

Left with the Breeze

Ramadan and the days are like taffy. I read, write and exercise in the sunlight to keep time at bay, but the nights gape before me like toothless mouths. I whittle away the seconds, minutes and hours – still, the weeks and months stand beyond reach, a bleached distance I will only have crossed at the end of my year's teaching contract at a top secret base in Saudi.

Evenings, I take to cruising between my apartment and the massive copper gate of King Fahad's summer palace. Occasionally, the massive entrance swings open and a white Rolls emerges, or else a black Rolls cruises in from the Jeddah Highway. Even the rich get bored in eternity.

I wander through the souk, learning to thread my way through the labyrinth of shops and narrow alleys. There is no one to share my thoughts with. I speak to no one except a merchant who lifts his eyes from a whirling sewing machine to see me pointing at a bolt of silk "*Bekam hada?*" (How much?) I ask. I am not lonely as much as feeling unused, like a match with nothing to strike against.

Tonight, two days before Eid, the feast celebrating the end of Ramadan, I am driving back to my apartment, when I notice a video shop advertising movies in English. I park, walk over to the entrance and wait while some Egyptians haggle with the owner. One of the group discards a cassette on the counter and motions to his friends. They swirl out the door in their white robes and are gone.

The shopkeeper, a handsome man in his 30's, shelves the discarded cassette and turns to notice me. He brushes back his *gotra* and steps closer to the counter. "Sir, from what country are you?"

"America."

"*Alhamdulillah*, he exclaims." I am waiting for Ameriki or English man much time."

“Why?”

“Oh, sir, I have many problem.”

The man proceeds to introduce himself. His name is Achmed. He is from Yemen, and this is his video shop. On his shelves are more than 1,500 movie cassettes in English. Unfortunately, "there is difficulty."

Achmed says that many customers are leaving because they have never heard of the films in his shop. The popular films in the West, the ones the customers want to see, are not listed among the cassettes. Achmed tells me that when he bought the store two months ago from a Persian engineer, all the labels were written in Farsi. He couldn't find an American, so he hired a Taiwanese mechanic who spoke English to re-label the hundreds and hundreds of boxes. But errors must have been made. "Something is terrible wrong," says Achmed. No one has ever heard of his movies, and the Persian engineer swore they were the latest and best from the West.

Without a pause in describing his tribulations with the mislabelled tapes, Achmed sends a boy for Pepsis and cookies. "Come in, sir," he says, opening the Dutch doors. I walk inside the shop, where Achmed motions for me to sit on a stool.

Achmed continues talking, explaining that he is from Aden and, for political reasons, can't return home. "This," he tells me, motioning toward the stack of cassettes, "is everything I own. Please, sir, help Achmed. Please find movie names."

The boy returns with a plastic bag filled with cold drinks and small packages of sweets. Achmed turns to a group of impatient Saudi customers and speaks in staccato Arabic. The customers turn to study me. Achmed pats me on the shoulder." Sir, I tell them no more problem. We have Ameriki here to find good movies."

“Achmed, let me see if I understand you. The man who labelled the films made mistakes and didn't...”

“Sir,” interrupts Achmed, “every night same problem. Germani, French, Egypti people ask for movies I have.” He sweeps his hand toward the ceiling high shelves. “But where, sir? I no read Englishi. Please help me find good movie and write name.”

I scan the bottom shelf nearest me.” Achmed, how do you know the films are labelled wrong? Maybe they’re Persian movies the engineer brought from Iran.”

“No, sir, I have Ameriki movie, but Taiwanese man change all names. He not know English, I think, Try, sir.”

I reach out and take the first cassette within reach. I turn the box in my hand study the crudely scrawled English title,” “Left With The Breeze.” Although I don’t pretend to have spent my entire adolescence scrunched in the balcony of the Fox Theater in San Francisco or huddled in the auditorium of the Cinematheque on the Rue d’Ulm in Paris, I have seen quite a few films in my life, and I can’t remember ever having seen, let alone heard of, an American film entitled Left With The Breeze.”

Eagerly, Achmed takes the cassette from the box and slides it into the VCR. He pushes the start lever and the film begins. I immediately recognize the Max Steiner score, the cloud-shaped white litters illuminated against the amber sky, Tara’s silhouette against the horizon...

I push the stop button. “Achmed.”

“What, sir?”

“I think you’ve got problems”

“Bad, sir?”

“Maybe very bad. Let me check a couple more. How do you know this Taiwanese could read English?”

Achmed frowns. “He speak Englishi to me. He told me he read, write English. I pay him many rials to watch movie and write name. “

“Where does this man work?”

“I think he gone Saudi.”

“All right, let me look at another one.” Think positive, I tell myself I— maybe there’s only one bad apple in the bin. I grab the next cassette and study the label: “Dog Go Away.” Hmmmm, what jewel could this be? I slip in the cassette, lean forward and wait. For a moment, the screen is fuzzy, then a pastoral scene comes into focus. A collie darts through the foreground. The credits appear, “Lassie Come Home.”

Behind me, Saudis poke each other and nod toward the screen. They must be thinking, *Haram* (“Forbidden”), a movie about the second lowest animal in Islam. Thank God Porky Pig didn’t appear on the screen. Achmed quickly jerks out the cassette. I shake my head and pull one more movie from the stacks. The extent of the task at hand is starting to sink in.

On the next box is scribbled “Boy, Were They Angry!!!”, the three exclamation points presumably added for punch. I put in the tape and flip the start switch. An instant later, the first bomb falls and “Midway” slides gracefully across the screen. I pull the cassette out as Achmed hands me another.

This time I decide to first check the real title of the film, then see what the Taiwanese translator came up with. I watch the screen, admire Gepetto’s toy shop as it comes into view, then push the stop switch. No need to wait for Pinocchio – I know this film. Now, what did that inscrutable mechanic write on the case? “Would Boy.” Well, he wasn’t that far off.

The messenger boy runs back in, lugging another white plastic bag with Pepsis and Swiss chocolates jutting from the top. I stand up to leave the shop.

“Please,” says Achmed, motioning me back toward the stool. He hands me a box of candy and turns to take down a stack of films from Taif’s mislabelled Library of Alexandria.

I smile at him.

Accepting that the allusion will probably be lost on the gentle Yemeni, I nonetheless walk over and pat him on the shoulder. "Achmed, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

The End