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The Gulf Between Us



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The Gulf Between Us
by
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One

I was thinking about happiness. (I was meant to be thinking about menus but my mind had wandered.) Specifically, I was thinking about how no one knows what to believe in any more, let alone where to look for it. How there are so many different routes on offer, especially in a place like this where people come from all over, bringing their contradictory ideas with them. The particular route I had – I won't say chosen; been encouraged to believe in – was that happiness would result from another person's coming along and spotting me, identifying something uniquely perfect, if admittedly not very visible, about me. And that would be that. Sorted. This happens all the time in books, and then they end because there's nothing more to say. There's never any suggestion of having been spotted by the wrong person, or of having accidentally let something else go. Never anything about the person dying and leaving you on your own with three children.

It was staggering that I'd gone along with this as long as I had. At least my children had been exposed to soap operas and reality television and the internet and weren't girls, so they hadn't been encouraged to think that if they sat and waited in a spirit of passive good-naturedness someone would turn up and solve all their problems. Which only made it more mysterious that Will was getting married, now, when he was so young and there seemed to be no pressing reason for it.

I'd just come back to this point about Will and the wedding when Katherine said something that made me stop thinking about happiness, that made me scrape my coffee cup noisily into my saucer.

'I saw Adnan last night,' she began, 'and he said James

Hartley's got the Al A'ali House from the beginning of October.' She looked around complacently over the top of her clipboard.

'But surely he'll stay in one of those suites on the beach they built for the GCC summit?' I replied stupidly, given she'd just said he wouldn't.

'So he'll be there for the reception?' Matt asked, looking up. Until now he'd spent the brunch reading the film listings in the *Hawar Daily News*, even though there are only two cinemas in Hawar.

'I know,' Katherine said, 'but they're being understanding and I think we can too. It's not every day . . .'

'We'll have to invite him to join us,' Matt said, 'at least for a drink. We can't be in his garden and ignore him. It'd be rude. Maybe he'll bring some producers and casting directors and people? Maybe I'll be spotted.'

'You don't need spotting,' I muttered irritably.

'Bloody film!' Peter Franklin probably would have been reading the *Hawar Daily News* himself if he hadn't been the bride's father and required to look interested. 'I'm sick of it already and they're not even here yet. You'd think nothing else had ever happened in Hawar.'

'Well . . .'

Matt said. 'I don't know if you've missed it, Matthew, but we're about to have a war.'

'He's been saying we're about to have a war for at least eight months,' Katherine told Matt cheerfully: she was too pleased about James Hartley to be put off by the imminent explosion in the region of chemical and biological agents; 'ever since Bush started going on about his axis of evil. Which if I remember rightly was in January. And here we are in September, and it still hasn't happened!'

Peter raised his eyes to the roof of my veranda, meaning to convey that if his wife thought we'd got away without a war then she was stupid.

Matt shrugged. I don't suppose he really thought there was

any chance of avoiding the war, but he might have believed it wouldn't touch us in our tiny, strategically insignificant emirate. In 1991, he'd been eight: all he could remember about Desert Storm was journalists flying in and hanging around the hotels, making their way into the bars, lounging by the pools, doing pieces to camera against the sunset. It had all seemed rather glamorous, as if for a moment we were at the centre of a world that usually ignored us. And it is true that the epicentre, if that's the right word, of the American invasion of Iraq was going to be about 400 miles away, assuming things went to plan, which with wars is always a bit of an open question.

I considered backing Peter up – pointing out that we didn't know how many weapons of mass destruction Saddam Hussein had or how far they could travel or what mass exactly they could be expected to destroy. But we were organizing a wedding and it hardly seemed the moment. Besides, I was still thinking about James Hartley.

'Anyway, he won't be remotely like *whatsisname*, you know,' Peter warned his wife.

'Don't pretend you don't know! Porchester.'

'Why I'd be familiar with the name of a time-travelling professor of genetics who doesn't actually exist . . .'

Katherine ignored him. 'Anyway, he might be. Like Porchester. We haven't met him yet.'

'Er . . . Mum has,' Matt said.

'Annie? *You've* met James Hartley?' Katherine stared at me in a way that was, under the circumstances, bordering on rude.

'It was a long time ago.'

'When? How?'

'We lived in the same street.'

'They went out,' Matt said, without looking up from his paper.

'No!'

It is true that James Hartley is a film star whose name is known to remote tribes without telephones and I'm a mother of

three who's quite good at making lists, but why the incredulity? He had to come from somewhere. And I'm not so hideous.

'Well, you kept *that* very quiet!' Katherine said offishly, as if I'd lied to everyone, which I hadn't – although I hadn't made a big thing about it either. I knew that once the word got out I wouldn't be able to go into Al Jazira to buy a lemon without people asking me about it and whether I'd be seeing him when he was here and why didn't I throw a party for him?

'We'll definitely have to invite him, if you know him,' Katherine said.

'Knew him . . . It was a long time ago. And perhaps Maddi and Will won't want a stranger at their wedding?' I looked at them sitting side by side on the sunlounger in khaki shorts and white T-shirts, like twins dressed by their mother. Their knees were thrust up in an awkward posture that made them seem eager, as if they were somehow on call for the future, his dark head and her blonde one glossier than everyone else's.

Sam chose this moment to push open the sliding glass door, still in his pyjama bottoms, but no top, so you could see every nubbly ridge of his skinny, sixteen-year-old ribs.

'Morning, Sam!' Katherine said brightly. Perhaps breeziness first thing in the morning is allowed if you have daughters. Not that it was first thing in the morning for anyone except Sam.

Sam muttered something, which might have been 'Yo, coz,' took a croissant from the table and slid to the floor with his back against the door. I silently handed him a plate.

'James Hartley's staying at the Al A'ali house, and he's arriving in time for the reception!' Matt said loudly, as if addressing a person of limited faculties.

His younger brother blinked, which was quite a lot of response from him.

'I still don't really understand how the Sheraton could have done this,' I said. 'It's not as if it hasn't been booked for months.'

'Well, Adnan did sort of mention it a while back,' Katherine admitted, 'but I didn't think anything would come of it.'

So she'd known. She hadn't bothered to alert me. Presumably, though, Maddi and Will wouldn't want to be upstaged by a film star at their own wedding? . . . That was what I was hoping, anyway, until Maddi said how exciting she thought it would be to have James Hartley at the reception. Evidently, Katherine's news hadn't come as much of a surprise to her – which must have meant that Will had also known. I should have been better prepared for his keeping things from me: he may have been my child, my first-born, but he often seemed alarmingly alien – a large-limbed, stubble-faced, rangy creature powered by purposes of his own. What was he doing, with his top grades, his three musical instruments and cricket blue, his Oxford degree and job offer from an investment bank, at the age of twenty-three, before he'd even started work, before – surely – he had any idea who he really was – getting married? Why the rush? And why – although this may of course have been related – had he started going to church on Sundays, despite no previous record of spiritual questing or interest in the numinous?

I certainly wouldn't have predicted a couple of years ago that he and Maddi would have wanted all this – the Friday brunch with the parents, the succession of menus and lists, the hassle about where to sit my brother. And if I couldn't have anticipated something as fundamental as their wanting to get married and in the most traditional way possible, how could I predict what feelings they'd have about inviting James Hartley? Perhaps, like Maddi's mother, they imagined he'd be like his most famous role, and that Hawar was about to entertain a laconic, sexy genetics professor with his own quantum teleporter.

'I expect if he's taken the house knowing there's a wedding reception he'll have made plans to be filming, or something,' I said vaguely, writing 'tabbouleh' next to the word tabbouleh on the menu provided by the Sheraton.

'You must be curious to see him, after all this time?' Katherine said.

Obviously, I was curious to see him. *Obviously* I'd thought

about whether we'd meet and when and how that would be and if he'd be as interested to see me as I was to see him. I was intrigued to know how much of the person I used to like and still thought of fondly would have been dermabraded and permatanned off, turned into an artificial construct, a high-grossing film star. I was fascinated to see whether with all that teleporting he'd managed to keep his personality intact, so that I could still recognize him. Obviously I don't mean physically. Everyone would recognize him physically.

But I also thought that if we invited him and he didn't come – and really, why would you bother with an expat wedding in a small Gulf state if you were him? – then people would be disappointed and think the event had been a failure. And if he did come, it would be almost worse: breezing in with his aura of celebrity, of being cleaner, shinier than everyone else, upstaging everything because that was what he did, that was his job, and no one being able to concentrate on what really mattered, which was Will and Maddi.

'We can't have a wedding in his garden and not invite him down for a drink,' Matt said again.

Why couldn't we? It wasn't his garden; it belonged to a hotel. And we'd booked it first. Just because Adnan had made a mistake with his system, I didn't see why we had to start inviting random hotel guests to our party.

I didn't say so, because it would have revealed how nervous I was about meeting him. The fact was that when it happened I wanted to be able to concentrate, to make sure he didn't get the wrong impression, didn't imagine that I'd made mistakes, married for the wrong reasons (like, say, to get away from home, or out of insecurity, or thinking I was getting something I wasn't). I didn't want him to think I'd come to Hawar without properly thinking about it, or that I'd got stuck, staying on basically for my children who now didn't really need me any more or that it had taken the death of my husband in a car crash for me to stop feeling disappointed, to get a sense of what I

wanted from life, or that, by the time I had, it was too late, so that I was now marooned in a backwater, without either a career or a man.

While this was one possible interpretation of what had happened to me, there was another one, which was equally plausible: that Hawar was no more of a backwater than anywhere else, was in fact full of people of different nationalities and views (about happiness for a start, as I had been thinking only recently) and was consequently as fascinating and demanding as anywhere else.

I looked around at my children – Will handsome beside Maddi, Matt carelessly sprawled, Sam gnawing his third croissant in an endearingly feral way, hair flopped over his face – and I thought that even though I might not have had the first idea what I was trying to achieve most of the time – somehow, I had done *this*. Helped to, anyway. It wasn't failure, nothing like it. They were nearly men, and they had the ability to feel adult emotions, love and all it led to. They had their own points of view. It didn't matter that this was a very ordinary thing to have done, that people had been having children and bringing them up for ever. It was still incredible, and while James Hartley might have had a private jet, he hadn't done it.

That was the side of me I'd have preferred him to see, but I could appreciate that it could take some setting up.

I kept on telling the boys that Adnan's alleged mix-up did not oblige us to invite James Hartley to the wedding reception, and, at times, I almost persuaded myself it was true. But not quite, so after a couple of days I delivered a note addressed to James to the offices Gulf Films had set up in the Diplomatic Area. A glamorous young Hawari woman took it from me and I imagined her passing it on to a phalanx of fierce assistants employed solely to guard James Hartley's privacy.

The last time James and I had communicated, he'd said he never wanted to speak to me again. You had to assume he'd

probably got over that now, but it was still difficult to get the tone right. I explained about the double booking and hoped that he'd join us for a drink, along with any of his colleagues and friends who were with him. (For all I knew, there could be a girlfriend, even a small harem. He'd been photographed with enough women over the years; it was hard to imagine he'd managed to fit them in serially.) I wondered whether he'd actually see this careful composition. He was dyslexic and probably paid for people to read things to him now.

I drove home afterwards along the Corniche, peeling along the edge of the emirate, the sea to my right heavy with the weight of salt, gleaming dully through the thick air like an opaque mirror; then on up the Jidda Road, through palm groves and smallholdings to Al Janabiyya compound. I was thinking as I drove how odd it was that James Hartley had never married any of those beautiful women. Presumably he hadn't needed the security, once he got successful. The plethora of people available to sleep with him must have been enough.

As I turned into the compound, I saw Andrew's Jeep parked by our wicket fence. He lived in central Qalhat, along with most of the posh expats in Hawar – people like Peter and Katherine Franklin, who regarded compound living as a bit suburban and preferred more authentic and often inconvenient older houses in proper streets in town, as long as they were equipped with new air conditioning and perhaps also had a pool in the back garden. The chaplaincy did not have a pool and Andrew couldn't afford to join any of the sports clubs or hotels so he liked to come out to us and play on the tennis court and swim in the decent-sized and prettily landscaped pool we shared with the nineteen other households on Al Janabiyya compound.

The pair of them were sitting on our veranda, dressed in shorts and tennis shirts, rackets propped up against their chairs – Andrew, as usual, looking too big for the space around him, even if that was outdoors. The way his leg was draped over the arm of the garden chair reminded me of those slinky toys the boys used

to have when they were little: if he tipped slightly to one side, his whole body might come behind, rolling over on itself.

They got up and ambled over to the carport to help me unload the shopping.

‘OK if Andrew stays for supper?’ Will asked.

Andrew’s hands, as he picked up several bags, seemed oddly outsized, for a vicar: more suited to scaffolding, or rugby, or piano.

‘Sure.’ I was pleased by Will’s friendship with Andrew, if perplexed by the amount of churchgoing that went with it. Until now, my eldest son hadn’t been a great one for hanging out. It wasn’t that he hadn’t *had* friends, exactly, more that they seemed to be a by-product of more purposeful activities: the cricket team, the school string quartet, further maths groups. His relationships usually seemed to involve an awful lot of work, usually practising something or other – bowling, or the works of Haydn – but with Andrew he seemed happy merely to sit and talk, or even stare into space. They seemed to be at ease with each other, although I found Andrew rather formal and proper. Will (who could probably come across as a bit formal and proper himself) told me this was all wrong and I hadn’t understood him at all.

Even Will’s relationship with Maddi seemed to be rather hard work these days. As we went indoors, he told me the pair of them had spent the day trying to sort out flights for her South African cousins, who’d originally said they weren’t coming to the wedding but then decided they were, although only if they could get aisle seats on a particular flight out of Cape Town.

‘Don’t they have travel agents in South Africa?’ Matt asked, from the sofa, where he was curled up with his best friend Jodie and a girl from the year below at school called Maya, watching a re-run of *Sex and the City*. ‘Thank God you’re home,’ he added to me, making a point of taking the Lord’s name in vain since Andrew was around. ‘I’m starving.’

‘When you talked about your gap year, there was a lot of stuff about earning money and challenging experiences. I don’t remember the part about watching fictional women in Manolo Blahniks discuss their orgasms,’ Will said. He hadn’t had a gap year. He can also be a bit of a pain.

‘I didn’t want to overwhelm you with the possibilities,’ Matt said, yawning. ‘And I *have* been earning money. I’ve had a hard day at the office.’ He had a job with a local publishing house, working on a publication he said you had to describe as a high-net-worth-lifestyle title. ‘I’m only in Hawar because of you and your wedding. Otherwise I’d be trekking through Borneo or somewhere by now, insh’allah.’

Jodie raised her head from his shoulder and looked at him sceptically. She was working at the Presbyterian Mission Hospital before going off to Columbia University to study to be a doctor and she thought Matt’s days writing captions about unaffordable consumer items were a risible way for him to be spending his time. Generally speaking, she treated him as if he were her slightly hapless younger brother. Matt seemed to like this.

‘How’s your dad?’ I asked her, meaning ‘Does he know when the war’s going to start?’ Jodie’s father was a senior officer at the American military base.

‘It’s no good, mum,’ Matt disentangled himself from the girls and cushions and got to his feet, ‘he’s not going to let Jodie know when he’s invading because she’ll only tell.’

‘He’s fine, thank you,’ Jodie answered. ‘Busy. And no, he hasn’t given me a date for the invasion, mainly because he doesn’t have one, but I think you’ll be able to get Will and Maddi’s wedding over and done with.’

‘And the film made, I guess?’ Maya said. ‘I mean, someone must have said it’s safe to bring James Hartley here?’

‘I have to make my mother a cup of tea,’ Matt informed the girls, ‘before she starts going on about how at our age she’d been working for three years.’

‘And in a proper job,’ I pointed out, ‘not just to earn money to go to Costa Rica. But it’s fine. You carry on with what you’re doing.’

He followed me into the kitchen anyway. ‘Actually, I had a very draining day,’ he said as he put on the kettle. ‘How many interesting things are there, frankly, to say about boats?’ He held out a mug inquiringly to Andrew, who was unloading the shopping on to the counter, then leant back and looked at him as if he found him very puzzling. ‘Are you, like, you know, meant to convert people?’

‘If you want to be converted, I can give it a try,’ Andrew said good-naturedly.

‘You’ve done him, haven’t you?’ Matt nodded at Will. ‘How did you manage that, then?’

‘Trade secret.’

‘Well, don’t come near me.’

‘Oh, I can do it from a distance.’

‘Probably only when people are weird in the first place.’ He ducked to avoid the orange Will threw at him.

‘Boys . . .’ I said warningly. ‘And Matt, you’re not being helpful. If you can’t make me a cup of tea without provoking food throwing, you’d be better off watching television.’

Matt changed the subject. ‘Granddad rang again just before you got home.’

‘Oh, no, what is it this time?’ My father, who lives in south London, thinks it’s extravagant to phone the north of England, but this was the third time he’d called Hawar in a week.

‘Just the usual – when are the Americans going to invade Iraq, and is it likely to be before the wedding?’

‘I hope you told him no?’

‘Plus, he can’t quite bring himself to say so, because he knows it’s wrong, but I think he’s also wondering how he’s going to avoid people who look Muslim.’

‘Yes, well.’ I stuck the labneh, milk and butter in the fridge. ‘Is Sam around?’

‘No, he’s out with Faisal.’

Sam was always out with Faisal these days, although there isn’t really anywhere to go in Hawar, at least at six o’clock on a Wednesday evening. The Pearl Mall? The Corniche? Everywhere you might have thought of loitering around in a moody adolescent way was full of Hawari families. Sam was reticent about what they got up to, but he was reticent about everything.

Their main interest, as far as I could work out, was setting up web fanzines for indie bands that had no fans. Sam and Faisal communicated with people like themselves in Stockholm or Munich or Carlisle, but only as long as the numbers involved remained tiny: as soon as any band they’d adopted started to acquire a serious following, they had to drop them. While it seemed rather pointless trying to publicize groups you didn’t want anyone else to know about, it also appeared unlikely to lead them into any serious trouble.

Will and Andrew had booked the compound tennis court for six o’clock; Matt went back to the girls and the orgasms. I took a glass of water out on to the back porch and sat down as the muezzin started calling in Ghafir, the nearest village: the dusk call that begins in the violet light and ends in darkness and seems to be full of longing. I leant my head back on the wall and felt the night collect around me. All the plants in the garden that looked tired during the day, the life leached out of them by the heat, seemed to start breathing again in the dusk, to acquire solidity, density, weight: the oleanders, the palms that looked like banana trees but that were actually palms, the fluttery bougainvillea. It’s the best time of day: the yearning call from the mosque, the dusk that comes as a relief, enveloping the garden, making it suddenly substantial, lush.

Then Cheryl pushed through from next door.

‘Ohmigod, Annie, is it true?’ She stood with her hands on her hips, her legs slightly apart as if tensed for activity, wearing a pink check Lycra vest and matching three-quarter exercise pants. I blinked at her silhouette, a vision against the vegetation; ‘about

you and James Hartley? – I mean, I know you look great and I've told you before, all the men I know say you're sexy, but ...'

'It was a long time ago.'

One of the boys once told me that all the cells in the human body die off every seven years, which meant that James Hartley had been, roughly speaking, three different people since I'd known him. (Annoyingly, they seemed to have been getting better-looking, which is not what usually happens.)

'Are you going to get him out here to Al Janabiyya? You should have a party.'

'I imagine they'll be very busy.'

Cheryl came up the porch and sat down. 'What's he like, anyway?'

I hadn't seen him since he was nineteen. Everyone kept asking me what he was like, but I'd known him for three years when he was an apprentice plumber in Thornton Heath, which is a very different thing from being a film star in Hollywood ... I didn't see how I could possibly have anything useful to say. He'd always wanted to be an actor. And I hadn't taken it seriously, because I hadn't thought it was a thing plumbers from Thornton Heath did. This wouldn't have been interesting to Cheryl, but it was what I thought when I remembered James Hartley – that I'd been stupid back then: half-formed, clueless about most things. I hadn't allowed myself to think big. I'd believed there were certain things to which I shouldn't presume. Most things, in fact. This wasn't a particular failing of mine: most people I knew were the same. It wasn't even conscious. We had imbibed it, swallowing it as naturally as if it had been part of the fish-fingers or baked beans or salad cream we had for tea. It had turned out that James had been much more exceptional than any of us realized, not so much for having deep blue eyes and an impressive bone structure as for, somehow, from somewhere, having managed to pick up a sense of entitlement. And that did make him different.

★

Over dinner, Andrew told us about a visit he'd made to the Dariz Palace earlier in the day. It seemed that even the emir was excited about James Hartley's arrival, despite the fact he should really have had other things on his mind, such as running the country and persuading the Americans not to invade Iraq. While Andrew was describing the various parties Shaikh Hassan was intending to throw in James's honour, I found myself wondering if he (Andrew, not the emir) had found whatever he'd been looking for when he came to Hawar. It seemed an odd place for the Church to have sent him, when the Anglican needs of the emirate would so obviously have been better served by someone older and less ambitious, with a wife who was prepared to join the gardening club and organize cake sales. Andrew's parishioners wanted the Church to carry them back spiritually and emotionally to Bournemouth or Bridlington or wherever they'd grown up – places where there was obviously a God, and he was fairly British.

It may be that the Church was like the Foreign Office, which tended to send us either dynamic youthful ambassadors, or older, tired Arabists getting their one head of mission before retirement. Andrew reminded me of the younger diplomats: he had the same kind of restlessness. He'd tried to bridge religious divides by forming alliances with various mosques, as well as with Father Joseph at the Sacred Heart. Unfortunately, this wasn't what his parishioners mainly wanted from religion. People in Hawar pushed past one another in the souk, worked together, even lived together, if you overlooked the fact that the white expats who dominated Andrew's congregation tended to have spacious villas on compounds, while their Filipina or Sri Lankan house maids, who mainly worshipped at the Sacred Heart, occupied breeze-block servants' quarters in their back gardens. But this was generally felt to be enough proximity. Religion was one of the many ways of honeycombing Hawari society, of making coexistence possible. It was like compounds for expatriates, or the women's quarters in Arab households: a

way of dividing people, allowing them to get away from one another, remember who they were. In the confusion of people, in the babble of Arabic and Malayalam, Sinhalese and Filipino, Urdu and dozens of other languages, religion was a way of asserting a separate, more secure identity.

After dinner, when Will was driving Andrew back to the chaplaincy, Matt said, 'Have you noticed how Andrew always acts like someone's trying to catch him out?'

'That'll be you, then.'

'Me?' He pretended to be shocked. 'Really, though, what d'you think they talk about? I mean, tennis may be fascinating' – Matt loathed tennis: he said it was too hot and he couldn't bear the responsibility – 'but it can't keep them going all the time.'

'I don't know. They're clever. Maybe their minds run on a different track. Sort of more elevated.'

'What, like a monorail at a theme park?'

'I don't know. Maybe. Anyway, he's good for Will and you shouldn't be hostile.' Matt, who'd only left the International School in the summer, still had friends living in Hawar – Jodie, for example, to whom he was very close, and Maya, who might, I thought, be his girlfriend, or at least be heading in that direction. Will had left the International School more than three years earlier and his friends were scattered across the world, studying or working. The only young men here of his age were the equity dealers and commodity brokers whose idea of a good time was to get smashed in Trader Vic's on Thursday nights and shag the HawarAir crew. And that wasn't his thing.

Will had been ten when his dad died, and I'd worried ever since that the loss had ruptured his confidence. He had, I suspected, too little of that blithe sense you should have in your childhood, your teens and early twenties – a belief that life basically works out OK. Obviously, it doesn't, always, but that seemed a hard lesson to have had to learn at ten. I worried that his life had been shadowed, making him different from other boys. In which case, it had probably been a mistake to keep

him here in the Gulf, which was so unreal, an affluent bubble in a cloudless sky, confectioned in a few decades from desert subsistence into cities, hotels and high rises. Hawar could hardly have been more insecure. Apart from its painful environmental fragility (built on petroleum revenues, dependent on air conditioning) it was also politically precarious. Nothing about it made any real sense – its modern cities rearing up out of pitiless desert, its archaic hereditary dictatorships – so how could you expect it to give you a secure sense of identity? How could you base your sense of yourself on somewhere so shiny and unresolved, built on a kind of lottery win and so much at odds with its surroundings? Will was an Englishman in the desert and a stranger in England. He might be getting married to get something clear about himself.