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The Polygamist

Written by William Irvine

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THE POLYGAMIST

William Irvine



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To Anthony, whom I last saw near Colva Village
in September 1979.

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The Brides of Omar

1 – The Vow

'What kind of a man are you anyway? I mean, what person walks out on someone without a proper explanation? Simply dumps her for no good reason?'

For a moment her outburst shook him, and yet he must have been here a thousand times before. He knew perfectly well that next would come the tears, then the name-calling – the display of bravado that always betrays such weakness. She would finish by storming out, and after that she would be gone, out of his life forever. Considering the benefits, a few minutes' grief was a price worth paying – but despite his familiarity with the process, he remained uncomfortable with it. He still could not get used to *this*.

He tried to be conciliatory, knowing he would fail before he had started: 'Look, try to understand, it's not your fault – it's mine. I just can't do this thing. It never works for me, not with anyone.' A flushed face, trembling lips, then tears trickling down inflamed cheeks – the absence of distress on *his* face serving only to exacerbate hers. Why was this part always such agony? He knew countless ways to initiate affairs, but not one good one with which to end them. *I should work on that*, he told himself, but there probably *wasn't* a good way to get rid of someone, and he knew it.

'You complete bastard!' The abuse stage. He would

keep silent, give her nothing to latch on to. It also meant she was nearly finished – these would be her parting shots. 'You arrogant piece of shit! You think you're something special, don't you? Well let's face it – you're just screwed up, a loser. Goodbye and good fucking riddance!' With that she did an about turn and marched out, slamming the door behind her.

A silence returned to soothe him like a balm. He closed his eyes to bathe in it, to let it work its healing magic. Disturbing, distressing, tiresome; no matter how brief the liaison, the break-up was always all of these things. He knew it went with the territory, yet for a moment her tirade had taken him aback. She had touched a nerve because there *was* something wrong. Something needed to change, and he knew it. He also knew that just suppressing his promiscuity was never going to work. He wasn't made for 'settling down', for the straight and narrow. No. He would have to find a compromise with the forces that drove him, but the question was *how*?

★★★

'No.

I do not consent.

I will not kowtow before the altar of the false god, convention.

I refuse to prostrate myself before the hollow idols of others' social norms.

Rather than suppressing what is natural within me,

I shall give it rein.'

Omar uttered these words as if in prayer. They would

steel him against all opposition – the sly disapproval of the faint-hearted, the backlash of the mindless conformists. He would fall back on this vow in the future, rely on it to bolster his resolve, use it to prevent himself from departing from the path he had chosen.

'But, nor will I skulk around like a liar or a thief,
I shall not live dishonestly.
I shall not live shamefully.
I shall not waiver from this course.'

★

He would miss nowhere else in the Kingdom once he was gone. To be alone in this place, with the low moan of the wind, its whispering chant, was to be truly blessed. Yet, he had company of sorts, for he shared this rocky hilltop with a great gathering of spirits. Nearly half bore the Al-Ghamdi name, and some twenty of *those* were descended from his own great grandfather and his wives. He wondered if they took as much pleasure in the commanding wilderness views as he did, but whatever the interred did or did not see, today they had something else to observe. Possessed at last of the means, and not solely the will, this was his turning point – and they would be witnesses to the oath that would steel him for the direction he now embarked his life upon, a direction that for too long had remained only a dream.

The eternal desert, cradle of his ancestors, expanded below; and at his feet was a grave, the body interred in it his father's. Unimpressive beside his mother's marble slab, the plywood marker read: '*Farouk ibn Tariq*

ibn Khalid Al-Ghamdi – 21st April 1979'. Death having separated them for two decades, husband and wife were finally reunited. Gazing at the recently disturbed ground he was transported back to that day when, aged nineteen, he admitted to having switched courses at the University of California. 'Did I spend all that money on an overseas education for you to squander it on such nonsense?' Farouk had raged. Omar had justified his disobedience by declaring that social anthropology interested him whereas business administration did not, provoking more vitriol. He had never been what Farouk had wanted him to be. He had never been a second Suleiman.

It wasn't the beatings. I accept they were normal for the times, just the way fathers thought they should raise their sons. It was the put-downs, your constantly telling me I wasn't good enough, that I can't forgive. I should spit on your grave, urinate on it, for the way you made me feel. Such profanity would not be unjustified – but he knew such acts would succeed only in demeaning *him*. He also had to acknowledge the efforts at reconciliation Farouk had made later on, particularly after he had learned he was dying. There was no doubt that having time to get used to the idea – his father having suffered from cancer – took the sting out of this death. Being less close had also helped.

His mother's passing, which had been sudden, had been far harder. They had hauled him out of some lesson at Harrow to put him on a plane home, for Omar to spend the entire flight in a tearful state of despair. Younger then, he had also been weaker.

★

Mellowing towards his wayward child later in life, the father used to give thanks in his prayers for having one son who was everything he wanted and another who was – if nothing else – not a *complete* failure. His second son was not a drug addict, a compulsive gambler or a drunkard. What Farouk never cottoned on to was that Omar *was* hooked, but not in any of the ways that he feared; for whilst the common vices held little sway over him, when it came to women it was a different matter. The father used to ask his youngest son when he would marry, but Omar always evaded the question. He was 'too busy growing his business,' or 'could not find the right one'. It was better that way, better that Farouk only knew the half of it.

Tall, slim, with thick dark hair and an olive complexion to offset his green eyes, he had proved highly tempting to the fair-skinned women of the West. Good looks were, however, the least of the factors in his success, for Omar was endowed with an adulterer's charm that went beyond the ordinary. He had worked hard to hone his craft, ironically being taught most by his many partners, always taking heed when they commented on their likes and dislikes, whether great *or* small. He knew when to be authoritative and when to take the reins, when to be playful and when to be silent. He was diligently attentive to his quarry, hanging on every word, and he knew how to make a woman feel briefly that she was the centre of the universe. Experienced now, able to 'feed' almost at will, he was like a tiger shark amongst minnows.

Omar's womanising career had, unsurprisingly, been at the expense of his professional one. Despite graduating

with first class honours, he had not gone on to make any use of the anthropology degree he had fought so hard to study, and after UC proved deaf to his father's pleas that he train further and take up a profession. At the time, Omar could not have cared less. All he wanted was a means to live, any means. After drifting around from job to job, first in the United States, later in England, he ended up running a small travel goods business in London's West End – his by then increasingly forgiving father even putting up the capital with which his errant son was able to establish a shop on fashionable Kensington Church Street.

Selling suitcases had bored him rigid, but even the dullest job has its compensations, for he benefited from a steady stream of women passing through his outlet, cosmopolitan London providing him with the opportunity to sample females of a variety of complexions and cultures. Most were foreigners, young tourists or students, taking advantage of their first freedom from overprotective parents. Others were older, dissatisfied or unhappily married women with needs. Consciously or unconsciously, most were in search of romance and fell easy prey to his diabolical charms. So that time nor place need present an obstacle he used to keep a chaise longue for his philandering, a French Empire reproduction, at the back of his shop. It was here that he gave many of his conquests their 'little souvenir' of London.

★

Red hair and ghostly whiteness – a vision of Aleksandra's Scandinavian features floated before him. Never, neither

before nor since, had he seen a complexion like it, yet her skin provided the perfect foil for the chestnut hair nestling between her thighs. His heart gained speed as he relived the moment of exposure, warmth flowing to his loins as Aleksandra peeled down her girlish navy knickers. The urgent movement of a scorpion scurrying to safety, to a crevice in the stone wall, cut short his daydream. A messenger to summon him back to reality; this was neither the time nor the place to be delving into the archive of his erotic memories. *Look to the here and now – what do you see?* He saw that he remained alone in this place, was still able to bask in its solitude. At the base of the neighbouring headstone lay the half-eaten corpse of a lizard, a horde of ants working flat out to devour the banquet.

As soon as his father's estate was settled – within a week they had assured him – he would be free to leave Riyadh, perhaps never to return. Sharia, after all, was hardly conducive to his lifestyle. Farouk's bequest, a stake in the family estate agency, added to the sale proceeds of his London business, ought to free him from money concerns for good. With the financial obstacle to his plans removed, he would be as a snake outgrowing its skin. He would moult off his former existence, and with it the constraints of stifling convention. He took one last look at the grave and whispered, 'Goodbye,' and on the ten-mile drive back to Riyadh he wondered when, or if, he would set eyes on this sacred place of rest again.

★★★

Preparing soft boiled eggs was a small job that she enjoyed. After placing a pan of warm water onto the ring, Faiza added first salt and then the eggs. She was interrupted by a piercing scream – apparently a person was being mortally wounded in the next room. Najwa or Noha?

'You STOLE them, you little thief – four squares. Maa, she just ate a whole row of my chocolate bar.' Noha. The higher-pitched shriek belonged to the thirteen year old.

The accusation provided the cue for a second whinging voice: 'Maaa, Noha called me a fat cow. She's so cruel, the most unbearable sister…'

'Girls! *Please* stop fighting – and stop eating sweets now. I'll be serving your eggs in a couple of minutes. Omar, are you going out already? Why not stay and have some breakfast with us?'

'I'm sorry, maybe tomorrow. I'll catch you later. Goodbye, girls. Enjoy your breakfast.'

'Goodbye, Uncle.

Maa, why can't we ever have *poached* eggs?' asked Najwa, 'and why does Uncle Omar never stay for breakfast?'

★

Gold-plated swan-neck taps and showy fabrics imbued with stale cigarette smoke – how he hated their nouveau riche home. He escaped by spending long hours at the gym, driving out of town to the Interior, or visiting shopping malls that held no interest for him. He went

anywhere as long as it took him away from *them*. When being in the house was unavoidable he stayed in his room, reflecting on the family he was temporarily a part of, the tensions he was witness to. Everything revolved around the daughters who, supposedly, justified all the parents' hard work and sacrifice. Having to watch his brother's harassed wife pander to their every whim got on his nerves. He would console himself, as he languished on the bed after a cold shower, by going over his plans, the plans that would ensure he never ended up in a household as dysfunctional as this one.

The 'week' required to sort out the bequest turned into three, and now looked set to become four. At the age of thirty-six, knowing only too well that lawyers *never* exhibit a sense of urgency, that they *always* drag things out, he had no right to be surprised. His sisters, Sanaa and Taja, younger and less experienced, had returned to the US immediately after the interment appointing executors to act on their behalves. He was a fool for not having done the same.

He was, of course, impatient to get on with the new life he had promised himself, to begin sampling the delights and mysteries that awaited him. However, the real problem was that the delay forced him to stay longer with Suleiman, which was to court disaster, for it risked mere uneasiness deteriorating into open conflict. Although the brothers did not always get on badly, each nursed a contempt for the other's lifestyle. The 'head of the family', 'Suleiman the Magnificent', had followed in Farouk's footsteps, devoting himself heart and soul to the Al-Ghamdi agency. Since he had been running

the business it had gone from strength to strength, undeniably; but for Omar a life so burdened with responsibility, so serious, was anathema. His obvious aversion to Suleiman's ordered bourgeois existence was not appreciated, and the older brother regarded his younger sibling's irresponsibility with disdain, as pure childishness.

When the moment finally came for him to leave he mustered as much affection as he was still capable of feeling, and said his goodbyes. It came as a surprise to Omar that they seemed genuinely sad to see him go, Suleiman even leaving the office for an hour to see him off from King Khalid International. By some small miracle all of them had managed to remain on comparatively good terms. He gave his brother a forwarding address in Goa, the address of a house he was to live in but had not yet seen, and after kissing Suleiman one last time, went through security. On board the plane he waited impatiently for take-off, as if imminent suffocation was a serious possibility.