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The Zahir

A Novel of Obsession

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Extract

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Her name is Esther; she is a war correspondent who has just returned from Iraq because of the imminent invasion of that country; she is thirty years old, married, without children. He is an unidentified male, between twenty-three and twenty-five years old, with dark, Mongolian features. The two were last seen in a café in Rue Faubourg St-Honoré.

The police were told that they had met before, although no one knew how often: Esther had always said that the man – who concealed his true identity behind the name Mikhail – was someone very important, although she had never explained whether he was important for her career as a journalist or for her as a woman.

The police began a formal investigation. Various theories were put forward – kidnapping, blackmail, a kidnapping that had ended in murder – none of which were beyond the bounds of possibility given that, in her search for information, her work brought her into frequent contact with people who had links with terrorist cells. They discovered that, in the weeks prior to her disappearance, regular sums of money had been withdrawn from her bank account: those in charge of the investigation felt that these could have been payments made for information. She had taken no change of clothes with her, but, oddly enough, her passport was nowhere to be found.

He is a stranger, very young, with no police record, with no clue as to his identity.

She is Esther, thirty years old, the winner of two international prizes for journalism, and married.

My wife.

I immediately come under suspicion and am detained because I refuse to say where I was on the day she disappeared. However, a prison officer has just opened the door of my cell, saying that I'm a free man.

And why am I a free man? Because nowadays, everyone knows everything about everyone; you just have to ask and the information is there: where you've used your credit card, where you spend your time, who you've slept with. In my case, it was even easier: a woman, another journalist, a friend of my wife, and divorced – which is why she doesn't mind revealing that she slept with me – came forward as a witness in my favour when she heard that I had been detained. She provided concrete proof that I was with her on the day and the night of Esther's disappearance.

I talk to the chief inspector, who returns my belongings and offers his apologies, adding that my rapid detention was entirely within the law, and that I have no grounds on which to accuse or sue the State. I say that I haven't the slightest intention of doing either of those things, that I am perfectly aware that we are all under constant suspicion and under twenty-four-hour surveillance, even when we have committed no crime.

'You're free to go,' he says, echoing the words of the prison officer.

I ask: Isn't it possible that something really has happened to my wife? She had said to me once that – understandably given her vast network of contacts in the terrorist

underworld – she occasionally got the feeling she was being followed.

The inspector changes the subject. I insist, but he says nothing.

I ask if she would be able to travel on her passport, and he says, of course, since she has committed no crime. Why shouldn't she leave and enter the country freely?

'So she may no longer be in France?'

'Do you think she left you because of that woman you've been sleeping with?'

That's none of your business, I reply. The inspector pauses for a second and grows serious; he says that I was arrested as part of routine procedure, but that he is nevertheless very sorry about my wife's disappearance. He is married himself and although he doesn't like my books (So he isn't as ignorant as he looks! He knows who I am!), he can put himself in my shoes and imagine what I must be going through.

I ask him what I should do next. He gives me his card and asks me to get in touch if I hear anything. I've watched this scene in dozens of films, and I'm not convinced; inspectors always know more than they say they do.

He asks me if I have ever met the person who was with Esther the last time she was seen alive. I say that I knew his code name, but didn't know him personally.

He asks if we have any domestic problems. I say that we've been together for ten years and have the same problems most married couples have – nothing more.

He asks, delicately, if we have discussed divorce recently, or if my wife was considering leaving me. I tell him we have

never even considered the possibility, and say again that 'like all couples' we have our occasional disagreements.

Frequent or only occasional?

Occasional, I say.

He asks still more delicately if she suspected that I was having an affair with her friend. I tell him that it was the first – and last – time that her friend and I had slept together. It wasn't an affair; it came about simply because we had nothing else to do. It had been a bit of a dull day, neither of us had any pressing engagements after lunch, and the game of seduction always adds a little zest to life, which is why we ended up in bed together.

'You go to bed with someone just because it's a bit of a dull day?'

I consider telling him that such matters hardly form part of his investigations, but I need his help, or might need it later on – there is, after all, that invisible institution called the Favour Bank, which I have always found so very useful.

'Sometimes, yes. There's nothing else very interesting to do, the woman is looking for excitement, I'm looking for adventure, and that's that. The next day, you both pretend that nothing happened, and life goes on.'

He thanks me, holds out his hand and says that in his world, things aren't quite like that. Naturally, boredom and tedium exist, as does the desire to go to bed with someone, but everything is much more controlled, and no one ever acts on their thoughts or desires.

'Perhaps artists have more freedom,' he remarks.

I say that I'm familiar with his world, but have no wish to enter into a comparison between our different views of

society and people. I remain silent, awaiting his next move.

'Speaking of freedom,' he says, slightly disappointed at this writer's refusal to enter into a debate with a police officer, 'you're free to go. Now that I've met you, I'll read your books. I know I said I didn't like them, but the fact is I've never actually read one.'

This is not the first or the last time that I will hear these words. At least this whole episode has gained me another reader. I shake his hand and leave.

I'm free. I'm out of prison, my wife has disappeared in mysterious circumstances, I have no fixed timetable for work, I have no problem meeting new people, I'm rich, famous, and if Esther really has left me, I'll soon find someone to replace her. I'm free, independent.

But what is freedom?

I've spent a large part of my life enslaved to one thing or another, so I should know the meaning of the word. Ever since I was a child, I have fought to make freedom my most precious commodity. I fought with my parents, who wanted me to be an engineer, not a writer. I fought with the other boys at school, who immediately homed in on me as the butt of their cruel jokes, and only after much blood had flowed from my nose and from theirs, only after many afternoons when I had to hide my scars from my mother – because it was up to me not her to solve my problems – did I manage to show them that I could take a thrashing without bursting into tears. I fought to get a job to support myself, and went to work as a delivery man for a hardware store, so as to be free from that old line in family blackmail:

'We'll give you money, but you'll have to do this, this and this.'

I fought – although without success – for the girl I was in love with when I was an adolescent, and who loved me too; she left me in the end because her parents convinced her that I had no future.

I fought against the hostile world of journalism – my next job – where my first boss kept me hanging around for three whole hours and only deigned to take any notice of me when I started tearing up the book he was reading: he looked at me in surprise and saw that here was someone capable of persevering and confronting the enemy, essential qualities for a good reporter. I fought for the socialist ideal, went to prison, came out and went on fighting, feeling like a working-class hero – until, that is, I heard the Beatles and decided that rock music was much more fun than Marx. I fought for the love of my first, second, and third wives. I fought to find the courage to leave my first, second, and third wives, because the love I felt for them hadn't lasted, and I needed to move on, until I found the person who had been put in this world to find me – and she was none of those three.

I fought for the courage to leave my job on the newspaper and launch myself into the adventure of writing a book, knowing full well that no one in my country could make a living as a writer. I gave up after a year, after writing more than a thousand pages – pages of such genius that even I couldn't understand them.

While I was fighting, I heard other people speaking in the name of freedom, and the more they defended this

unique right, the more enslaved they seemed to be to their parents' wishes, to a marriage in which they had promised to stay with the other person 'for the rest of their lives', to the bathroom scales, to their diet, to half-finished projects, to lovers to whom they were incapable of saying 'No' or 'It's over', to weekends when they were obliged to have lunch with people they didn't even like. Slaves to luxury, to the appearance of luxury, to the appearance of the appearance of luxury. Slaves to a life they had not chosen, but which they had decided to live because someone had managed to convince them that it was all for the best. And so their identical days and nights passed, days and nights in which adventure was just a word in a book or an image on the television that was always on, and whenever a door opened, they would say:

'I'm not interested. I'm not in the mood.'

How could they possibly know if they were in the mood or not if they had never tried? But there was no point in asking; the truth was they were afraid of any change that would upset the world they had grown used to.

The inspector says I'm free. I'm free now and I was free in prison too, because freedom continues to be the thing I prize most in the world. Of course, this has led me to drink wines I did not like, to do things I should not have done and which I will not do again; it has left scars on my body and on my soul, it has meant hurting certain people, although I have since asked their forgiveness, when I realised that I could do absolutely anything except force another person to follow me in my madness, in my lust for life. I don't regret the painful times; I bear my scars as if they were medals. I

know that freedom has a high price, as high as that of slavery; the only difference is that you pay with pleasure and a smile, even when that smile is dimmed by tears.