

## The Village Mule

The bullet entered through the side of my protective vest at the shoulder and everything went dark.

We had just stormed a small village, driving off the last of the rebel forces. I got separated from my platoon. Alone, I turned a corner at dusk. A boy, around 12 years old, was standing in the alley with a .22 single-shot rimfire rifle cocked and pointed at my chest. The rifle butt had broken off and been replaced by a makeshift wire mesh. My instinct was to fire before my next blink. But I was mesmerized by the boy's dark, almond-shaped eyes staring at me, vulnerable, yet fierce and unafraid. I don't think I'll ever be able to erase from my memory those powerful, blazing pupils, on fire with the reflected sun that was settling on the horizon behind me. His wide little eyes were war-weary, filled with permanent fear; yet they held their ground, steady and confident. The kid knew how to use a rifle. He must have had long training and experience. He noticed me hesitate. It was only for a fractured second, but I saw in his sun-filled eyes, a flash of doubt. He could see my surprise ... to encounter a child aiming a lethal weapon with the skilled resolve of a grown man. He seemed accustomed to this look of shock on an enemy soldier's face. The look many soldiers must have expressed when they stumbled onto this innocent boy pointing a firearm at their adrenaline-pumping hearts. Yet, for some reason I haven't been able to figure out, the boy wavered in my favor. Before the bullet struck me down, I saw the boy jerk the rifle barrel upwards, as if, last minute, he had a change of spirit. I tried to retreat behind the wall. Just my luck, as I turned, the bullet entered from the side, at the shoulder, where the sleeveless vest failed to protect me. It hit me between the ribs, above my heart, missing it by a sliver, and knocking my lights out.

The bullet poked clean through me. It missed all my vital organs and lodged itself in the padded fabric at the back of my vest. I still wear that slug around my neck, next to my tags. A constant reminder to be grateful for what I got ... after all, I'm still breathing. I got a smart, beautiful wife and daughter and a solid roof over my head—which I hope won't crash anytime soon—under an angry and wobbling democracy.

I woke up in a cool, dark room, surrounded by concerned faces. Under the oil lamp suspended from the rafters, their eyes and cheeks cast a grim chiaroscuro. Iraqi dwellings are well crafted to stave off the aggressive sun. Thick, insulating walls and roofs, painted white to reflect the heat ... effective as air-conditioning, and a lot cheaper. Many living rooms are recessed; so you step down below ground level as if you're in a wine cellar. They use backyard wells and underground structures as natural refrigeration to store and preserve fresh food goods and keep beverages cold.

When I first gained consciousness and opened my eyes, I saw an old woman hovering above me. She commanded the matriarch position for the household, the great grandmother; her face was as chiseled with years as the carved-up desert surrounding us.

She was un-rattled by my awakened presence and calmly removed a bloody compress from my chest wound like a jaded field nurse; she replaced it with a clean one she had dipped in a thick admixture of herbs, mashed pomegranate flowers and red juice squeezed from the fruit seeds. She repeated the same operation by lifting my shoulder gently; she removed the soggy pad that pressed against my scapula and slipped in a fresh one. It felt soothing and non-intrusive. In my groggy state of mind, I couldn't tell the difference between the old bloody compress and the new clean one dipped in the red juice.

I felt comfort with this family from the get go. Here I was a perpetrator, an occupying enemy willfully ravaging their country; yet they embraced me wholehearted. They offered up a rare honesty, sincerity, and decency I find lacking in most prosperous nations. The simplest, poorest people often possess the greatest nobility. Not only are recent immigrants to the U.S. supremely grateful, they step onto American soil carrying a suitcase packed with virtue. They're mostly hard-working and earnest people. The generosity I received from this Iraqi family was a great blessing. It taught me humility. I discovered the *Good Samaritan*. Dormant in us all. Until called upon by exigence. It's the only thing that gives me hope our human race will survive the gloomy challenges ahead.

I stayed with the family for about three months. Knowing my platoon would come looking for me, and upon my request, they erased all signs of my existence; adjacent to the library, behind a sliding wall of books, these clever people had engineered a panic room. Here,

within this hermetic sleeve I would sleep nights, sealed in safety, hidden from the rest of the world as if I were a page inside a book.

In about two weeks, I recovered well enough to get up and walk around. When you're a young man, you can get it up for anything ... But I didn't want to leave. I fell in love with this sweet Iraqi family who had adopted me, not by design, but by the brute circumstance of war.

My father was a drunk and also a brute who beat my mother and kicked my ass, daily. As soon as I was eligible, I joined the military just to get as far away from the bastard as I could launch a grenade. Turned out, the armed forces was no different. Yet another gang of loud brutes who turned me into a brute as well. There was no escaping it. We branch out, root bound, and shaped by the container from which we sprout.

I was trained as a Marine, Special Operations Forces. A rare breed. Few make the grade. The military covets unique individuals they can train to be smart killing machines. But not too smart. Someone who has the intelligence to make personal decisions on the fly under near impossible battlefield situations, but still follow orders up the chain of command. Cocky, brave, and obedient. That was me. That was my mind set. But I grew out of it.

The kid, Hamid, always felt bad around me, filled with remorse for having shot me. I was a magnet for his curiosity. He was roped to my side. Whenever I dozed off or woke from a long healing sleep, there he was, a lifeline, studying me with his kind almond eyes. He was the only one in the family who could speak English. When I asked him how he had picked up the English language and be able to speak it so fluently, living in such a remote village and all, he shrugged his shoulders and simply remarked, "*The Simpsons*. I watch reruns. Many times." I had to reassure the boy, constantly, that I was grateful he had let me live.

The Iraqis killed me with kindness. I've never experienced anything like it. They treated my wound, included me in their daily rituals and all their meals and invited me to join them in conversation, translated by Hamid as interpreter. They asked me questions about my country and culture and I asked them with equal interest about their customs. When I pointed to the menorah in the corner, they had mixed responses. Also, although I can't speak Hebrew, I recognize it when it's spoken. So I thought I kept hearing a smatter of words that sounded more like Hebrew than Arabic.

Now, I had read a bit about the long history of Jews living in that region, since biblical days. But by the time I left Iraq on my second tour, there were probably like no more than maybe *eight* Jews in the whole country, not counting American Jewish soldiers stationed there. Over the centuries, under persecution and fear of expulsion, Jews were forced to convert to the religion of whatever dominant society they happened to be living in. Yet, they held onto some of their ancient traditions in secret and merged the two traditions in a kind of *syncretism*. A word I learned after I left Iraq when I was doing some follow-up research. A merging of two religions when cultures intersect.

The smarter Jews became Sufis, which is a group, in general, more flexible and tolerant of *difference* than mainstream Islam. Currently, the violent Sufi extremists are SINO's (Sufis in name only).

Sufism predates Islam. The Sufis themselves had to convert under Mohammad's brutal armies or they would have all been killed. Because the Sufis had acquired great wisdom over time, they were smart enough to keep their tradition intact by disguising their practice in the language of Islam. Just like the alchemists of the middle ages had to use the language of Christianity to disguise their secrets.

Recovery from the bullet wound was a *slug's* progress. But once I was able to stand on my own two feet, walk around, fully articulate the rotator cuff, I joined in family chores. I filled buckets with fresh water from the well behind the house. I kneaded pita dough and baked a daily batch in their adobe oven. The kneading was physical therapy. It helped strengthen my shoulder muscles toward full recovery. And everywhere I went, Hamid was a permanent fixture, glued to my hip as a sidekick.

I tore off a withered branch from one of the pomegranate trees in their orchard and used my Swiss Army Tool to whittle a new butt-end for the kid's broken rifle. I custom-designed it to fit the curve of Hamid's shoulder. I even carved a large pomegranate on one side and a row of pomegranate blossoms on the other. My reward was his broad smile, exposing his shiny new adult bucks; all but his wisdom teeth had fully grown in.

“How’d you break your rifle?” I asked curious. “These things are pretty rugged. Made to last. Did your mule step on it? Heh.” I was joking but he shrugged his shoulders and didn’t answer right away. I continued to oil down the newly replaced rifle butt.

“Mule-headed man hit head of mule,” Hamid finally said.

“Hum. You people sure like to talk in proverbs and riddles. It’s poetic. Not sure I always understand, though.”

“Not riddle,” Hamid corrected me. “Not poetic. Just Truth.” He returned to his silence for a long moment and then solved the riddle by telling me the back story.

On a mule clopping along the cobblestones through the alley, eyes focused on the road ahead and ears vigilant to every sound, Hamid rode proudly along, his spine erect and stretched tall, the only straight line in that broken village.

The saddlebags bulged with provisions. Hamid held the reins in his left hand; in his right he balanced a single shot rifle over the mule’s back, a finger on the trigger at the ready.

An arm jetted out from the shadows, fingers hyperextended toward him; before the boy could fire a shot, a hand wrapped around the barrel and pried it from him almost tearing off his trigger finger. A soldier stepped out of a door frame swinging the rifle at the boy’s head. (From his description I could tell it was a *Meat Eater*, special forces unit). Hamid ducked and slid sideways off the mule and away from his enemy. He ran into an abandoned building across the alley and disappeared.

Having missed the boy’s head, the rifle butt continued its swing, colliding with the mule’s skull directly behind its ears. The mule lurched, tossing the saddlebags and scattering its contents onto the cobblestones. The soldier held the reins as the mule kicked and turned erratically. On the backswing the rifle struck the mule in the throat with such force it splintered the rifle’s wooden butt and broke the mule’s neck. The animal collapsed onto the stones dead on arrival. The soldier discarded Hamid’s broken rifle and began to gather up the scattered items and refill the saddlebags. He pulled out his long knife, ready to cut off a section of the mule’s hind quarters to cook for dinner.

Inside the building, Hamid lobbed a flare at the soldier. He had aimed well. The Meat Eater was on his knees butchering the mule leg; the flare spun and sparked between his thighs catching his khakis on fire. The soldier tried to stamp it out with a saddlebag strap but the shards of magnesium embedded in his flesh continued to burn. He screamed and passed out.

From the shadows, Hamid stepped into the alley, picked up the saddlebags and broken rifle and walked away. After a short distance he stopped to reconsider. He set the bags on the cobbles and returned to the unconscious man. The steady burning magnesium bits gouged deeper into the soldier's skin and underlying fiber. Digging into the saddlebags, he found some gauze and a half bottle of alcohol. After disinfecting the army long knife which he found lying on the cobbles next to his defeated enemy, the boy used its point to delicately peel away every ember still sizzling around the thighs and stomach. This left a patchwork of skin avulsions that would need time to air dry and scar over. Setting the knife down, he splashed some alcohol on the wounds.

This roused the Meat Eater from his brief coma; he raised his head momentarily, eyes wild and disoriented, before passing out again. Knowing he would require extended care, Hamid left the items next to the toppled soldier and departed.

When I had fully recovered from my shoulder wound we started hunting, Hamid, his father, Nassurdin, and me. We didn't need to travel far. The family owned 20 acres. Plenty of quail and rabbit. When we needed to travel further into the desert, we rode mules. On those days, we had to get up at 4 AM in order to be back before the intense heat kicked our asses. 110° on a good day. My balls against the mule I was riding cooked sunny-side up; my poor dick shriveled inside out and turned into a vagina.

In total, Nasruddin owned eight sturdy mules and a few old rickety ones. He had a fair understanding of English when he heard it spoken, but could barely speak it himself. He asked me how to say *mule* in English. When I told him, he took it in, nodding his head. But I wanted him to practice spoken English, so I always insisted he repeat a word out loud. The first time he pronounced *mule*, it sounded exactly like a donkey braying. Hamid and I laughed our heads off. Nasruddin laughed too.

Sometimes on our return from the hunts, riding on the mules in the rising heat, a stray cloud would roll overhead and let fall a few merciful drops of rain. We turned our faces upwards in gratitude and met the manna. Every drop sizzled when it hit our faces; the moisture was ambrosia; it dissolved our burning flesh and flushed away chunks of misery from our skin onto the desert sand.

On one expedition we brought home so much game, we shared it with the rest of the village, rather than let it spoil (people come together during hard times; again, this gives me hope for humanity). We even caught a baby rabbit and brought it home alive in a cage. Hamid's sister, Hilla, befriended the cute little bunny for two weeks before it became dinner. She cried all day and in the evening refused to eat a single bite of the bunny stew. Nasruddin had picked it up right in front of the girl, by its hind legs, and the trusting little creature hung uncomfortably upside down, not expecting a karate chop to the back of its skull. The bunny twitched for a full minute before blood oozed out of its nose and it went limp.

I flinched, because the father had performed such a violent act in front of his daughter. Nasruddin noticed my reaction. The dude noticed everything. That's why I loved the guy. He's a lot like me.

He said he wanted to prepare Hilla for a harsh world; where death is everywhere and *loss* is the rule of the desert. At first I associated this with a kind of child abuse. (My own father used to smack me unexpectedly on the back of my head and sometimes a slap in the face produced a nosebleed).

But I've thought a lot about it, since I'm raising a daughter myself. I wonder sometimes if I haven't coddled Hannah too much. Helicopter parents can cause child abuse as well, by not preparing their kids for the dark shit lurking in the shadows; predators stalking their innocence. If a child takes small, manageable risks along the way, it'll build up a broadcast warning system; averting more grizzly risks later as a baby adult. But then again, maybe I'm wrong. Look what happened to me. I was given so much rope to hang myself, I've become a menace to myself.

I learned to cook Middle Eastern food by helping in the kitchen. I discovered awesome herbs that don't exist in the macaroni and cheese American diet. Like zaatar. Most Americans

don't develop taste buds beyond a children's palate. I acquired more sophisticated and satisfying taste buds outside the U.S. There's an unlimited cuisine out there beyond burgers and fries.

I met great resistance inside that Iraqi kitchen. At first, the women were horrified to let a man join in *women's* work. Those ancient cultures are divided along gender lines for the sake of pragmatism. Men hunt and do all the heavy lifting; women cook, sew, wash the clothes, and raise the children. But I kept insisting. I would place a hand on my hip, tap my foot, tilt my head to one side and give 'em a good old fashioned American smirk. Finally, I got my way with the women.

Nasruddin laughed from the other room. Braying his way into the conversation, he had one word to address my stubbornness: MULE.

Nasruddin was a loving family man. Committed and engaged. He was attentive to his children and sweet with his wife, Sara. Always laughing and flirting with her, as if their honeymoon never ended. Every evening they would sit together intimately in a corner love-seat and review that day's events with deliberation: how to better resolve a difficult situation when it reoccurs in the future; how to evoke kindness and diplomacy in the heat of the moment. He became a great role model for me when I started my own family.

And the dude had learned some cool skills. Like I said, he was an astute observer of human nature. His eyes captured snapshots in rapid fire of every flyby moment. You and I stop noticing nuance in the people we see every day. A woman may add a highlight or a man trim his beard and we may detect that something's different but not know what detail has changed. Nasruddin knew when a woman started her period by noticing her lips were slightly fuller that day.

People would travel from great distances to study with him. He'd break us up into groups. Called his exercises self-awareness studies. Initially I didn't understand their purpose. My military bootcamp had plenty of pointless exercises designed to breakdown all resistance through humiliation. So at first I was resigned not to join in. But Nasruddin sweet-talked me into trying out each exercise under the pretext that I could give him feedback. Brilliant psychological move on his part, knowing my personality type: Major Smartass ... Lieutenant Know-it-all.



Many of the people who joined us were simple and naive. Gullible enough to believe he was super-human and possessed some kind of magical powers. He did study stage magic as a kid and was always playing tricks before my eyes. But I'm observant, so he never fooled me. Well ... that I'm aware of. Heh.

People believed he could appear in multiple places at the same time. Each group insisted he had been overseeing them during the same half hour interval. He did make the rounds. But, like I said, I pay attention. I'd see him leave and come back a few minutes later. The individuals in each group were so single focused on the task at hand, they didn't notice his movements and when they did look up, there was Nasruddin smiling at them as if he'd never left.

One time someone brought him the gift of a laptop. He'd never used a computer before. Everyone thought he'd be able to sit down in front of it and instantly master it. Now, he was a sharp learner who figured things out faster than most. But the dude flailed on the keyboard and had to be taught no different than any other *regular* schmo.

Yup. Takes a lifetime to score a bit of wisdom. And then we die. As I've gotten older I think about that oneway ticket. A straight and narrow timeline with limited seating. We're born to a blank slate. Spend decades imprinting parental Apps and downloading cultural Maps we can use to navigate our lives ... then our hardware shuts down and ... We're dead. The next generation has to reboot from scratch.

Nasruddin would set me up in the shade working on the garden with a jovial group. We'd laugh and tell stories through hand gestures. Hamid would interpret.

Everyone was honest and transparent with Nasruddin. Word would get back that I was having a great time. Making it a totally pointless exercise in Nasruddin's mind. So he'd relieve me of garden duty in the shade with the *friendly* group and reassign me to breaking rocks in the hot sun with a bunch of *arrogant* assholes who believed they knew better than me. This new situation offered up a mother-load of emotion and irritation for me to chew on. My father, my bootcamp sergeant, my enemy, real and perceived.

Sometimes it almost came down to fist fights. But I kept my cool. Just to be respectful. Being a stranger in a strange land and all. And a soldier occupying their turf. I had no business being an ass.

Nasruddin just laughed at my frustration butting heads with these buttheads and said, “Mirrors are useful.”

Bastard.

“So what are ya trying to tell me, Dude?”

He’d walk away with a smile, shaking his head.

One guy really got under my skin. I was handing out my famous delicious peanut butter cookies, freshly baked that morning. Everybody was enjoying the break hanging in the shade of a pomegranate tree relishing my treat. Peanut butter cookies were not yet known in that culture.

So this jackass has the nerve to tell me he preferred the store bought sesame cakes from the day before. I tell him, “Man, a stranger offers you a gift and you insult him?” The dude stormed off in a huff and complained to Nasruddin.

The wiseass old Sufi listened to the man and then spoke to him in Arabic. Hamid translated for me. “Mr. Bloom is correct. You owe him an apology.” The man drove off scowling and never came back.

Later that day Nasruddin approached me and basically said, “In life, those who irritate you the most are the best teachers. Be grateful for their existence.”

He would use an ancient Sufi practice called the *stop* exercise. This clever method, before smart phones, allowed us to take mental snapshots of ourselves at random moments throughout the day.

Without warning Nasruddin would shout *QAF*, which means *stop* in Arabic. We froze on the spot in mid motion. Every time. No matter what we were doing.

It could even be dangerous. On a ladder. Crossing a river. Lifting a heavy object. But Nasruddin knew what he was doing. That word *qaf* would strike our psyches like an ice pick. In that frozen moment we *identified* and mentally recorded our own thoughts, our body position, our emotions, and how all of it together related as a whole. I began to see an overview of myself. How thoughts affect our posture and how emotions affect our actions. After collecting an entire album of mental selfies, I began to see a bigger than life, uncompressed photograph of myself.

Helps me think before I react. Stops the brute in me before I smack some asshole in a truck for calling me names.

Another theme of Nasruddin's teaching was on the nature of existence; how we interpret what's *real* through the selective filter of our senses. We censor what we're *seeing* based on the belief systems we've been taught. We're *told* what to *see*.

"Nasruddin introduced exercises that helped us understand the bio-mechanics of sight and sound. He would demonstrate by having one of us approach his massive library and locate a certain book, say, a red tome titled: *The Essential Rumi* translated by Coleman Barks.

Because I'm colorblind I wasn't sorting for color. So I spotted the title pronto, even from the back of the room. But no one else was able to see it 'cause, as it turned out, the book was not red at all. It was blue. So, just like code, when given instructions with multiple commands, the first instruction in the code overrides the second instruction. Trying to connect those two mismatching pieces of script, color and title, confuses the eye, making the book invisible. Nasruddin used a basic Jedi trick.

One time, the local authorities burst in on us. They searched the entire place. But I had slipped into the panic room and off their radar. When they left, I asked what the hell all that was about.

Apparently, for years now, the authorities had raided Nasruddin's home, suspecting him of smuggling. He was a tradesman involved in many businesses, including the transport of rough diamonds; his extended family would cut the stones into marketable jewels for wholesale.

But Nasruddin's documents were always in order, every time he crossed the border with Kuwait or some other neighboring country. Customs guards would strip his mules down to their bare backs and rifle through every single item he was transporting. From finely loomed rugs to designer garments to rough gems. He even had to keep a sharp eye on the guards to make sure they didn't pocket one of the small stones. But after all these years, the law had nothing on him.

I looked Nasruddin straight in the eyes and asked him point blank. "Dude, I can see right through your poker face. I have a feeling those customs authorities wouldn't give you such a

thorough shakedown and ransack your mules if you weren't smuggling something. Now, I don't need to know, really, so you don't have to tell me. It's certainly no skin off my back. But I'm just curious, is all. What the hell have you been smuggling all these years?"

Nasruddin looked down sheepishly at a floral rug covering the marble floor, chuckled, and said in a perfect American accent: MULES.

Nasruddin's story has stuck with me. I recall it daily as I go about my business ... a constant reminder of our human ignorance: The obvious is right in front of us. What we pay attention to determines what we miss.

We're always chasing after something. 'Cause nothing is ever good enough. As soon as we get our hands on some shiny new object we've been Jonesing for, we dump it for the next glittery trinket. Hoping each time for happiness, but never achieving it. And though happiness is slippery, it's also plentiful. It hangs out in plain sight and is always up for grabs ... like a warm tit filled with mother's milk. The problem is, we're all greedy. And in our un-stoppable greediness, we overshoot the target and miss the nipple.

Nasruddin was part of the Sufi sect descended from the Mevlevi Order of Rumi. A scholar. Mystic. Great poet too. I read that translated Rumi book in Nasruddin's library from cover to cover.

Every Saturday night the family put on a Sufi version of our Texas Square Dancing. Musicians gathered from neighboring towns. And it was a dance-trance jubilee. At first, I just watched, blown away by the colorful pageantry, the costumes, the strange whirling movements, the wacky atonal music. But after a couple of weeks, Nasruddin asked me to join in. I felt funny slipping on a skirt, basically a longer version of a Square Dance dress ... minus the frills, crinoline, and petticoats; and donning a skinny red pillbox hat called a *fez*. It looks like a stretched up MAGA cap with a missing visor. Only the hidden message is *Make Allah Great Again*, through the whirling fervor.

I was instantly addicted. Now, just like the boozier who raised me, I have an addictive personality. That's why I can't drink or take recreational drugs. I instantly leave the realm of

recreation and enter the hell of addiction. It's all or nothing for me. But dancing is non-alcoholic. It's a healthy addiction. And for me, it was intoxicating. Whirling around to the music was like the closest a non-religious dude will come to a *spiritual, out-of-body* experience. After each weekend jubilee, I stayed ecstatic for the rest of the week; walked around *at one* with the cosmos.

I felt something I never felt my whole life, when I was whirling with them Dervishes. It was a communal experience. I felt connected with myself and the world around me. It gave me a sense of purpose. Of belonging. The closest I can come to describing the experience, if I can describe it in a single word is ... *contentment*. It filled my body to over-flowing in *contentment*. And I didn't need nothing else.

With the Sufi dancing, after a while, you get into the swing of things. Like starting a fresh relationship with a woman (after years of stale familiarity in a bad relationship). At first it's hot and heavy and a cute kind of clumsy. But you work at refining the love dance ... Yup. New girl, different makeup.

Nasruddin, in his vast travels, had studied many traditions from a wide variety of Sufi Orders. So he merged them all into a *syncretism*. Some of these traditions are so ancient they transcend time. That whole region, the bedrock of the Middle East, goes so far back into prehistory there's whole civilizations stacked upon each other like cars in a junkyard.

Let me see if I can give you the gist, how Nasruddin described it to me: Wisdom is acquired in two ways. You either learn it voluntarily over time through self-discovery and willpower, or life beats the wisdom into you with a stick. And that's practical wisdom. With a small w. But profound *Wisdom* with a capitol W is always gained and lost and rediscovered. Forgotten knowledge pops up again and again for the benefit of our enlightenment. Roadmaps pointing to human consciousness have trickled down the centuries, transmitted through written and oral instruction into the hearts of wise individuals.

For instance, the fine art of glassblowing disappeared from society many times because of war and stupidity and then got rediscovered a thousand years later by trial and error and craftsmanship.

Besides the traditional whirling, Nasruddin taught me some strange ass dance moves. He told me, before writing was invented, societies preserved knowledge through music, dance and poetry. They blended these art forms so they would transmit info for the next generation.

Each dance posture formed a hieroglyph loaded with meaning. Just a theory, but I think this was civilization's early attempts at code. Condensing an entire library of sacred knowledge into a single posture. An emoji of sorts. I had to hold the position while Nasruddin stepped around me, adjusting and refining an arm or a leg until I looked like a glyph etched on a rock. Then he'd teach me the next hieroglyph posture.

Once I got the physical movements down, he added certain math functions I had to compute in my head, that jived with the posture. Besides crunching numbers he had me recite verses, chants, incantations at just the right sequence in the dance. Some verses were in Arabic, others in Turkish or Persian. He also suggested I include some mainstream Muslim prayers into the dance sequence. But since I'm not religious, Nasruddin would say, in his broken English, "No believe in God? For dance, not necessary to pray. Use knowledge from your culture. From your heart."

So in my head, while I performed, I'd recite volumes of java script and other coding language. I was a three-ring circus unto myself. Confused. I had to juggle so many hardballs in this complex ancient dance, I mistook the balls for my testicles. More challenging than bootcamp.

I ended up exhausted after whirling all night. But every muscle, bone, brain cell in me buzzed with this enterprise of like ... total bliss-out. It introduced me to parts of myself I didn't know existed. It made me feel whole. The hipbone connected to the head bone.

Nasruddin gave me a wonderful gift before I left. He presented me with the traditional Sufi garb, the *sikke* and the *tennure*, that belonged to his father. The clothes came neatly folded in a lacquered box made from pomegranate wood and inlaid with pearlescent shells in a fractal design. It was a king's honor to receive such a gift. On special days of the year, I dress up for the occasion. More often though, on weekends, when I'm in my studio alone, I just put on some music. (Sometimes Rahat Fateh Ali Khan. Sometimes the B-52s. Nothing like good old

American Rock and Roll to throw you into a dance-trance). And on the spur I start to whirl. And on the whirl my rage flies out of the container.

So why didn't I return immediately to base camp? And why didn't my command unit find me? Well I was out of it for the first few weeks recovering in the panic room. I had virtually disappeared. And then, when I healed up, I decided I needed a break from the killing. I was pretty broken inside. Even though Hamid had missed my heart and the outer wound had healed, I needed to stop the psychic heart-bleed. At that point in our invasion, the dust had settled and our military presence was more like peace keepers. I was being treated with such love by this family, I preferred that space to my hard-knuckled superiors. Nasruddin became the warm-hearted dad I craved.

When I felt I was well rested, Nasruddin and Hamid drove me back to the base in the back of a pickup truck filled with melons. The desert extended in all directions without end; a gigantic pancake, sizzling in a hot pan; multicolored browns, buttered and honeyed and coffee creamed; flatter than the state of Texas and could serve as rationale for the flat-earth conspiracy theory. Nothing moved except for the dust our wheels kicked up.

We pulled up to a vehicle stranded on the side of the road. A man, visibly distressed, flagged us down. As we pulled up I realized it was the jackass who had insulted my peanut butter cookies and stormed off. He seemed more humble now but wouldn't look me in the eyes. He had a flat tire and no jack to replace it with the spare. Jackass had used it the night before and forgotten to reload it. Nasruddin's small truck scissor-jack was no match for Jackass's off-road, high-suspension vehicle.

A bombed building nearby provided a rusted steel support pole rising up from the rubble. I jarred it loose and stacking a pile of cinder blocks under the axle as a fulcrum I used the long end of the metal pole to easily hoist the dude's SUV up off the flat. Nasruddin and the man quickly changed the tire while I held the truck in suspension with only a drop of sweat under my armpits. Plus the added weight of Hamid's little body, hanging from the pole alongside me.

The man's stressed face relaxed and he thanked Nasruddin profusely without looking at me. He appeared dehydrated and hungry, so I gave him a bottle of water, a melon, and a bag of my freshly baked peanut butter cookies. He accepted them graciously. I stuck out my hand for him to shake, and laughing, said, "I know you prefer the sesame cakes to my cookies, but these will fill you up good."

He looked me straight in the eyes and although he didn't apologize, he shook my hand vigorously, his face filled with gratitude.

Nasruddin's face lit up, impressed by *my* change in attitude. And I was impressed with myself as well. He said, "Your heart is more big than desert."

We got back into the truck and continued on our way. Hamid and I stretched out on our cushion of melons. The scent was dreamy and intoxicating. I cracked one open, dug out the insides with my Swiss Army Tool and ate a half, seeds and all. I passed Hamid the other half and handed him the Tool, blade facing me so he could take hold of the handle. He had been eyeing the knife the whole time I stayed with them, so I said he could keep it. As a gift for introducing me to his family. I teased him, "Next time, Hamid, before you shoot, ask questions first." He didn't laugh. He dropped the knife and the melon-half and threw himself into my arms and cried all the way to our destination. It broke my heart too.

The truck pulled up to the base, we said our sad goodbyes and parted ways. As they drove off, Nasruddin yelled out of the truck window. "Kelly Bloom is good *mule*."

And what did my buddies do when they saw me walk into camp? What do you think they did? They shit their pants, thinking I was some kind of desert apparition. Their sunbaked faces turned white as ghosts. So I indulged in a bit of guilty pleasure. I gave them time to stew in the fright, before I spoke ... and spooked *them*: "Hey, what's up guys?" I extended my hand expecting high-fives all around. Instead, they staggered out of their trance and flanked me in a platoon of bearhugs.