

THE SUDANESE MAN

A short story

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For H, my bonnie lass.  
Til the seas go dry.

“All suppressed truths become poisonous.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

## THE SUDANESE MAN

25 January 2012.

02:00.

Most cities would be dead at this time. Not Cairo. Cairo is alive. Revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries, car horns, party boats, gunfire, the occasional unexplained explosion—it can all be heard somewhere in the distance. Twenty-four hours a day.

I shouldn't be surprised. Life might have been difficult under Mubarak but at least there was stability. People could get on with their lives.

Then came that goddamn revolution. Now, what do we do? We make the best of it.

Tonight, that means spending an evening sitting in an unmarked van on the side of the road. Doesn't sound that great to you? Well, it's a road in Zamalek—the fanciest suburb in Cairo. This is the only way I'll ever get to spend time amongst the wealthiest, most powerful, and most corrupt people in the city.

And I'm not alone. I've brought el-Masri along too.

“Hey, are you sure our guy is in there?”

I reassure my colleague.

“Yeah, he's in there.”

This is going to be a pivotal moment in our careers.

I can see the headlines now:

**“Hero Cops Solve Brutal Murder.”**

**“Sudanese Killer Brought to Justice.”**

**“City Can Breathe Again.”**

For a couple of mid-level, National Security Agency officers, it doesn't get much more high profile than the torture and death of a foreign national.

Headlines, promotions, pay rises—that's our future.

El-Masri lights his first cigarette for the night.

“I assume we're going to be here waiting for some time.”

He's not wrong.

But it will be worth it to wrap up this case.

I pass him the binoculars.

“Your turn to stare at that doorway.”

He groans but accepts the task. Police work is very rarely as exciting, fast-paced, or glamorous as it is portrayed on television.

El-Masri blows a smoke ring out his open window into the cool, Cairo night.

“Tell me about this foreigner. What was his name again?”

I mumble his name as I light my own cigarette, “Thomas Edwards.”

Poor bastard. He travelled a long way to end up face down in the dirt in the middle of nowhere.

“Thomas Edwards...from New Zealand. It's the bottom of the world, el-Masri.”

El-Masri is non-plussed. He doesn't care about anything outside of Cairo, let alone Egypt.

“New Zealand, the Netherlands, England, Washington—it's all the same to me.”

He's not a details man. Normally that's frowned upon in this line of work, but he's the perfect companion on a night like this.

For one, he isn't concerned about my eternal soul. Life is difficult in this city. Whatever vice you need to get you through is okay with el-Masri.

I pull an overstuffed folder out of the glove box. Photos, notes, witness statements, testimony—it's all there.

I thumb through the detritus of Mr. Thomas' life.

Poor bastard. When did he arrive in Egypt? Not even a year ago? Yeah, June 2011.

He arrived with his wife. She's the new Deputy Head of Mission at the New Zealand Embassy. He's got a research job at the university.

They turned up in the aftermath of the 25 January revolution. Mubarak had resigned, ending thirty years of repressive rule, and the country was on the path to its first-ever fully democratic elections.

Everything looks good on paper.

I can't help but feel bad for Mr. Thomas. Like so many other people, he was probably both happy and optimistic then. Naivety often leads to disillusionment.

I turn to el-Masri and notice he's pointing the binoculars at a group of hijab-less girls, rather than keeping an eye out for our guy.

Some stakeout. I gently nudge the binoculars back toward the entrance of the apartment building. We'd be pretty terrible police officers if we let this guy slip from our grasp.

"Why did you want to become a cop, el-Masri?"

He takes a deep breath and reflects for a moment.

“When I was a young man, it was simple. There was good and there was evil, and it was our duty to punish evil.”

There’s no need for me to say anything; he anticipates my follow-up question.

“But now, now I find it best not to think about it too much.”

He’s not wrong.

I was idealistic once too. I even snitched on a couple of colleagues for beating and robbing some guy in the street. Just didn’t seem fair, what they did.

That seems like a lifetime ago. It’s a different world now. The revolution exposed Egypt’s fault lines. The poor, the rich, the *feloul*, the protestors, liberals, Salafis, Muslims, Christians—everybody is at each other’s throats. Everyone thinks they deserve something.

It’s chaos out there. In the cities, protestors, thugs, Ultras, and soldiers clash regularly. In Sinai, Islamist extremists are infecting the peninsula with their own brand of violent justice. Blood gets spilled and people like me are left to clean up the mess.

That’s why we’re out tonight. To clean up a mess.

He hands me the binoculars.

“Your turn again, old man.”

I fix my gaze on the doorway. El-Masri takes the opportunity to liberate the last cigarette from my packet on the dashboard. No matter, I have more in my coat.

“So, this Edwards guy, I assume he was living quite a luxurious lifestyle like all the ex-pats here? How’d that all go wrong?”

Double dose of the femme fatale, I’m afraid. Neither his wife nor Lady Revolution did him any favours.



I bring el-Masri up to speed.

Maspero seems to have been the catalyst. Up until then, Mr. Thomas had largely kept his head down and focused on his job researching New Zealand's involvement in the 1919 Egyptian revolution. Colleagues said he was polite and affable but not particularly political. Then Maspero happened. Can't blame him really. You'd have to be pretty soulless not to be moved by an army massacre taking place outside your apartment. Officially, thirty Copts were killed but, you know, officials are inclined to under-report death tolls these days. No one is going to ask too many questions in case they suddenly find themselves on a casualty list as well.

Anyway, this massacre had a profound effect on Mr. Thomas, and he turns his attention to what's happening now, what's going on around him. He starts spending more and more time with disadvantaged locals—African migrants, street vendors, activists— anyone he might be able to help in some way.

The wife, this Lilith Noble, well, she's a real beauty but she's not really "a people person." She doesn't take kindly to the diversion of her husband's attention away from her and towards...er, now how did she describe it...ah yes... "Orientals."

Anyway, Noble by name but not by nature, she starts "spending time" with her boss, Ambassador Baboso. A real piece of dirt. He's widely despised by his colleagues, and has low emotional intelligence. Now the boys back in the office have been watching this guy for a while. Turns out adultery is just his side hustle. He has more of an interest in young Arab men. And drugs. He's not exactly subtle about it, you know. He picks these guys up at local bars, and takes them back to his residence for his little parties.

El-Masri shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

“So, she’s married to a guy who by all accounts is a decent human being, and she’s cheating on him with some guy everyone knows is a sack of shit?”

I can’t fault el-Masri’s sentiment. It doesn’t seem fair at all. Some people are attracted to power though. Baboso might be a repulsive creep, but he’s also the top dog in her small world. And he takes what he wants without any sense of remorse.

Some people are into that.

Maybe that’s el-Masri’s thing too?

“You like a firm hand, el-Masri? Guess you’ll be voting for the Brotherhood in the upcoming elections?”

He shoots me a look of disdain. “Bread not beards, my friend. Bread, not beards.”

Again, he’s not wrong. The Brotherhood preaches freedom and justice, but it’s the sort of freedom and justice that benefits them at the expense of everyone else. In reality, they are no different than Baboso.

I’m suddenly distracted from my contemplation by a light in the doorway of the apartment building. Someone is coming through.

I pick up my pistol and we both start to reach for the doors, but it’s not our target.

Just some guy walking his dog.

We return to our waiting game.

El-Masri stares impatiently at the doorway.

“At least help me solve the case of the missing cigarettes.”

I reveal the hidden stash in my coat pocket. We both light up again.

“Ok, so back to the story...the Ambassador wants to get rid of a love rival?”

El-Masri is talkative tonight. Normally we sit in silence for hours on these sorts of missions. The brutal death of a foreign national though, that makes the stakes so much higher. You don't leave a broken, tortured body on the side of a highway unless you want people to see it. And you'd only want people to see it to send a message.

Yeah, el-Masri is nervous. And like most people, when he's nervous, he talks.

I pick up where I had left off.

The Ambassador, you see, he's getting the drugs for his parties from a street vendor out front of Gezira Palace. He's your typical street vendor—an uneducated, country boy who moved to the city to try and make some money so he can get married. Only, the revolution happened. Suddenly times are especially tough and he needs to supplement his income just to get by. The guy starts selling Captagon on the side.

This is where it all starts getting a bit complicated.

The vendor is getting his Captagon from Wagih Abaza. Yeah, that's right. The Prince of Zamalek, a billionaire from one of Egypt's most prominent families. He's got a foot in both politics and business, and not all of his business interests are above board. The boys back in the office tell me Abaza is getting his Captagon out of Syria. It's a narco-state these days, the unfortunate outcome of their revolution.

Now Abaza is trying to organise a deal with this New Zealand company, Fonterra, on behalf of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. These generals might be running the country at the moment but business isn't their area of expertise, so they're happy to turn to a guy like Abaza.

Fonterra owns thirty percent of the global milk trade, which makes these Kiwis the OPEC of milk. They like to throw their weight around and dictate terms to partners. Abaza wants some leverage in the negotiations, so he ensures the Ambassador has steady access to Captagon, and that the Interior Ministry turns a blind eye to his “extra-curricular activities.” It’s quite useful to have an ambassador in your pocket, right?

“Wait, wait, wait. Are you trying to tell me we have to shoot a Sudanese guy in the head tonight because of milk?”

El-Masri. Always jumping to conclusions. We don’t have to shoot this Sudanese man in the head. We could throw him off a building. Or maybe drown him in the Nile.

That’s what we do, right? Clean up other people’s messes.

One way or another.

All I’m saying is, we’ve got options.

A car pulls up out front of the apartment building. In the darkness, we can see four people exit the vehicle. They pause and look over at us in our van. Unperturbed, they shuffle on.

Probably going into the Marriot for dinner. Our guy isn’t with them.

“Right, so this Baboso guy is sketchy, and he’s working on a deal with Abaza, who is super sketchy. Where does Thomas Edwards fit into it?”

I stretch my legs and groan like the old man I am. All this time sitting in a car is terrible for my circulation. I take my flask out of my pocket and swig some whisky. Yeah, whisky and cigarettes. That’ll get me through tonight.

Time to bring this story home.

I pull a photo out of the file and show it to el-Masri. It's taken from a security camera out front of Nile City Towers.

In the picture, Thomas Edwards and his wife can be seen arguing while another man is attempting to hold them apart.

The other man—that's Mehmet Garafoglu. He's the İşBank rep here in Cairo. Mehmet is Edwards' friend, but he also happens to be helping his business partners back in Turkey secure a deal with Fonterra. One that would favour Turkey, at Egypt's expense.

Edwards was arguing with the wife because he'd found out about her liaison with Ambassador Baboso.

But it's more than that right? He also knows about the drugs and the gentlemen callers at the Ambassador's residence.

His confidence is shot. He had arrived here full of optimism—for the country, the embassy, and his relationship—but now his world is starting to unravel.

And that's not the end of it. All that good he's been trying to do with the street vendors, that's being corrupted by Abaza's drugs.

Confusion reigns. He probably feels like he's Alice, tumbling down a rabbit hole. A man in a cave grasping at shadows on the wall.

What does he do?

Why, he turns to his friend Edouard, a French reporter based here in Cairo. He can help him get the story out, and expose everything that's going on. Wouldn't that be fair? Maybe this is the justice he's looking for?

And in the end, isn't that what we all want? A little justice?

Abaza certainly does. But he has a different perspective on justice than Mr. Thomas. To a guy like Abaza, justice is power. And power is survival.

He needs to do something about Thomas Edwards. If he doesn't, his Fonterra deal is in jeopardy. Even worse, he'll look weak.

Abaza has friends all over the place—the government, the army, the police, the criminal underworld—but he knows that if word gets out he's no longer "taking care of business" the sharks will start circling.

He needs to get rid of Thomas Edwards.

How to do it?

It needs to be spectacular and headline-grabbing. That's the best way to deter any other aspirational snitches. But Abaza lives in the shadows. He's a private man who doesn't like to draw attention to what he's doing.

It's a puzzle, but there's an answer.

"The Sudanese man."

Indeed. The Sudanese man.

And so here we are. Two policemen, sitting in a van on the side of the road in the fanciest suburb in Cairo. In the dark.

Waiting.

Waiting for the biggest moment in our careers.

Waiting to deliver our own form of justice.

Waiting to wrap up this case.

And then, finally, it happens.

I see the crack of light in the entranceway as the door opens.

Before he even fully steps through, I know it's our guy.

The guy we've been waiting for all night.

Thomas Edwards.

Poor bastard.

He has no idea what's about to happen to him.

"Sayyed, are you sure you want to go through with this?"

I nod, eyes fixed on our prey.

Of course, I do. I took this job because there's a promotion and a pay rise in it.

And Abaza is not the sort of guy you say no to.

I grab my handcuffs from the glove box and go over the plan with el-Masri.

We'll cuff him, gag him, and throw him in the back with the other guy.

We both turn to look at the Sudanese man lying on the floor of the van. Bound and gagged, his eyes full of terror. It's not surprising. He wouldn't have had any idea what was happening when we abducted him off the street in Imbaba earlier in the evening. I imagine he still doesn't know what's going on, though I suspect he's realized it's not going to end well for him.

And it won't. First, we'll torture and kill Mr. Thomas, then dump his broken body in the dirt out on the Alexandria–Cairo highway, per Abaza's instructions.

Then there's only one loose end to tie up.

The Sudanese man.

That part is easy. We'll drive him out to another part of the city, quickly dispose of him, and plant some of Thomas Edwards' belongings next to his body.

Poor guy. He probably moved from Sudan to Cairo in search of a better life.

Now this is happening.

Still, he's perfect for the role.

Nobody in Egypt is going to ask too many questions about an illegal African migrant.

Especially one killed resisting arrest for the murder of a Westerner.

Yeah, no one of importance is going to care about the Sudanese man at all.



## AFTERWORD

This short story is a work of fiction; however, the actions of the National Security Agency officers portrayed in this story have a basis in fact.

Both the police and the military largely operate with impunity in Egypt.

Enforced disappearances are a common occurrence in the country.

These disappearances are used to curtail dissent and intimidate political opponents.

Sometimes the victims survive and reappear. Sometimes they do not.

In 2016, the brutally tortured body of Italian student Giulio Regeni was found on the side of the Alexandria–Cairo highway.

Police claimed he had been murdered by a criminal gang. The alleged criminals were unable to refute these claims because they had been killed resisting arrest.

Italian investigators found significant inconsistencies in the account provided by the Egyptian police.

In 2021, an Italian court attempted to try members of Egypt's National Security Agency in absentia for the torture and murder of Giulio Regeni.

Egyptian authorities did not cooperate with this trial.

The trial was eventually suspended without resolution.

**TO THE READER**

Thank you for reading my story. I am extremely grateful and hope you found value in reading it. Please consider sharing it with friends and family and leaving a review online. Your feedback and support are always appreciated.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Glen David Peters is a New Zealand author who has previously lived in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.