

Money Dump

Somewhere in the mountainous West Bank town of Silwan, nuzzled in a neighborhood of old concrete homes and new houses of stone, Abbas, father of one boy and three married girls, homeowner of a stone residence, was looking to start an argument with his wife.

Abbas waded through his home freezer, bags and foils of blackened meat and freezer-burnt chicken, while trying to conjure a Quranic verse that forbade wasting. Something along the lines of waste not, want not. His mind was filled with the cautionary tales told to children of food wasters turning to monkeys, but nothing with a holy citation or proof backed by Allah himself.

His wife, Maryam, watched silently as he emptied the tightly packed freezer to teach her a lesson on frugality. Money was hard to come by, easy to spend. After all, he “worked himself like a donkey” to bring in beef, chicken, and quail. That was the phrase he liked to use. A phrase he grew up hearing from his father and uncles and friends, passed around from generation to generation. Such phrases and anecdotes were the building blocks of Abbas from the town of Silwan. His wife had told him once how she’d come to realize this early on in their marriage when he forced her to wear the veil, afraid the people would gossip about her looseness. There were always people and the people had tongues, long tongues. In his mind, the residents of Silwan never wasted an opportunity to tarnish a reputation of an honorable man like himself.

On that particular day, his head in the freezer, frost biting his scalp, he made space for the new batch of steaks he purchased from the butcher, a special order meant to be prepared for his son’s arrival from Jerusalem. He’d invited guests, friends who echoed his opinions and thought twice before debating him. This he mistook as a sign of strength, of leadership.

When she finally had enough, Maryam asked what they would prepare for the guests and he angrily assured her he had backup.

“Take out the garbage. Allah knows I’ll be asked about this on judgement day. He’ll hold me accountable. The donkey that I am.”

And off she slumped, dragging the heavy garbage bag behind her, contemplating something, as he complained and grumbled to himself, to the open fridge.

Malek, his first born and first of many feats, not excluding graduating university, arrived with a half-smile. His expression was of one not too keen on coming back to see his father because no sooner had he reached the threshold then he flocked to his mother who complained about their argument. Wasted food. Wasted money. Sin this, cursed that.

Malek’s hug was limp just as the smile on his face.

“You get thinner every time I see you. Are you not eating?” Abbas said, trudging toward the kitchen to where his wife prepared the steaks. He barked directions at her. Malek sighed, protesting in body language. He caught the two of them gesturing with their eyes, secrets passing in space, in silence.

“I’m studying, father. That takes up a lot of energy. I don’t always have time to eat.”

Abbas scoffed. “Well, if you’d listened to me and married, then you’d have a wife to cook for you while you studied. Hot meal. Company. You’d be as fat as a football.”

Malek protested the way he always did. Feigning ignorance. He dropped his luggage in his old room. Already Abbas thought of ways to convince him to stay longer than a week. He missed his son. He liked showing him off to the Silwanis, the doubters, the gossipers, the uneducated. But there was still the matter of Malek’s marriage to settle. He would need to find a wife, and his failure to do so would, no doubt, be more reason for gossip.

From inside his old room, Malek said, “And what about money? Marriage isn’t cheap.”

Abbas checked the steaks Maryam finished seasoning, commented that they were too seasoned, that she ought to use less peppers so as not to agitate his stomach and intestines. She grumbled prayers of mercy.

“Money comes and goes. You just get married, and Allah will provide. Stop worrying about money. Money isn’t everything,” Abbas said with confidence. He liked to think he was wise on account of his greying hair and loosening skin in areas where it used to be taut and strong. Those were the requirements of dispensing advice, weren’t they?

Malek didn’t respond. He was ignoring his sage advice, for that, he turned to Maryam who precariously glanced up at him with worried eyes, apprehensive.

“See your son. He’s becoming more like you and less like me.” Abbas’s voice lifted, the passion of her failures fueling him. “It’s these ideas you fill his head with.”

“Stop it dad. I came here to have a good time. Let’s not turn today into an argument.”

Maryam said, “Thank you. Can you get him out of the kitchen, please. He already dumped out half the fridge. We have no food for next week.”

Abbas frowned. “If you didn’t waste, we wouldn’t be in this predicament.” He considered narrating the cautionary tale, imagining his wife a monkey.

The rest of the afternoon, they ate leftovers while Malek discussed his graduation plans. He mentioned America and a scholarship to study there. The matter of money rose again, but to elaborating on this point, Malek kept silent. Abbas detected a secret.

“And when will we celebrate your true happiness, of marrying, of having a child?” Abbas insisted, not trying to be difficult, but stealing little time in between his son’s appearances to discuss such sensitive topics.

Malek told him he was happy and that marriage wasn't necessarily the end-all-be-all. To this, Abbas's stomach protested, churning those leftovers into sickness. Malek, he thought, was going to single-handedly bring about the death of his family name.

At night, Abbas and Maryam reconvened in their bedroom, saying little to one another. Maryam refrained from glancing at him as she disrobed and slid into her sleeping gown. He considered stealing his pillow and covers to sleep in the living room on the hard sofa but thought against the whole ordeal.

Nevertheless, despite his resolve to stay, Abbas couldn't sleep. He attributed his insomnia to anxiety and the bustling thoughts that began their endless rotation the moment he rested his head. Malek's thinness, his refusal to marry, and the rapidly approaching end of the week when he would return to Jerusalem were a stimulant. He thought about money too, a recurring worry despite his relative wealth in their poor, agrarian town. He wondered, should he come upon a fortune, what he would do with it and, most importantly, where he would save it.

And it happened at once, a single memory that triggered an unholy reaction.

He jerked out of bed, almost shouting. His skin was hot and bumpy. Sweat poured out of every orifice, every gland. Maryam jolted beside him, squinting at his sudden arousal.

"Bismillah, in the name of Allah, what happened?" her voice bordered on worry and annoyance.

"The money. Where did we save the money, woman?" He knew the answer but hoped she would confirm otherwise.

"What money?"

"The money I asked you to save. Where did you put it?"

Silence stretched for longer than a comfortable minute. Abbas made out the face of his wife as it came into the moon's luminescence; ghostly, almost translucent.

"You told me to wrap it in foil and hide it..."

"In the freezer."

The two of them hurried out of the bedroom, Abbas detoured into the kitchen and began rummaging through the trash.

"It's not there. I took the garbage out to the curb." Maryam's words were a bucket of ice water poured onto his head, shrinking his scalp until it tore.

Malek appeared in the foyer, groggy, inconvenienced, a child again. Abbas felt a twinge of guilt for interrupting him, but this was an emergency.

"What's going on?"

Maryam responded, unable to hold back the scandal. "Your father tossed our savings in the garbage."

Malek's face was all questions, but Abbas hurried out of the foyer and the front door. Both Maryam and Malek chased him closely, questioning his intentions. Abbas's head was a battlefield, raging with fire and ice.

Into the cold of the night, down the polished granite stairs, he went. He couldn't sense the freeze, couldn't comprehend anything beyond rage, at himself, at his wife, for being so idiotic as to dump a heap of money into the garbage. Within that moment of ignorance, he rendered himself poor. The whole town would learn of his folly for it was a folly from grace and rank. The people would laugh at him, ask how he lost such a fortune in a swift move and why, if banks were plentiful, would he choose to hide his money in a freezer?

The hypothetical scenarios and questions forced him to hasten his pace, running away from his mind. He turned the curb and started toward the blue garbage receptacle which was used by the entire neighborhood. The houses were dark. The streets were empty and quiet. Only stray cats loitered the alley. One particular black cat leaped out of the container when he approached it only to find nothing. He grabbed a rock and tossed it at the cat, cursing the devil and his luck.

“It’s gone,” he said as the earth shifted beneath him. He found purchase in Malek’s firmness. “The money’s gone.”

His wife slapped one hand across her mouth and another across her cheek. The realization of their tragedy came to fruition with each passing second. Their life’s savings tossed out with rotting meats and thawing vegetables. He envisioned the bills soaking in rotten blood and juices, turning to mush, consumed by maggots. The same was happening to his insides. A part of him questioned his foiling techniques and whether he properly sealed the money. Whether there was a chance the money would survive the elements.

“What are we going to do?” Maryam said, finding her voice and her tears, the culmination of his worries translating in her expressions. She spun in her spot, searching for refuge and an outlet for her frustrations. She reached for Malek’s arm, he who had become their beacon and anchor.

“Let’s go back home and sleep. Tomorrow, we’ll figure things out,” Malek said, dragging them both back up the road toward home. “People might be watching.”

Abbas gleaned the windows and doors of their dusty alley, searching for prying eyes, for movement. They were surely there, watching them, wanting to know what the problem was.

He had the common sense to straighten himself up until he was back in his home again. He exhaled for a long time, letting himself deflate, and his head spun.

“This is all your fault. If you hadn’t left all that food to rot in there...” His fury spilled out, washing over Maryam. Malek stood between them, a swimmer caught between two currents.

“Don’t turn this on me,” she said, pacing backward, away from his looming shadow. “You had to stick your nose in that freezer. You had to get into my business. Why don’t you just let me do my work?” The rift she created between them grew in space and time. Entrenched itself into the past and present.

Abbas had more words to unleash, regretful, bitter words which he sealed behind his lips and swallowed. They plunked into his belly.

“Don’t start this again,” said Malek, looking older and wiser. He’d been witness to such spectacles since he was a child and grew to resist their pain. Abbas wished he could erase those moments from his son’s head. Wash them out with holy water. “I told you to just go to sleep and tomorrow, everything will be khair.”

But Abbas’s insomnia was now exacerbated by the loss of his fortune and the coldness of the living room. It was *his* fortune. The work of a decade as a cab driver, toiling in the sun, waiting, begging for passengers. Every month, he took his earnings to the bank to exchange the shekels into dollars. He had hoped by doing this to carve out a more than meager living, to build a second house or fly to America where he could open a grocery store like his older brothers, once upon a time. He could even marry a second wife, one more observant, more tactical than Maryam. She was complaining in her bedroom to Malek, recalling previous transgressions and outbursts, Abbas pondered over the way she watched him with disdain. Brows knit; eyes unforgiving.

The barbecue went according to plan, but still, lingering at the periphery of his thoughts was the money and his newfound position at the bottom of the societal pyramid. Often, his friends caught him wandering and chided him with jokes of senility. He kept the burgeoning secret to himself and with every passing second, it engorged and throbbed, a tumor ready to burst in a sudden shift of his body. His muscles tormented his idleness, his thoughts pricked with their thorny what-ifs and should-haves. He wanted to find the money. Malek, putting himself to good use, had spoken to the garbage disposal services and they informed him that all trash pickups were sent to the landfill. After the party, Abbas determined to go there alone.

Of all the places he'd dreamt of going in his life, of all the trips he never managed to make due to his "limited funds", the landfill was never one. But in that moment, it was his Rome, his Riviera, his New York City.

He barely ate when Malek offered him a freshly grilled steak with a lobe of sizzling fat dangling from its end. He barely laughed when his friends told jokes and reminisced over the old days when they were all poor and hungry and cunning. When they were unified by a common enemy. One particular guest, Rauf, a childhood friend who was more a brother, nudged him.

"What's the matter with you, ya zalama? You've been quiet all day. It's not like you. You're not bothered by our company, are you?" He looked playfully offended.

Unable to hold back, he leaned forward and regurgitated his secret to Rauf. With every dispensed word, he watched the man's expression change from horror, to resolve, to utter humor. Rauf clapped him on the back and guffawed. "Is that true? What the hell were you thinking?" He wanted the guests to know. "How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars," he whispered to Rauf's surprise. The man almost choked on his food.

Abbas looked toward Malek, wanting to find a scapegoat. His other guests leaned in, already smiling along to Rauf's contagious laughter.

When Abbas told them, they too laughed for a good five minutes. Five minutes later, they inquired about Abbas's banking methods and chided his trust issues. Ten minutes later, when it was obvious the matter was no joke, the air turned stuffy like cotton.

"Then we should go find the money," said Rauf, wiping his greasy hands with a napkin. He pulled himself to his feet.

Abbas shuddered with fear. Before his eyes, his friends transformed into demons, wanting nothing but his money. He should have kept his mouth shut. He should've gone alone to the landfill to find his money.

"We can wait until later. No hurry now," he said to them, reluctant.

Rauf cocked an eyebrow. "You're afraid we'll take your money."

"Audhubillah," Abbas said, feigning offense. May Allah be my refuge. "That thought never crossed my mind."

"Then, let's go."

There were about a dozen of them pressed into his taxi van. Maryam provided them all with plastic bags to wear around their shoes and hands, but she stayed behind to entertain the wives. By then, everyone had learned about the money and Abbas saw brewing in their eyes the stories, the scandals, the plans.

He should've kept his mouth shut.

Talk in Silwan, traveled at the speed of light. Abbas liked to joke that before a bite of food would be wet with saliva, gossip was unleashed from that same Silwani mouth. It was true.

Silwan was a small, landlocked town with little entertainment to be had and lots of leisure time.

By tomorrow, he anticipated, word would be out.

Shame. Shame. Shame.

He drove toward the landfill at the edge of town, wondering if he should detour or pretend like his van broke down. If he turned the wheel just so to the right, it could tumble sideways and kill them all. But one guilty look at Malek straightened his thoughts.

Along the way westward, the men joked about Abbas and his oddities. About the times when they were all poor and wanting for nothing more than a bit of food and money. They revealed stories from when he, a stone headed little boy, pulled off the cleverest of pranks to earn money. Making shady deals. Spinning cunning lies. At one point, even robbing a man in a challenge of wits. Even then, they said, he never let a penny go to waste. Malek laughed along, not privy to Abbas's vulnerabilities. Abbas laughed because he saw nothing of himself in his son. They could almost be strangers.

The Silwan landfill was a mountain above the hill at the end of town. It curved around the slopes like a belt and broke off over a cliff. Garbage tumbled toward the wadi where a small fire burned, bellowing with the blackest of smoke. A sour wind curdled around them when they stepped out of the van.

"How does it feel to be poor again?" said Rauf, wrinkling his nose.

"Like shit," Abbas said, the foul air bringing back hungry memories. He secured the bags around his shoes and Malek helped tighten them in a knot. In that moment, looking at the top of his son's head, he perceived him as a little boy, needing his protection. He couldn't shake the thoughts of disciplining Malek, the way he cried often. He was sensitive and yet...

When Malek caught him staring, he smiled nervously. It was the smile of a man who had put the past behind him. “You can wait in the car if you prefer. I can help the others.”

“No. It’s my money. I find it.”

“Are you sure it’s here?”

“Inshallah.”

And they toiled in the landfill, like bizarre archaeologists. This was a different type of wading, Abbas thought. The swimming of the poor. A sport where he dodged massive burlap sacks that spelled Sugar on them in bold font but were filled with bloated cow intestines and many soiled diapers. He unraveled shiny objects that promised gold only to discover they were nothing more than cheap knockoffs. There were dull things too. Here were the secrets of the townspeople, on display, for all to see. Here were the things people surrounded themselves throughout their lives. Things they used, things they consumed, things that consumed them. Once-treasures. They all ended up at the edge of town, falling over an abyss. To the ends of their existence.

Rauf tossed a fist-sized animal heart at him and laughed and he, in return, tossed back an open diaper. Momentarily, they were children, playing in a landfill where things died. Here, time warped.

The hours passed, the men searched from spot to spot with no rhyme or direction.

Every time Abbas came upon a new spot, his mind projected the bag, the aluminum foil in the shape of a rectangle. The hope that he would find his fortune and be whole again.

But to no avail.

Night fell.

The men were tired.

Malek suggested they go back home and the men, all afraid to voice their consent, stared back at Abbas for a final decision.

“Inshallah tomorrow it’ll show up. If this money is halal, then Allah will deliver it back to me.”

Inshallah. Inshallah. Inshallah.

The chants were a prayer.

There was optimism in Maryam’s voice when they returned, choosing positive words, Godly words and inshallahs to glean a response. Abbas said nothing. Nothing was a proper response.

“Inshallah it will show up,” she said, looking equally guilty.

That night, they sat together and drank tea, the three of them. Maryam sat closer to Malek, barely an inch apart. They spoke a different language together, unlike the one Abbas understood, and he felt apart from them. Malek seemed most worried, his mother dispensing news and rumors he’d missed during his time in Jerusalem. At the end of the narrations, of their secret talks, Malek turned to him. A solution twinkled in his eyes.

“I have some savings. I’d like to give you what I have,” he said.

Abbas recoiled at the implication; the wiser, older father receiving charity from his unseasoned, young son. What would the people say? His first instinct was to chide Malek for thinking himself superior, to discipline him with caustic language. But that rage subsided when Maryam reached out to kiss Malek on the cheeks.

“Habibi, you are so generous to do that.”

The way she responded to kindness, like a flower to a sun. The way she beamed reminded him of the old days when they were first married and she laughed at his antics and stories.

“You keep your money, son. Inshallah the money will come up,” he said, not believing his own words. God was punishing him.

Malek sighed. “But if not, then there is another option. I’m offering you this money. And I want nothing in return.”

“Inshallah.”

The following day was just as miserable and hot. The acrid smell of soured garbage hung in a hazy mist, pervading everyone’s senses, clothes, and flesh. That morning, he, Malek and Maryam went alone. Already, there were young men -Abbas had never seen them before- loitering with bags on their feet and hands. When they appeared, Abbas chased them down with balled diapers, rotten chicken bags, and gallons of cheesed milk. Word had reached the ends of town, perhaps even beyond, of the fortune in the dumps.

The black smoke from the fire had risen from the wadi, blowing into their faces as they waded into a new corner of the heap. There was a fresh batch that morning and Abbas’s anxiety tripled. Suddenly, the landfill was a continent, an endless sea of once-treasures and minute wastes. He became a part of the heap, similarly minute and insignificant.

Maryam lifted her veil over her nose as she raked through her section and every time, she neared Malek, they exchanged words that seemed to brighten them both up. He reminded them often of the passing time, pointing to the sun as a witness. And the sun raced across the sky.

Every now and then, heads of strangers poked in and out. Hyenas ready to feast on the remains. Rauf arrived at sunset with a coffee thermos and good tidings. Others would join them soon.

Abbas didn't care anymore if his friends came to help, in fact, he was tired and had resolved to offer a cash prize for anyone who found the money. He described the shape to the searchers, old and new, using hand motions and gestures. The size and shape of a brick but foiled in tin. And they moved like bees, humming traditional songs, often in unison, passed down to them from their agrarian ancestors. The ones who harvested the olive groves and pressed the fruits into oil. Rauf switched the lyrics, inserting more appropriate words to match their circumstance. Harvesting the olive trees became picking through shit and bloated guts. Pressing oil turned to quashing rats. Finding love turned to finding sludge-drained money.

Abbas laughed despite his fatigue.

Malek checked on him often to ensure he had enough water.

But he was determined to not drink or eat or rest until the money was found.

Maryam came too, showing him prospective finds of rectangular foils, hope pouring out of her eyes, but when they unraveled the foils, they often found nothing. Maggoty ribs. A box filled with fake pearls. Melted chocolate bars.

"Inshallah the next one," she told him, passing him an endearing smile, like the ones that made him fall in love with her.

"Inshallah."

They moved faster as the hours ticked down. Night fell, but everyone was in high spirits. So much so that Rauf turned his headlights on and directed them at the landfill. Others, neighbors and friends, brought flashlights and gas lanterns. Some brought coffee and tea.

People laughed. People sang and danced, as if commemorating a happy memory.

At one point, Abbas joined the singing and dancing, hovering about his wife and son.

He was reminded of the old days of indigence when he could experience true happiness without the burdens that came with money. Away from material worries. Away from sleepless nights. He could get used to that feeling. How bad would it be to start over again? Perhaps this was for the better.

In the wake of that thought, as he raked through a particularly foul pile of meat, a silver light shone back at him, winking in the headlights of Rauf's car.

The item had the right color and dimensions, but the moment seemed too unreal.

His heart skipped a beat, two, three. His head spun. The world danced along his focus. His arms seemed detached as he reached out for the foil, thinking he was getting his hopes high.

But when he peeled the foil back, Maryam materialized behind him, Malek at his other shoulder...

There was the money, all of it. Green on white. Green within green.

"I found it." Happiness was him, was his voice. Maryam sobbed with excitement and Malek embraced her.

"Alhamdulillah. Alhamdulillah," he cried.

Friends and neighbors gathered to glimpse the treasure, faintly disappointed that they didn't happen upon it first. Abbas lifted it in the air and laughed, careful not to show the reams. He didn't know what to say or how to thank them. He could offer each a hundred-dollar bill, but then they would know his secret.

That he had actually dumped twenty thousand dollars. Twice the amount he claimed to have lost. He could trust no one. And why would he?

– *Fin* –