows of potted plants and brilliant panoramic views of the airport's runways. Mr Waddington was there, as were speakers from the police, the government and Barcelona. The relatives and friends huddled on benches in one corner of the room: white-faced and tense, they recognised each other and nodded silently, unwilling to speak, almost as if they were ashamed for being there. They hoped, desperately, for some good news, some ray of hope, but they expected the worst.

Mr Waddington spoke in his usual fashion: his slow, ponderous words echoed through the loudspeakers, filling the room, saying nothing, denying everything. The police representative was more interesting. She outlined three possible scenarios to explain XY375's disappearance. Islamist terrorism was a possibility: there was an active group somewhere in north-east Spain. But the police had found no direct link between them and XY375. Mechanical failure could also have been the explanation:

despite the plane passing the safety check, a week earlier there had been a problem with one of the engines. However, the policewoman told them, it was not the most likely cause. The third possibility was a struggle between drug smugglers. Heroin had recently been smuggled from Barcelona to Britain by plane, and two rival gangs were involved. It was possible that one gang had learnt—or perhaps even only suspected—that the other gang was going to smuggle drugs on XY375 and could have blown up the plane in order to scare them off. (George wondered once more if Judy could have been a drug smuggler.)

The policewoman spelt out the implications of the investigations to the relatives and friends: they must now consider that the passengers of the plane were deceased. A shudder ran through them. Some gasped, some cried, and one or two shouted out: ‘no!’ George looked for the hijab lady at that point: he couldn’t see her. The spokesman for the British government gave a brief, empty statement expressing the government’s grave concern. The representative from the city of Barcelona proved to be surprisingly eloquent: his offer to all of them to come to stay in Barcelona, at municipal expense, was quite pointless, but it was made with such passion that somehow it comforted them.

Following these speeches, the reporters asked questions and the photographers took pictures. The relatives and friends were ignored. George looked around: he wasn’t sure what to do. He noticed someone had got up from the benches and saw that it was the blue hijab lady... only she wasn’t blue anymore. Her hijab was a sombre black, and large sunglasses covered her eyes. He hadn’t spotted her before because he’d been looking for a blue hijab. She was heading for the exit, carrying a small overnight bag. On an impulse, he stood up and went the same way.

In a minute they were walking out together, talking like old friends. She introduced herself as Mariam. They agreed that the policewoman's speech had been interesting, if worrying, and they both had felt embarrassed by the British politician's empty words. George listened carefully to her voice for the first time and noticed how her accent shifted: there was a northern ring to her vowels – maybe Bradford? – when she spoke colloquial English. But when she spoke more formally, the vowels grew longer, the stresses on the words were sometimes misplaced. She looked thin and tired. She explained that her husband had died from a surprise heart attack five years ago, and now her son was... She didn't finish the sentence.

'I have no one left! No one!' she repeated several times.

He felt a sudden sympathy for her. As he walked to his car, she followed. When he opened the driver's door, she got in the passenger side. This seemed odd to George, but no odder than anything else that had happened in the last six weeks. He decided it felt right. They said little on the drive back to George's house.

When they arrived home, he automatically offered her tea or coffee.

'Coffee, please,' she replied, 'black, no sugar'.

She smiled, and he noticed how white her teeth were. He went to the kitchen and made two coffees. When he came back, there was a surprise waiting for him. She was standing in his sitting room, taking off her hijab. It took a surprisingly long time: it involved much fiddling with hairpins at the back of her neck. It's worse than taking off a bra thought George. Probably the whole process took less than two minutes, but while she searched for hairpins, three important thoughts hit George in succession.

Firstly, he realised that while he had no idea what the hijab meant, there was some quality in her deliberate, measured movements, and in the manner in which she looked at him, that told him that her actions were intensely important. This was some sort of turning-point... in her life? In *his* life?

Secondly, he kept thinking about a stripper he'd once seen. He knew that this was wrong and felt ashamed of himself. In fact, discounting films and videos, he'd only actually *seen* a stripper once: she was an ill-judged addition to a stag-do. He'd admired her dancing skills but found absolutely nothing erotic in her performance.

Thirdly, he realised that Mariam was very, very beautiful. On their previous meetings, he had only looked at her hijab. Now, for the first time, he looked at her face.

She began to talk as she searched for another hairpin.

'Some Muslims would say that I am committing an unforgiveable sin, and Allah will never forgive me.'

She paused as she pulled out the hairpin.

'Others would say that I am committing a sin, but if I sincerely repent, Allah will forgive me.'

She placed the hairpin down on a table.

'Finally, some would say that the most significant expression of my religious faith is my devotion to Allah. My actions today are of little importance to him.' She paused and looked at George directly.

'I happen to agree with those in the third category.'

She smiled, flashing her white teeth at him.

'You understand: I will continue to be a Muslim.'

Finally, the black cloth folded free from her neck.

‘And I think I’ll continue to wear this thing. It protects my hair, it makes me feel safe, and... Oh, I don’t know... Maybe I won’t.’

She ran her hand through her long, glossy black hair, pulling it straight.

‘Right: I’m tired, I’m going to bed.’

She walked out of the room with her overnight bag and went up the stairs. A few seconds later, George heard the bathroom door close. How had she known where to find it? Then, after a few minutes, he heard her walk over to his bedroom. Again: how had she known which room it was?

George sat down. He had two coffees in front of him. He sipped one but found he didn’t want to drink it. He wondered for a moment what he should do, and then decided that he didn’t have any choice.

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Ten minutes later he was in bed. Mariam was wearing the type of dowdy, grey pyjama trousers and smock that, in his experience, most women wore in bed. He lay on his back, on the left-hand side of the bed, *his* side. Mariam was cuddled up next to him: her head lay on his right arm and chest, an arm stretched out over him, hugging him tight. He could feel her body move as she breathed deeply. He thought she was already asleep. For the first time in six weeks he felt at peace; his muscles relaxed, and his breathing came to follow Mariam’s slow rhythm. He lay still, listening to her breathe, and hearing the small, quiet sounds of the night around them: a car passing, an owl hooting, a dog barking three times, each bark a little quieter than the one

before, a door shutting... He had a sense of him and Mariam forming a little circle, which was inside the bigger circle of the house, and that inside the circle of the block, and so on, until he could imagine the moon rising and the planets and the stars circling around them.

As he slowly slipped towards sleep, a thought came to him: sex? He knew that they would make love later, maybe a lot later, but it would happen. He reached out with his arm, and hugged Mariam closer to him. For the moment, they had something more important than sex.

#

The train juddered into the station, its wheels screeching painfully: a sound which cut through George's head. He was impatient to get out. He'd promised Mariam he'd meet her at the café, but he knew he was late. He could send a text, but would she notice in time? And how late should he say he'd be? There'd been a missed connection, then a signalling problem and now it was moving slower and slower as it rolled towards the platform.

'We apologise for the delay and the inconvenience this may cause you,' said the conductor over the loud-speaker.

George stood up to join the queue of irritated passengers waiting by the door. In front of him two blonde girls chattered, playing with their hair: he couldn't hear what they were saying because of the screeches from train's wheels. They'll be talking about their boyfriends, or about clothes, or about some party they went to, he thought, and sighed. Ahead of them was a white-haired lady clutching an enormous

suitcase, its contents held in by broad leather belts. George could see that she wouldn't be getting out of the train quickly. And, by the door, there was a fat, round-faced man with an odd smile and a little quiff of hair, dressed in a smart blue suit that he somehow made look untidy.

The train shuddered, throwing them all to the left. George grabbed the chair next to him, but one of the blonde girls fell down. Her friend helped her up, and she looked round resentfully. Their conversation resumed.

The train drew towards the platform inch by inch. The wheels screeched again, rising to a fearsome crescendo. The train juddered to the right and then finally halted. In the sudden silence, George heard the blonde girls' chatter:

'But Aristotle, he's all about people, y'know, he's—like—a *people* person, while with Plato it's all abstract, it's all ideas and ideals...'

'No, but, Plato wants to achieve the good, and that will be, like: *good* for everyone, for all people. A good form of rule. Something that would be clear for everyone.'

George couldn't believe his ears. Was this some sort of travelling symposium? Then he remembered: The University was near the station. They must be two philosophy students. They didn't *look* like philosophy students, he thought looking at their skinny jeans and crop tops, but then he wondered what philosophy students were supposed to look like these days.

They'd reached the platform. The fat man opened the door, and they heard distorted, over-loud words echo out from the station's loud-speakers.

'What did that say?' asked the Plato girl. 'Why can't they make these announcements clearer if they're meant to be important?'

Her friend, the Aristotle girl, shrugged: she was checking her mobile phone.

‘I can’t get a signal,’ she moaned.

At the front of the queue the fat man was trying to help the lady with her suitcase.

‘Won’t take a moment, madam,’ he said.

The case was very large and very heavy, and the fat man was struggling with it, trying to pull it to the right.

‘Just a second, just a second,’ he said, pulling once more. ‘It won’t take a second.’

He laughed, an odd, un-funny chuckle, which sounded to George like ‘arf-arf-arf’. It was the least comic laugh that George had ever heard.

‘It’s for my son,’ explained the lady, looking round. ‘He asked me to bring these books with me. Maybe we should look for a porter?’

‘A porter, madam? Arf-arf-arf. You’d be lucky to find one round here.’ And he gave her case another pull.

George checked his watch: he was over twenty-five minutes late. Mariam would be worried. He pictured her waiting for him at the café. He reached for his mobile but found that the philosophy girls were right: there was no signal.

Another blast of noise came out from the station speakers, deafening and unintelligible, the words swallowed up in distortion.

‘Did he say “incident”?’ George asked. Girl-Aristotle in front shrugged. But behind him, a woman in a smart business suit nodded. After her was a thin man in a light suit, with anger in his eyes.

‘More problems with signalling,’ he said. ‘Or maybe the wrong kind of leaves are on the line.’

At the back of the queue was a dark-skinned young man who said nothing: he too was inspecting his mobile phone. George looked out at the grey platform, which normally would have been bustling with commuters.

‘It must’ve been a serious incident. The platform’s empty. I think... maybe they’ve cleared the station.’

There was something eerie about the bare platform: where were the streams of commuters, coffees in their hands? Where were the tourists, pulling their cases? Where were the teenagers, the schoolkids?

The fat man was now on the platform and trying to pull the case down from the train.

‘Let’s see if gravity does the trick, arf-arf-arf’. George noticed how he was chortling with glee, as if he’d said something extremely witty. From inside the train, the old lady pushed, and then, like a cork bursting from the bottle, the case rolled onto the platform, knocking the fat man over on to his back. George smiled.

The little group of passengers descended one-by-one onto the empty platform. An icy wind bit into their faces, and the space was filled with another ear-splitting but incomprehensible message echoing from the loud-speakers. It seemed to be the same message, repeated over and over again.

‘He said evacuation!’ shouted girl-Plato, sounding as if she deserved a prize for guessing the word.

‘But where has everyone gone?’ said girl-Aristotle, looking at the other platforms.

‘That’s the evacuation,’ girl-Plato explained. ‘They’ve all been cleared.’

‘Obviously an emergency procedure has been implemented,’ said Arf-arf-arf.

‘Something serious must have happened.’

‘How can we tell?’ asked girl-Aristotle.

‘We’d better leave too,’ responded girl-Plato. ‘That’s the procedure.’

They walked towards the stairs but were met by two armed policemen striding down to meet them. They had heavy protective body armour, big black boots and shiny black helmets; they both carried guns.

‘What’s this? What are you doing here?’ one said.

‘It was the train,’ explained the old lady. ‘First it was late, and then we couldn’t get out the door, and now we can’t understand the announcements...’

The policeman explained that there was a danger of a serious terrorist incident and everyone in the entire station had been evacuated. Now it was under lockdown.

‘So, we’d better leave too!’ said girl-Plato.

‘No one’s allowed out now,’ the policeman replied. His colleague was speaking softly into his radio, and George could hear tiny, tinny, distorted words coming back.

‘Right,’ said the second policeman, turning off his radio. ‘First, we need identification from all of you. Then, you’ll have to stay in the waiting room.’

‘Why can’t I get a signal for my phone?’ asked girl-Aristotle.

‘It’s part of the lockdown procedure,’ explained the first policemen.

‘Complete blackout of all electronic media.’

The two girls moaned.

The policemen inspected their ID. The lady in the business suit asked if she could leave: she had an important meeting planned. The policeman just shook his head. George had his driving licence with him; he didn't see what the others produced. He had the impression that the two policemen spent longer looking at his licence, and then tapping its details onto a little electronic reader. Maybe everyone thinks this when their ID is inspected, he thought. He looked closely at the two policemen: they seemed calm.

This isn't really a terrorist incident, guessed George. It's a practice, or perhaps there's been a threat somewhere else, but nothing's going to happen here.

'This is just a practice, isn't it?' he asked quietly.

The one checking his driving licence said nothing, but the other policeman looked up.

'We're not allowed to comment on operational matters, sir,' he said, but there was a half-smile playing over his mouth, and George thought that maybe he'd winked.

So, it was just a drill. He felt less frightened, but more annoyed. Why did they have to stay here? For a second, he imagined marching past the policemen. What right did they have to stop him? Why couldn't he join Mariam? But then he thought of the consequences: they'd immediately be suspicious of him, he'd be stopped, maybe arrested... In this sort of situation, you do what you're told, and there was no point protesting.

Mariam must be worried, he thought. Maybe the café had been affected by the lockdown as well; maybe she was stuck there. He pictured her looking at her

mobile, checking to see if there was anything from him, wondering why she'd heard nothing. If only he could phone her!

#

A few minutes later, they were all in the waiting room which—like most waiting rooms—smelt of fried food and was at once cold, stuffy and clammy. There was a vending machine in one corner, and George immediately thought of a coffee and a muffin. The ones from vending machines were never nice, but it would be better than nothing. He checked the prices, and put some coins in.

‘There’s no point, mate.’ He realised that the thin man in the suit was behind him. ‘It’ll never work. Those things never do.’

Sure enough, when George tapped in the code for a latte with sugar, nothing happened. He pressed the button to get his money back, but it seemed to be stuck.

‘Typical,’ said the thin man. He slapped the machine with surprising force, then kicked it: it rocked, but no coins emerged.

‘Told you so,’ he said, sounding pleased with himself. He walked back to the other passengers, who were grouped round Arf-arf-arf.

‘Now, I’m just a backroom boy,’ Arf-arf-arf was explaining, ‘but I think we’ll be here some time.’

He glanced round to make sure that he had their attention.

‘We need to stay calm and wait from the police to complete their procedures.’

‘Calm?’ said the thin man. ‘This is third time this week that the train’s been delayed.’

‘But this isn’t an ordinary delay,’ countered Arf-arf-arf. ‘There’s real danger here. The police told us that it could be a terrorist attack.’

‘How we can be sure it’s an attack?’ asked girl-Aristotle.

‘The police told us,’ replied her friend.

‘They can make mistakes...’

‘Come now, come now,’ interrupted Arf-arf-arf. ‘We must trust the word of the law.’

‘Another attack,’ muttered the thin man. ‘It’s those bloody Muslims again. Get rid of them and there’d be none of this.’

‘Now, now...’ said Arf-arf-arf, glancing at the dark-skinned young man. He was sitting to one side, his eyes on his phone.

The two philosophy girls looked at him.

‘What’s he doing?’ whispered girl-Plato. ‘He hasn’t got a signal, has he?’

‘No,’ said girl-Aristotle. ‘He’s playing a game.’

‘Muslims! Bloody Muslims, *again*,’ said the thin man, noticing the dark-skinned man for the first time. ‘I’d send them all home.’

The vehemence of his words made the dark-skinned man look up. He saw them all looking at him and seemed to understand something. He replied slowly and hesitatingly:

‘I yam not Moosleem. I yam Spa-anish, from Santiago de Compostela.’

George loved the way he pronounced the place-name. It was like listening to a mountain stream splashing down a series of rocks. He had a sudden vision of an old, sand-coloured city, with narrow, medieval streets, and he wished he could visit it.

‘There, you see. Arf-arf-arf. He’s no trouble.’

The thin man looked momentarily angry, as if the young man's words were somehow a provocation. 'Muslims!' he said again. 'I work for an insurance company. You can be sure when one of those Pakis sends in a claim, nine times out of ten it's a fake. They're just trying it on. Muslims.'

His words made George feel awkward. He wanted to say something, to confess something... He thought of Mariam, and phrases buzzed into his mind, one after another. Tell him you're married to a Muslim... But you're not married... *Is she a Muslim?* Now she says *she* doesn't know. She still wears that thing on her head. She says being a Muslim isn't a yes/no thing. She's not your wife anyway... She took the spare room and shares your bed every night. You can't blame her: she's a widow and she lost her son... and I lost Judy...

'Now steady on,' said Arf-arf-arf. 'There's room here for everyone who respects our laws.'

'Look where that's got us!' said the thin man. 'You can't even catch the train without some rag-head setting off a bomb. Don't talk to me about laws.'

The two philosophy girls stared at him. George could feel a lump in his throat. He thought of Mariam, *his* Mariam, and knew he had to speak. He opened his mouth, hoping that words would simply come. But before he could start, the lady in the business suit spoke.

'I am a Muslim.'

All eyes turned to her. There were gasps.

'What?' said the thin man. 'But... But... you can't be!'

The smart woman smiled coldly.

‘Religion’s no respecter of skin colour. You probably would’ve called Jesus a Paki.’

‘But you weren’t born a Muslim, were you?’ asked Arf-arf-arf.

‘No,’ explained the smart woman. ‘I’m a vicar’s daughter. I was brought up in the C of E. But I had a crisis of faith in my mid-20s and grew interested in the other religions. Islam seemed the most logical of all of them. It gave my life structure.’

‘You call this “structure”?’ said the thin man.

‘But what about the way they treat women?’ asked girl-Plato.

‘When you find a religious faith...’ began the smart woman.

Her words were interrupted by another monstrous wave of noise erupting from the loud-speaker system, echoing and buzzing across the platform. None of them could hear any of the business-woman’s words. George suddenly missed Mariam intensely.

#

‘Be careful with that plate,’ Mariam warned him.

George grasped the large, blue plate carefully, and wiped it with the threadbare towel.

‘Not much left now,’ she told him. ‘Finished soon. It’s a shame we couldn’t fix that dishwasher. You never got the hang of washing-up, did you George?’

‘No,’ he shook his head. ‘Nor cooking.’

‘Poor George.’

‘I could go back to Hamzi’s shop. He’d be willing to try fixing it again.’

‘How many times has he looked at that dishwasher, George? It’s pointless. No, we’ve got to face it. It’s wrecked. Anyway, we can’t afford to pay him. So, let’s just use it to dry things in.’

‘Yes...’ George sounded uncertain.

‘Never mind. We’ve still got a cooker and a fridge that work.’

‘I’ll go shopping tomorrow.’ There was a tension in George’s voice as he spoke.

‘Good. I’ll write you a list of what we need. But is worth it? Last time, all you came back with was rice and an old tin of tomatoes.’

‘I’ll try that new shop. When I looked in last week, the people running it seemed... good. They said they were expecting a delivery soon. They thought they might even have some fruit in the next few days. You could come?’

‘No, not yet. No. Not after last time. It’s not safe for me.’

‘It’s not so bad now. The really bad ones have...’

‘No, George. It’d be a mistake. Don’t you remember? They were looking for me. Or for anyone in a hijab.’

‘I know.’

‘They could’ve broken my arm: those bruises! They took weeks to go.’

‘Suppose...’ George began cautiously, ‘Suppose you went out without wearing your...’ He stopped and indicated with his hand her head covering. ‘After all,’ he continued, ‘you said it’s not...’

‘George! I’ll decide what I wear on my head, okay? It’s my decision... Not yours, and certainly not those thugs... But don’t worry: I’m not going to imprison

myself in this little flat for the rest of my life. I won't let them do that to me. That's not going to be my future, no... I went out on that march, remember? But... No, not shopping, not yet.'

George dried another chipped blue plate.

'Do you need the computer tonight?' asked Mariam. 'No? Okay, I'll get the sewing machine out. The woman upstairs has a dress she wants me to do.'

'Go ahead. I'll be reading.'

'*War and Peace*? How many times have you read that?'

'Do you mean: how many times have I tried to read it? Or how many times have I actually read it?'

They both laughed. Then George sighed.

'We used to have a television that worked. Remember?'

'And you used to have a job...'

'And you used to have a stall at the market...'

'And there'd even be elections, sometimes...'

They both laughed.

'Yes, telly could be nice, some evenings,' continued Mariam. 'But it changed very quickly, didn't it? All those government regulations. And then those awful public safety broadcasts. Every hour, then every half hour. And then the clampdown on the web-sites. Now it's so hard to find out about anything.'

'I think it's got a bit better recently. No, really, it has. That big march made a difference. You can feel it.'

George and Mariam had joined the demonstration in the market-place: it was the first time that George had done anything like it. He'd wondered who on earth

would be brave enough to do this, but when he got there, the answer was suddenly obvious: people like them.

At first, they'd been scared. Mariam had clutched onto his arm, her eyes running up and down the rows of curious onlookers, the windows in the buildings, the helicopters buzzing over them, the black-clad policemen, temporarily stunned by the size and vehemence of the protest... They had nothing to lose, George and Mariam had agreed on that. As the march progressed, they joined in the chants and protest slogans. After a few minutes, George had shouted like he'd never shouted in his life. It had felt good: they both thought that they were finally hitting back at the people who'd caused such misery. George had felt a new sense of *belonging*, which puzzled him for days afterwards as he tried to work out what the march had achieved, if anything.

He finished drying the plate, then looked at Mariam.

'People in the café are beginning to talk about things they've heard or seen. Like they used to. They're not so scared anymore. Maybe I'll try a web-search tomorrow, see if there's any trace of something changing.'

'On that old computer? I doubt you'll find much.'

#

'Come on, George,' said Mariam. 'We can't stay in forever. You've been nursing that cold for three days.'

George didn't want to move. He still had a headache and felt weak. He knew why Mariam was keen to get out. Steve was coming to the café: he'd speak about

another of his projects to stage a film in the quarter, and these plans always fascinated Mariam. George knew it was important, in a way: just talking like this, openly, was a sign that things had changed. Should he tell Mariam to go by herself? That seemed mean. It was time he started moving again: after all, it was only a cold.

The electricity supply was on, so he could have a hot shower. It made him feel a bit better. He found his smart jacket from the back of the wardrobe: he was sure that Mariam would be dressing up for the occasion, and he wanted to wear something suitable. As he put his jacket on, he felt a sudden tightness when he inhaled. There was a dull pain around his lungs, which grew more intense with each breath. He sat down.

‘George!’ called Mariam for the other room. ‘Are you ready?’

He took a deep breath, and then emptied his lungs slowly. The pain ebbed away.

‘George!’

He breathed again, slowly and deeply.

‘I’m coming.’

Steve was holding court in the little café. All eyes were on him as he outlined his plans: the waitress and the cook stood silently by the till; the students were crowded round one of the uneven wooden tables, coffees in front of them, while George and Mariam sat at the other. As Steve reached one of his jokes, the students laughed, and Mariam grinned, nudging George, who stayed silent. He felt distant: he didn’t resent Steve, he even admired him for being able to give them a bit of hope. He liked his patter and his easy way with words, he even liked the vision he was

giving them of a different future... but George was certain that nothing would come of this project.

George looked round the room and noticed a new face: a pale young man, carefully dressed in a stylish black jacket, white shirt and well-polished shoes. What was he doing here? He was leaning against a wall, away from the tables, and paying no attention to Steve. In his hands, he had something which held his attention: was it a phone? A small book? He had an attractive, regular face and dark eyes. The sort of man that women would call handsome. As George watched him, he turned round and looked back at George, nodded in an almost friendly fashion, and then stared back at whatever he was holding in his hand.

The people in the room laughed at another of Steve's jokes, and the Iranian student said loudly: 'Let's hope so!'

Mariam nodded vigorously.

'Yes,' she said. 'And about time.'

George felt another jolt of pain in his chest, and then a curious, cold sensation, creeping out from his left arm, and going around his torso. He sat back in his chair, and gasped, but any noise he made was drowned out by another wave of laughter.

The room began to get misty.

The young man turned to look at him, then weaved his way through the little gathering of people. Curiously, no one looked up as he passed. When he stood in front of George, he held out his hand. The pain in George's chest lessened.

'It's time,' said the young man in a clear, gentle voice.

'What? Now?'

'Yes, George. I've been waiting for you.'

‘But... Mariam...’

The other people in the room were concentrating on Steve’s words. No one looked at him.

‘Mariam will be okay. Look at her: she’s a fine woman, a strong woman. She’ll manage. And anyway, you’ve got to go. There’s nothing you can do.’

‘Is this it?’

‘This is it. Think yourself lucky. No lingering, painful disease. No horrific outburst of violence. If you’d taken more care of yourself, perhaps you would’ve had longer. But you’ve lived through some tough times, haven’t you? And now you’re just going to slip away.’

‘Can’t I stay just a little longer?’

The young man pulled out his mobile, pressed a button or two, and then nodded.

‘Okay, no hurry. We can wait a bit. But it is your time.’

‘What will happen next?’

‘How do you know that there’ll be a “next”? No previews, George. What will be, will be. You’ll find out soon enough.’

George looked at Mariam: he noticed her mirrored glasses, pushed up high over her forehead; her dark eyes, shining with delight at Steve’s words; her mouth, moving into a smile. He’d been lucky. Fifteen years with her... fifteen *good* years... probably more than he deserved. Oh dear.

‘Okay, George. Come on. Time to go.’

The young man held out his hand as if he was inviting George to dance.

**END**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Sharif Gemie is a retired History professor. He wrote about themes such as minorities and cross-cultural contacts. His most recent non-fiction work is *The Hippy Trail: A History*; see [here](#) for further details. After retirement, he turned to creative writing as he thought it was time to do some real work. Writing about fictional cross-cultural contacts and journeys is a logical continuation of his historical research. Sharif is half-Egyptian: he grew up in London and lived in Wales for 25 years.