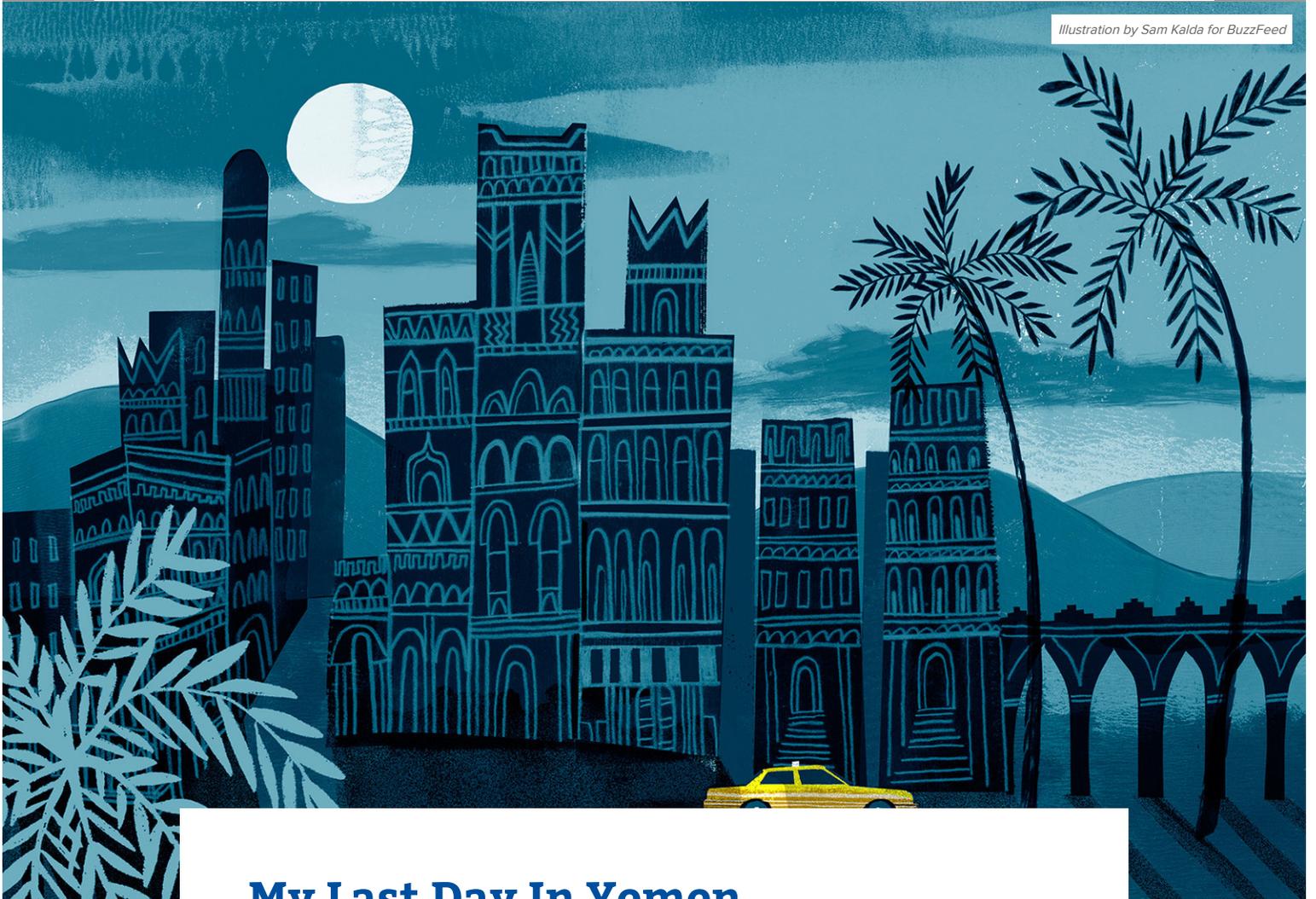


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Illustration by Sam Kalda for BuzzFeed



## My Last Day In Yemen

Yemen was like a home away from home for me — until the day I was nearly abducted in broad daylight, and narrowly missed suffering a grim fate similar to other journalists drawn to covering, and living in, the Middle East.



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Mostly I remember his face — the anger and hatred and evil as he realized his plan was not going to succeed. There is no sound to this memory. The traffic and background noise that must have existed are gone, edited out as superfluous. All that I have left is an image. Zubayri Street on a Saturday morning in Yemen, a silent movie that plays on a continuous loop.

In that clip, about 45 seconds in, the man is getting frustrated. I can see it. He keeps pulling me toward the cab and I keep resisting. Everything is falling apart, and he knows it. The hardness on his face twists into anger and then rage, almost as if it is traveling along some sort of spectrum of hatred. This happens quickly, like he has to touch every base when all he wants to do is get to the end. Then he is there and the decision is made.

The man grabs for his gun. He needs both hands to chamber the bullet; his right holds the metal, the left works the lever. And now it is just him, waving his gun like he wants to destroy the world and press reset. For three seconds, an eternity when you're waiting on bullets, I'm stuck in the middle. One man is about to shoot and another is pulling on my backpack. The second man drops my backpack and chambers his own bullet. Then everyone is moving at once. And I'm running with them.



I first saw the desert in books. Big, blank, and imaginary; it was perfect. A boy's world of dominoed dunes and empty spaces that stretched and shimmered across the pages my mother read to me every evening in our Nebraska apartment.

My father had just left, and I was having trouble sleeping. My baby brother didn't seem bothered. But I was a couple years older and more easily frightened. During the day I rarely spoke or cried, but at night I couldn't close my eyes. My mom must have been struggling too, because at some point during that ugly stretch reading became our thing. There had always been bedtime stories, but this was something different. This was a mother's magic trick, the borrowing of alternate worlds to escape our own.

We started with Bible stories, bearded patriarchs and long robes, before working our way through the public library's collection of *The Black Stallion* books. I adored Alec, the redheaded hero of the series, almost as much as I loved the Black, the wild Arabian stallion at its center. The pair appealed to me because they were me, or at least the me I wanted to be. Alec was young and independent, free from parental interference, and the Black was big and loyal, just like my own horse.

After the divorce, my mother had fixated on the animal, stubbornly refusing to sell our one luxury. Molly wasn't black or a stallion, but my mind was already learning to skip past the awkward inconsistencies of life. I didn't know Palomino or mare. But I knew horse. And that's what I had. Sitting on Molly wearing a plastic cowboy hat, I spent my days playing through the stories we read at night. One minute I was Alec racing the Black through Arabia, the next I was Jedediah Smith crossing the Mojave. Already I was learning the dangers of the desert. Smith, my mother would read one night, died on the Santa Fe Trail full of Comanche arrows. Another night, Alec got trampled. Slowly, as the stories began to

accumulate, tragedy seeped into play. “Sorry, Molly,” I would whisper toward the end of our sessions, “we’re lost and I have to eat you.” Patting her neck, I tried to ease the sting of my words. “It’s the only way I’ll survive.”

As our reading times expanded, so too did my imagination. What started as a desperate attempt to get a scared little boy to sleep had grown into a ritualized treat: reading time with mom. The comfort of her voice gave way to the rhythm of the story, as I went from not knowing the shapes of letters to sounding out words. Only later, when I started to go off on my own, reading large chunks while she was away at work, did things change. For a while we had two sets of books: ours and mine. But that didn’t last either. I read too much, too fast. And as my stack of library books dwindled, I tended to steal from our shared pile. My tastes changed as well, moving out from the half-shelves around the library checkout counter to Hardy Boys mysteries and western biographies deeper in the stacks. But I never left the desert, not really.



*Illustration by Sam Kalda for BuzzFeed*

First it was Cairo, on a semester abroad program during my junior year. Then it was the Peace Corps in Jordan after graduation. That was the beginning, a decade in which I spent much of my time living in the Middle East. It was also the decade of 9/11 and a pair of massive wars.

Cairo was exotic but crowded and Jordan's eastern desert was drab and dreary, more volcanic rock than sand. But Yemen was different. Vibrant and stark, it felt like the underside of a rainbow. Sanaa had character and a wild, intoxicating charm. Politics, even at the top, was real and contested. Ali Abdullah Salih, a rough-talking president with a

whiskey habit, had been in charge since before I was born, but even he was constrained. Tribes mattered more than parties, and alliances were always in flux. For a year, I spent my mornings reading Arab histories and my afternoons parsing rumors in sweaty little rooms where the smoke floated in layers. I was 24 years old and I was hooked.

A trio of guards and doormen were my guides that first year. They taught me how to chew qat, rubbing and polishing the leaves, and welcomed me into their circle. We went shooting together in the desert, and opened up to each other in the awkward, fumbling manner of boys learning to become men.

One day, Shaqib confessed this was how he imagined heaven: the four of us sitting around chewing qat, laughing and joking. “Paradise,” he told me, “is the best of this world.” And that year the best of our world took place in a cramped little guard shack with crumbling walls off al-Bawniya Street. Outside everything was a mess with horrifying pictures from Abu Ghraib and Saddam in a spider hole. But inside there was the gentle grace of centuries and the human warmth and dignity that in Yemen could transcend everything else. Politics was one thing; personal interactions were something else.

Most evenings, after qat, I slipped off on my own for a quiet walk. I usually turned right toward Zubayri Street and my favorite bookshop, dusty and disorderly, before reversing course for Sanaa’s old city and a glass of milky tea. History lived near the surface on those walks. I passed a bombed-out palace from Yemen’s last revolution in 1962 and, a bit further on, a paved-over square where the imam used to behead dissidents with a single stroke from a sword called “The Purifier.” The palace had been converted into a secret prison, and teenagers played soccer all night in the square. But the past was still there if you knew where to look.

**For the first time I felt physically unsafe. It was just a feeling, impossible to quantify, but I couldn’t shake it.**

I went back to Yemen again and again over the next several years, neglecting my Ph.D. dissertation to write a book about the country and cobbling together grants for visits. In late 2012, after the Arab Spring and the uprisings that forced Salih to step down, I scheduled another quick trip. I had lived through the revolution in Cairo, and had seen the expectations of change and a better life inflate and then burst leaving everyone more confused than ever. Yemen had changed as well. No one seemed to know the rules anymore. Salih was out and security was evaporating. There was a mad scramble for power that fall, and for the first time I felt physically unsafe. It was just a feeling, impossible to quantify,

but I couldn’t shake it.

Yemeni friends on Twitter and Facebook disagreed with my assessment, claiming I had lost my feel for the country. And maybe I had. What did I know about predicting violence? But I wasn’t alone. Among the small group of Yemen watchers, the numbers had started to

lose their meaning with repetition: 40% chance of bombing, 60% chance of being kidnapped. They were guesses without an anchor. No one knew anything for certain. Western embassies issued travel warnings, but they were as vague as everything else. Yemen was bad — maybe not Iraq bad — but the speculation kept getting worse.

Still, earlier this spring I decided to go back one more time. I pitched it to my editors as a three-story trip. But in my mind, it was a final farewell. I was getting married in a few months, and I wanted to move on and write about other things. I'd quit smoking years earlier and my twenties had slipped into my thirties. I was ready for a change. On March 6, I boarded the plane for my last trip to Yemen.

Sixteen days later I was done. I had my three stories, or at least the notes and interviews to write them. But I didn't want to leave, not yet. Something was still missing. Instead of flying home early, I compromised: One more story.

I already knew the one I'd do. The ghost story every writer has, the one they obsess over and worry about; always researching, never writing. Mine was a tragedy that started with a Guantanamo interrogation.

Detainee: I am from Urday City in Yemen, not a city in al-Qaeda... My city is very far from the city of al-Qaeda... That is not my name and I am not from that city...

Tribunal President: al-Qaeda is not a city. It is the name of an organization.

Detainee: Whether it is a city or an organization, I am not from al-Qaeda. I am from Urday City.

Tribunal President: Are you from Yemen?

Detainee: Yes, I am from Urday.

Tribunal President: Did you travel from Yemen to Afghanistan?

Detainee: I went from Yemen to Afghanistan.

Tribunal President: Did you do that in the year 2000?

Detainee: I don't know the time.

Tribunal President: Was it the year 1421?

Detainee: I am from a village, I cannot tell time.

The detainee, Adnan Abd al-Latif, was a mentally unstable man who had suffered severe brain damage as a result of a car crash in 1994. Twice he had been cleared for release, but each time something went wrong and he remained locked in his cell, counting the days until there was nothing left to count. On Sept. 10, 2012, he committed suicide. He had been in Guantanamo Bay for more than a decade.

Latif's case seemed to get at all the horrors of that lost decade: a handicapped man who confused al-Qaeda with a Yemeni village of the same name, locked up as the worst of the worst. For 10 years, while Latif befriended the iguanas and banana rats that wandered into his cell, the U.S. and Yemen fought for custody. Neither side would give in. The U.S. had him but wouldn't let him go; Yemen wanted him but couldn't get him.

Then Latif killed himself with a fistful of pills and positions changed. Now neither country wanted him. The U.S. needed him gone, but Yemen wouldn't take him. In death, just as in life, he was in legal limbo — neither here nor there. Instead of Guantanamo, Latif was sent to Germany, where his body was frozen and stored at Ramstein Air Base while the two countries argued over who had to take the corpse.

Latif's story was sad, but mostly it was just human. He wasn't nameless or faceless, an abstract stand-in for our fears. He was a man with a history and a family, and I wanted to write about them, to tell his story. In my mind it was less about Guantanamo Bay than it was about the withering of hope and how a single man had been ground down to nothing by a pair of bureaucracies. But no one else seemed to see it this way. Obama had already ordered the prison closed. He just hadn't succeeded. Guantanamo was still open, and indefinite detention was still the law of the land. But the country had moved on; a collective forgetting that let us pretend everything had changed when nothing had.

Before I left the U.S. I had reached out to one of the Guantanamo lawyers and he gave me the name of Latif's brother in Yemen. Muhammad lived in Taizz, four hours south of Sanaa. But Yemen was still coming apart, and the roads were too dangerous for a drive. I asked Muhammed if he would fly to Sanaa for an interview.

Since arriving in Sanaa I had been working with Shuaib, a young fixer and friend, who knew how to get things done in a country where nothing worked. That morning I met him at the ticket office to buy Muhammad's plane ticket. The money I had just collected from Western Union went from me to Shuaib to the man behind the counter. I signed the receipt, the man behind the counter stamped it, and Shuaib called Taizz to confirm that Muhammad was on his way to the airport. It was just after 9:30 a.m. on Saturday, March 22. Muhammad's flight landed in three hours, and Shuaib wanted breakfast.

When we arrived at the ticket office, Zubayri Street had been quiet. In another hour the shadows would be gone and the street would be noisy and hot with four jumbled lanes of traffic. But for the moment it was neither. Caught between the two, Zubayri Street came to life in fits and starts. Shuaib moved through it quickly, claiming he could smell something good. I smelled diesel and cigarettes. After a block whatever scent he was tracking had

disappeared, and he gave up.

“Let’s just go in here,” he said. The restaurant looked like every other one on the street: an open front with a roll-up shutter, a counter in the front, kitchen in the back, and long metal tables in between. “Sure,” I said. But I didn’t really care. I’d already had breakfast; I just wanted another cup of coffee. “This is fine.”

Stepping up onto the sidewalk, Shuaib bumped into a soldier who was coming out of the restaurant, catching his windbreaker on the man’s rifle. “Sorry,” he mumbled, as he reached over to untangle his jacket. The man just looked at him, taking in Shuaib’s youth and his slight frame. And then he saw me. I was used to it, the attention and the double takes. Yemenis tend to stare at obvious foreigners, observing them as if they were under glass. But this time the lack of words was disconcerting. We were in the man’s space, inches from his face with Shuaib’s jacket hooked on his rifle. The whole thing was too intimate for silence. But the man in the olive green uniform didn’t say a word. Only his eyes moved, following Shuaib’s fingers as they slid up the barrel of his gun. Then we were free and moving again.

That was it, a few seconds on the street before breakfast. It was nothing and he was no one, a soldier with a gun in a country that had plenty of both. We were already past it. He wasn’t.

Fifteen minutes later, the man was waiting for us. I saw him as soon as we left the restaurant: Ten yards up the road next to another man in a military uniform. Both of them were young, and both had guns.

The first man, the one Shuaib had bumped into, crossed the space between us surprisingly quickly and grabbed his arm. “Who is this?” he asked in rough Arabic, with a gesture toward me.

“He’s my friend,” Shuaib replied.

“Is he a foreigner?”

“Yeah,” Shuaib said. “He’s an American researcher.”

“OK,” the man said, pulling Shuaib toward the street. “Come to the base with us. We need to ask you some questions.”

“Sure, why not,” Shuaib shrugged, moving his shoulder up with the pressure on his arm.

Somehow — although my memory is clear this part is missing, like a dream that skips —

**It was  
nothing and  
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both.**

the other man had circled around behind me. Grabbing my arm, he started pulling me toward the street. My eyes followed my body and I saw the yellow-and-white taxi: driver inside, back door open. And then I knew.



*Illustration by Sam Kalda for BuzzFeed*

I had played through this scenario dozens of times. Get in the car and you're kidnapped, resist and you're dead. Months earlier a German diplomat had been caught in a similar situation. He resisted, breaking free of his Yemeni kidnappers in a Sanaa supermarket. He lasted only a few terrifying seconds. The kidnappers caught back up to him and, in the middle of a grocery store aisle, they executed him.

Back in the U.S., talking through my options with Asha, the woman I would marry, I had been uncertain. I told her what to do — who to call and what to say if I were taken. But I hadn't been able to decide on my own course of action: submit or resist. Each had benefits, each had drawbacks; neither was good. Yet when the moment came, my body didn't give me a choice. I couldn't get into the car.

**I said it. In  
my heart or  
out loud, in**

I said it. In my heart or out loud, in Arabic or English, I don't know. But I said it: "There's no way I'm getting into that cab." Then I jerked my arm back. The man pulled harder, and we were scuffling. There was no punching or screaming, none of the

## Arabic or English, I don't know. But I said it: "There's no way I'm getting into that cab."

things I would have imagined, just a weird one-armed tug-of-war over a few yards of asphalt. I was older and stronger, but he had a gun. His hand, dry and cracked, slipped down past my wrist, catching on the backpack that I had slung over one arm. For a second, I thought about dropping the backpack and running. But it had the rest of the \$600 I'd pulled out of Western Union, my passport, and all my notebooks from two weeks of work. I tugged.

Several Yemenis had gathered around us in a loose half-circle. I had always assumed that if something went really wrong, some Yemeni would step up to save me. That had been my insurance policy as I moved through a society that was not my own. But now I was being taken and they were just watching.

In our world, evil typically wears a mask. It stalks about in disguise, peeking out through the cracks in our humanity. We rarely see it or recognize it when we do, but on that morning in Sanaa it was unmistakable. Dropping Shuaib's arm, the man grabbed for his gun. That's when I thought he would start shooting. Shuaib moved fast, escaping up the street and scrambling for cover. The second man let go of my backpack to chamber his own bullet, and then I was running too.

I remembered to zigzag as I ducked into a different restaurant and headed for the back. My plan was to run through the kitchen and escape out the back and then make a big loop back to the American Institute, where I was staying. I made it to the rear of the restaurant, but as I tried to go through the kitchen, one of the Yemeni workers blocked me.

"*Mamnu'a*," he said.

"Forbidden," I panted back dumbly. He just stared at me and said *mamnu'a* a second time.

I was trapped. The restaurant was laid out like a giant L, one long main room with a right-angled nook for a sink. I was around the corner by the sink, only a few feet from the door to the kitchen and the way out. But I could no longer see the street and I started to panic. I had to move, to get out of the restaurant. Any second, the men were going to come around the corner. In my mind, I saw the German diplomat lying dead on the grocery store tile.

I tried to get through the kitchen door a second time, but another employee wrapped me in a giant bear hug and said *mamnu'a* yet again. I had no more moves. There was nothing left to react against. Shaking as fear crashed over adrenaline, I tried to think. I needed a plan and I didn't have one.

Fumbling with my backpack, I found my phone and called a contact at the U.S. Embassy. Earlier that week I'd met him for lunch, seen his guard detail, and ridden in the armored SUV. Maybe he could come to the restaurant and escort me out. But no one picked up. I

dialed a second number; still nothing.

Waiters were still moving back and forth with food and people were eating. But I was stuck, cowering in a corner waiting for whatever came next. A couple of Yemenis came over to tell me that the men were gone, but I didn't believe them. Then, someone walked over with a metal cup of water in his hand.

"Don't worry," he told me. "You're under my protection.

I wanted to laugh. He had a cup; the men outside had guns. I explained that they were trying to kidnap me.

"You're a foreigner?" he asked. "Syrian?"

"No," I said. "I'm American."

"Hmm," he shrugged, and walked away. After that, no one else approached me.

A few minutes later, Shuaib came around the corner. "They're gone," he said. But my heart was still pounding, and I no longer trusted Yemen or my instincts. I didn't move. The corner had become safe.

Shuaib left and came back. "They're really gone."

"OK," I said. "Let's go."

We grabbed a cab in front of the Chinese Embassy, while Shuaib called the police and I gave the driver directions. "Those weren't real soldiers," Shuaib told me with the phone pressed up against his ear. I held my bag as he told the driver to go the wrong way up a one-way street. Two minutes later we were in front of the American Institute.

"Stay inside," Shuaib implored. "Don't go out."

I called the embassy and reported the incident. I told the director and I emailed Asha. Then the electricity went out and there were no more distractions. I imagined Shuaib hit in the head and dumped out of the car. I would be taken to some house for a few days and then smuggled past the checkpoints around Sanaa. After that I'd be gone. It had happened before, and it would happen again. Sitting alone in my room on a sunny Saturday morning in Sanaa, I felt my fear grow wild and unchained like a beast come back to life. It was the fear of a little boy who didn't understand the world or what was happening around him.

Getting out of the room suddenly seemed very important. I wasn't hungry, but it was lunchtime. Time to go. I paused in the courtyard, taking in the walls that kept the rest of Yemen out. They were mud-brick and thick, comforting but debilitating. If I didn't go now, I never would. I thought about Molly and my mother's voice trying to make me tough for the world to come. "Get back on," she'd say each time I got bucked off. There were no hugs

or comfort in those moments, just the cold insistence of a woman who knew how hard life could be. I walked out the door.

On the surface, the city looked the same, drab beige buildings and the crowded market where I had bought my qat a decade earlier, but it was no longer a place I knew. The bookstore on Zubayri Street was gone, swallowed up by time, and the country was changing as well. The familiar had become foreign. What thrilled me in my twenties frightened me in my thirties. I played with my food until someone asked if I was an American.



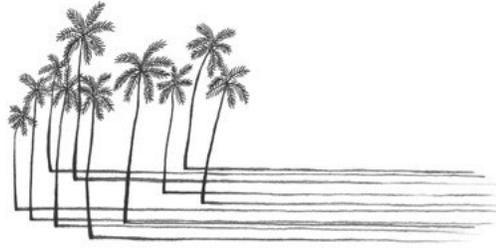
Muhammad wouldn't come in when I opened the institute gate for him and Shuaib later that afternoon. He just stared at me for a moment, and then he said what he'd flown to Sanaa to say: "I'm here to kidnap you and sell you to al-Qaeda for \$5,000, because you are an enemy of Yemen. Then al-Qaeda will torture you for 12 years and kill you and call it a suicide."

He had a bag and for a brief, terrifying moment I thought he had a gun. Then I thought I'd misheard. But when Shuaib translated the words were the same.

I lost it. Kidnap me? In my own house? "How dare you come in here and say that?" I screamed. "I bought your damn ticket." All the morning's fear was coming out as rage.

Muhammad just sat there silently seething as I screamed at him in Arabic before I started to stumble and switched back to English. Eventually I realized that he was just trying to make a rhetorical point, showing me what had happened to his brother and how he ended up in Guantanamo, but by then I was too far gone to care. It felt good to unload on him, to scream and rant and finally react to the morning. In that moment, I hated him and his country. He was mad about what happened to his brother, and I was mad about what happened to me. But I wasn't the one who had forced his brother into suicide, and he wasn't the one who had tried to kidnap me. We were just stand-ins.

Later — I couldn't handle speaking directly to him — I asked Shuaib to apologize and explain what had happened to us that morning. Muhammad just shrugged. He didn't care. Probably no more than I really cared about his brother's experience. Our own pain was what was personal and real, everything else was just a story.



A week or so after I got back, I reached out to a Yemeni contact. I was finishing up my first story and I needed an interview. I'd already talked to his dad and brother on my trip, but it turned out that he had more information than anyone else and that he lived in Brooklyn. I suggested dinner at the Yemen Café on Atlantic.

I got there early and for a few minutes I just sat and listened to the chatter around me. English and Arabic, familiar and foreign, Brooklyn and Yemen. Everything was so mixed up and messy. The restaurant was different but the same. I couldn't separate any of it.

When I looked up Fahd was coming through the door with two other Yemenis. He hadn't mentioned friends, but I didn't want to seem like a jerk so I told them to sit down. BuzzFeed would cover the meal. They wanted to hear about my trip and what I thought of Yemen. "It's bad," I said. "It's very, very bad." They just nodded at what they already knew and ordered for me.

The restaurant was too crowded and noisy for an interview, and one of the men suggested we talk across the street in his shop. The bill had already been paid. But as soon as he pulled down the metal shutters blocking out the light and traffic from Atlantic, I knew it was a mistake. I was in Brooklyn, seven blocks from my apartment, but my body was back in Yemen, locked in a dark room with three Yemeni men. On the audio recording of the interview my voice sounds calm. I make a joke and everyone laughs, but I could feel the truth inside: jittery, full of fear, and looking for a way out.

For a moment I wondered if I was going mad, then I thought about PTSD. Is that why I was shaking?

Outside, Brooklyn was chilly and calm, American. I walked Fahd and his friends to the corner and thanked them for dinner. They had been gracious and hospitable, Yemeni. Three distant echoes of the country I once knew.

I didn't sleep much that night. For a while I tried to read, but stories had lost their magic. There were no other worlds, only this one. And in it I did the only thing I could. I cried, facedown and helpless, on a pillow where no one could hear.

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