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# GARAGE GERBIL

BY PETER WILD

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Late in the cold night. And early in the warm morning. Nawaz and Hermat sit upon stools with their backs against the outside wall of the otherwise bereft Garage Gerbil, a circular plastic table between them on which two half-filled transparent glasses (one with Boukha and one with American Coffee) and a recently cleaned ashtray (from which Nawaz scooped the dead ends into his hand a little over ten minutes previously, scattering them upon the dusty floor by his feet without a word ? he knows he will be sweeping the front of the Caf, a birdlike man with a bent back and balsa bones, in a little over four hours, hosing and raking the sand to clear the detritus of the previous day and night ready for the next day and night - such is his life) rest, waiting to be useful. The two of them are quiet, enjoying one of their periodic lulls in conversation (they know each other, these two - Hermat is married to Nawaz's sister, Fatima, but they were friends long before that - they met at school many decades earlier, served in the Tunisian army together, regularly meet and drink and talk), watching the wide road opposite, the dusty track of sand that stretches from Monastir through to Hammamet.

There is little traffic at this time - even the lemon growers (who race back and forth in pickups piled high with their fruit throughout the hours of daylight) - even the lemon growers sleep right now, beside their wives and below their satellite dishes in the shacks and lean-to's in the hills up and around Tunis. From time to time, an anxious coach rocks by, the grunting roar of an engine, the white faces glimpsed for a minute sleepy and curious, but ? the holidaymakers are infrequent. As Ahmed said earlier in the day, it is not yet the Season (it is not yet the season, Ahmed said over a mouthful of yellow smoke, wistful and waiting - in Season, Ahmed shepherds the tourists about Port El-Kantaoui indicating areas of interest for a handful of Dinar; out of Season, Ahmed scrubs and scrimps and scurries like the lowliest insect in the most weather-threatened hovel for whatever money or food he can lay his hands on). In Season, the road will be a scorched blister of traffic, a furious storm of wind and noise and whipped dust and sand, cars and buses and mopeds and coaches and vans and frantic bicycles endlessly careering to and fro, with the sun blazing and the smell of Tunisia (the smell like the skin behind an elephant's ear) catching in your nostril hairs and the cauldron-bottom heat, all thrown together like a rudimentary soup - but it is not yet the Season, Ahmed is right about that. It is not yet the Season.

I say they are quiet, Nawaz and Hermat. They are quiet, but only Hermat enjoys the silence of their customary lull. Nawaz is shifty and nervous, sweating beneath his clothes, but he betrays no sign ? they have sat in their seats drinking and smoking alongside one another for so many years now, maintaining decorum is the least of his worries. As far as Hermat is concerned, this evening is the same

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as many others previously. Not so for Nawaz. He is feeling the cold, clammy in his shorts and socks, ripe with the symptoms of unease. The only outward show comes with his periodic shift from right arse cheek to left arse cheek.

Hermat offers him a cigarette - a Marlborough cigarette, he says leering with the pride of it (there was a German tourist earlier that day – earlier that day? the previous day more like, hard to keep track of time as one day bleeds into another - who dropped an almost full packet on the pavement besides Hermat and didn't notice, the pack left and the German receding, Hermat couldn't believe his luck - there he was, waist deep in a hole, working as part of a crew repaving the streets of Sousse - Toto at his back thwacking the reset paving stones with a cartoon mallet; he snatched up the pack and slipped it into a shirt pocket, working out the rest of the afternoon and the early evening quivering with the excitement of it, his fingers shaking, actually shaking, but not touching the pack, leaving it, unsure about the reality of the box in his shirt, not removing it or glorying over it, waiting, biding his time until night drew in and he found himself sat alongside Nawaz in his customary seat). The packet emerges once more, held at the bottom corner between thumb and index finger. Nawaz assents and smiles helplessly at the way in which Hermat chooses to pass across the cigarette (cupped between two palms like an injured sparrow such as might fall from a nest in the eaves of the Garage Gerbil). They each lean in and light from a shared match and then recline (Hermat's hand wagging life from the match, blue smoke wafting clear of his free arm), eyes closed, for the first exhaustive drag.

Ahh, says Hermat, the smoke like Heaven. He opens his eyes wide and brings the ash close to his face, a prospector examining gold dust left in the pan. Such luck, he says to Nawaz. Such luck I have. What a day this has been.

Such luck indeed, Nawaz thinks, glumly staring into the dark of the silhouetted buildings opposite. He replays edited highlights from their previous afternoon in his mind - the visit from his sister, her news, the mnews she was too afraid to reveal herself, the news she couldn't bare to break to her husband, the plea, could he break the news for her? they were friends weren't they? He could tell Hermat. It would be better that way. If the news came from Nawaz, Hermat would have time for it all to sink in. There wouldn't be a fight. He could digest what he had learned, see that it wasn't as bad as he might initially suspect. Fatima loved him. She urged Nawaz to emphasise the point: my sister loves you. This is what Fatima said, speaking of herself in the third person: tell him my sister loves you (putting the words in his mouth, as if they were overlarge pieces of caramel). Nawaz said he didn't know. It didn't seem right for him, her brother, to intercede. A man should not step between another man and his wife. It was unseemly. Unseemly, Fatima said (her lips drawing into the fish scowl she inherited from their mother), unseemly. And is it unseemly, she continued, when a man takes a hand to his wife? Nawaz didn't speak (partly because, if truth were told, he was, even now, afraid of his younger sister and her sharp tongue, and partly because he thought it right that a man should take a hand to his wife if there was call) and the silence mildewed between them (despite the bustle of a busy lunchtime in the Garage Gerbil) growing sticky and sweet like a terrible gut wound of the kind Nawaz had himself witnessed in a violent skirmish that took place during Independence.

Fatima looked at her feet and said quietly: will you help me, Nawaz?

And Nawaz? What did Nawaz say? What could Nawaz say, in all honesty?

Yes, my sister, he said defeated. Yes, I will help you.

Hermat is talking. Some story. A man Nawaz is distantly aware of Hermat having

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mentioned before. A clown. Always getting into trouble. Always making a hash of what limited finances were available to him. Always getting some girl into trouble, always facing down some raging father. Turns out the man is lost at sea, presumed dead, after taking a job on one of the Galleons. Hermat can hardly bring himself to get words out, so amused he is.

Did the man take a job on one of the fishing boats, then? Nawaz asked, more for politeness' sake than anything else.

No, said Hermat. No. It was a tourist ship. They take tourists out to sea. They show them around. Let them dive. Bring them safely back to shore. Simple. The man must be the first ever casualty in the history of .

Nawaz interrupted. Said: Hermat.

Let me finish, Hermat bleated in-between three sharp intakes that drew the last life from his cigarette. Let me finish.

But Hermat. I have something to say.

Just a moment, my friend - I was going to tell you how the man (Hermat started to laugh once more, the laughter hissing up by his tongue and escaping through the ugly gaps in his overbite) - how the man ?

But this is important, Nawaz attempted again. What I have to say is important.

It is thought, Hermat explained - It is thought the man was struck by lightning.

Hermat is newly beside himself.

Nawaz began to smile, despite himself. He took his glass from the table and sipped from the cold coffee. Struck by lightning? he said.

So I was told. The sea - there was a storm that came out of nowhere. One minute the sky was blue and the sea was calm. The next, the sea was boiling, rain fell from the black sky, lightning cracked, thunder grumbled. The full works. They got everybody back on board, set a course for home when - Hermat snorted - disaster struck. Lightning struck the head of the boat, and our man fell overboard. Whether the lightning struck him or merely near him, nobody knows but ? wherever the hand of God fell – our friend was not anywhere to be seen when the smoke cleared.

Hermat slapped both of his hands down upon his knees and hawed like a donkey, his head and shoulders nodding with unsuppressed delight. Nawaz was horrified, by the story, and yet - watching Hermat - he too started to smile and laugh and soon, soon, the two of them were roaring where they sat, each with a hand upon the seat, facing each other, each with a hand fluttering between their knee and their chest, hooing and hawing, screaming with tears running down their faces, bursting overfilled barrels of hilarity, laughing until neither knew what the other was laughing at any longer, rocking and snotty with the sight of the other - two grown men laughing at nothing, laughing at that which was patently not funny and yet - not being able to stop, not wanting to stop, laughing into the night as if that was all the night was for.

Nawaz removed a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose like an old lady weeping over a trumpet. Hermat snorted three times more and said ooh and eeh. Nawaz rubbed the handkerchief under his nose from left to right and then right to left and, finally, left to right again. After which the two returned to their customary silence, watching the wind ease as the light gave shape to the world

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around them. A dog skittered past them with a dead bird in its mouth.

Nawaz looked sideways across the table at his friend. You should be home, he said.

I should, I should, said Hermat but did not move.

Nawaz was conflicted. He wanted to help his sister, certainly, but – they were laughing, the two of them, and what a shame it would be to wrench the light from laughter to sorrow. He shifted from his right arse cheek to his left and thought: I should tell him, I should just tell him, just spit it out, you are his friend, you are a good friend, just tell him. He shifted from his left arse cheek to his right arse cheek and thought: let her do her own dirty work, what business is it of yours, wait until Hermat is gone and call her up, say you couldn't do it, say you are sorry but no - the job of passing on this news falls to her. Back and forth he went like a man strapped to a pendulum. He knew exactly how the dead bird felt in the dog's mouth. He didn't have a coin he could flip and he wasn't drinking tea so couldn't check the grounds. As a child, his father had asked the stars (and if the star blinks, you had an answer - usually the answer you wanted, but even so). Nawaz didn't know what to do. He wanted the situation taking out of his hands.

And then it came. He would let Hermat himself decide. It was, after all, pretty late in the day. Should they have one more drink or part for the evening?

Hermat, said Nawaz.

Mm, said Hermat.

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**Peter Wild** is the co-founder of [www.bookmunch.co.uk](http://www.bookmunch.co.uk). He is the editor of a forthcoming series of books for Serpent's Tail, the first two of which - *Perverved by Language: Fiction Inspired by The Fall & The Empty Page: Fiction Inspired by Sonic Youth* - will be published in 2007. His writing and fiction have appeared in *Scarecrow*, *NOÖ Journal*, *Word Riot*, *Laura Hird's Showcase*, *The Big Issue*, *Nude Magazine*, *Alt Sounds*, *City Life*, *3AM magazine* and *Eyeballkid*.

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