

## **The Keeper of the Sea**

### **I**

On a dismal Sunday morning, one of those which enshroud the skyscrapers in Bahrain's financial district with a swirl of dust and blanket their surroundings with a sickly tint, Bandar Al-Miflih, preceded by his great gut, barged into the showroom of the premiere pearl dealer on the island, the Australian-based Badu Pearl Co., and cried out in the voice of a conqueror: "I am investing in our pearls," even before deigning to cast a glance at the salesman, who followed him with unblinking eyes and parted lips. It was a time when the country was shaken by political turmoil, a periodic occurrence which tends to intensify the patriotic fervor amongst our more affluent classes, particularly as cabinet reshuffles become in vogue to appease the popular discontent. Ever the entrepreneur, Al-Miflih had designs to capitalize.

The Australian salesman rubbed his bony hands on his pleated pants and somewhat loosened his collar before rising from his seat behind the sparkling display and welcoming the disruptive customer with a sigh under his breath, like an orientalist who has grown accustomed to the coarseness of bedouins. For his part, it may be said that Al-Miflih was blameless, for he was used to delegating his shopping to "the Indian" (when, in fact, he had an army of "Indians"), and was thus out of practice in terms of in-store etiquette. Today he was on an exceptional mission, invigorated by the love of his homeland.

The salesman was quick to gauge the purchasing power of the obnoxious client, not because of the effusive sandalwood scent which greeted him like a slap on the face, or the golden Swiss watch which blinded him with its luster, or the fact that he (the salesman) was treated rather like a shawarma vendor, but because Al-Miflih interrupted the salesman's mechanical

enumeration of the varieties of pearl available at the store with the following words: “Cultured pearl, I don’t want. Japanese, I don’t want. Australian, I don’t want. I want Bahraini, the likes of which the world has never seen!” Well, there are only a handful of pearl divers left on the island, and whatever pearls are left in the belly of the surrounding waters would hardly be worth the trouble of harvesting—their reputation belonged to a bygone era. This enraged Al-Miflih, whose head was bloated with state-sponsored National Education curricula like the rest of our compatriots. Thus primed, he proceeded to declaim upon the unsuspecting salesman the magic and secrets of the Bahraini pearl, its superiority to all other types across the globe, how songs and poems were written in its name, and how Gilgamesh (which he pronounced “Gilgash” or “Girgash,” meaning a baby’s rattle) was in fact searching for a Bahraini pearl in his journey to “the Land of Eternity,” which of course was Dilmun, Telmun, Awal, Bahrain itself. The salesman failed to convince Al-Miflih that the Bahraini pearl is simply no longer a sought-after commodity—certainly not a commodity on offer at their store. He also failed to understand that the business magnate did not want to buy such pearls, but invest in their harvesting. Undeterred, the sneering Al-Miflih flicked his business card in the salesman’s face and told him to arrange a meeting “with your highest manager.”

“The highest,” reiterated Al-Miflih, widening his eyes and pointing ominously upward, before exiting dramatically.

By the time the regional manager, Mr. Robert Burton, visited Al-Miflih’s private gardens, everyone at Badu Co. knew exactly how much the big fish weighed, as they say. The head office in Darwin even learned about it. It was an opportunity the regional manager was instructed not to squander, particularly since sales were down due to the episodic unrest and plans were underway to shift the company’s regional headquarters to a more stable and affluent location, perhaps Abu

Dhabi. After indulging in a lavish feast featuring the limbs of a greasy lamb, a full-grown grouper (“our national fish,” Al-Miflih decided), and a pile of mixed grill that looked rather like a mass grave, the two took a seat on adjacent Victorian armchairs facing a wood-burning fireplace that, so far as Mr. Burton could tell, had never been put to use. After a generous pour of brandy (Al-Miflih rehearsed a bad joke about leaving *sharia* to the workplace, in reference to his shares in a number of Islamic banks), the adept Burton coaxingly directed the flow of conversation to what amounts to the following:

*As you may know, our company sent surveying and harvesting missions to the shores of your esteemed Kingdom long before the 1930s, when oil was discovered. Since the early 1900s we were stationed on your shores. Before that, from the late 1800s onwards, the supply of pearl-bearing oysters began to dwindle, the oyster beds having been routinely pillaged by the local pearl merchants. By the time the Japanese developed cultured pearls, the Bahraini pearl was already a rare commodity. With the discovery of oil, the number of pearl divers declined drastically, the majority of them favoring the less-oppressive conditions of the oil company or what they called “the Mountain” to the slavery—is there a better word for it?—they endured aboard ship. But this was not the only reason for the decline in divers. The rate of suicide among pearl divers around this time was and still is shrouded in secrecy, between a culture that only sees ignominy in such acts, a local elite that sought to avoid agitation, and an Empire that did not want to muddy the bright new discoveries in its Protectorate with specters of death and despair. In fact, suicide amongst pearl divers was anything but rare; there are many ways to “die at sea.” But not all suicides ended as expected.*

*One day, during the 1950s, a mission of ours returned with bizarre cargo. What first seemed like the fresh corpse of a pearl diver – a not too uncommon occurrence – turned out to*

*be something altogether otherworldly. Hovering like a ghost in his sealed glass saltwater container, our finding was exhibiting signs of life—at any rate, none of the usual marks associated with death were evident: the elderly body was not bloated; the limbs were all intact, though the skin seemed to harden into something of an exoskeleton; the jaw, if nothing else, was definitely moving, as if straining to speak; the head seemed to nod or shake in assent or disapproval.*

*The finding was kept under wraps until the company could determine the appropriate course of action. Through the company's connections with a famous orientalist – you might know him as Muhammad Asad – a team was assembled and charged with conducting detailed research on the issue, under strict orders of confidentiality. The conclusions stunned the board of directors. Apparently, the existence of our unsettling find was the stuff of legend among the tight-knit inner circles of local fishermen, which teem with supernatural lore. Some of them have even claimed to spot the head bobbing on the surface of the sea in the early hours of dawn. He – if it was he who they claimed to have seen – was given the name of Keeper or Guardian of the Sea. It seemed like something resembling a cult had been spun around this figure. The fishermen sought his protection of the source of their livelihood, which was first ravaged by the pearl merchants, then by the oil and gas industries, and finally – the third and most devastating blow – by relentless land reclamation, which continues to impoverish the marine life surrounding your esteemed Kingdom's coasts – and where do you think all this dust is coming from?*

Bandar Al-Miflih could contain his enthusiasm no longer. Despite his best efforts to retain a semblance of composure, his words still came out in a yelp: “Name your price, I will buy him!” For while Mr. Burton was delivering his carefully prepared monologue, Al-Miflih was already constructing an elaborate and not altogether coherent plan to make use of this wonder,

which was soon rolled into the private collection of artifacts in the basement of his mansion, between the cage of his white tiger, who required air conditioning, and his collection of dozens of rarefied, tiny grains of rice on which a variety of verses from the Quran were inscribed.

## II

On the once bountiful shores of Tubli, a former fishing village now peppered with gated communities and fast food franchises, a week-long curated festival celebrating “culture and tradition” was held, which was said to feature the oldest surviving pearl diver in Bahrain, who was set to showcase his extraordinary skill in holding his breath underwater. The exhibit was a resounding success. The tourists ooh’d and ahh’d and applauded. The homegrown *nouveau riche* posed for pictures before the relic of a forgotten age, who floated like a corpse in his watertight tank. Bandar Al-Miflih presented himself after the show, extolling the need to “invest locally,” “take pride in our national heritage,” and “be inspired by the strength and resilience of our local workforce.” It was a spectacular PR campaign. Its timing during the political unrest did not go unnoticed or unrewarded. The newspapers depicted Al-Miflih as a deeply concerned citizen, even a patriot. Some columns recommended that he be appointed to the highest positions in the Ministry of Culture or Education. Others recommended he join the government-commissioned team of arbitrators tasked with adjudicating between the conflicting political factions and the government. Al-Miflih decided he would take the opportunity to run for a seat in the Council of Representatives, the most seamless way to secure diplomatic prestige and immunity.

Pleased with the reaction to his performance on the first day, Al-Miflih decided to turn the spectacle into a platform for his campaign. On the second day, he gave a similar speech, mainly recycling the material from the day before, only this time with the added flair of delivering it with the floating diver by his side, aimlessly staring at the aspiring politician and his

would-be constituents. So it went for the next few days, with the popularity of Al-Miflih rising steadily and media coverage of his performances intensifying. On the sixth day, the show attracted some hecklers, possibly incited by a political rival, though this was not confirmed. They called for Al-Miflih to unveil his secret investments, respond to charges of embezzlement, and address rumors accusing him of conducting business with “the Zionist Entity.” Buoyed by his confidence, Al-Miflih magnanimously decided to engage the hecklers instead of shutting them down. This proved disastrous. In the heat of the exchange, it was eventually noticed that the diver had been underwater for too long. One person yelled, “He’s dead!” Another, “He’s a demon!” A third, “This guy is a sorcerer, God save us!” An educated member of the audience was inspired to cry out, “Rasputin! Rasputin!”

“By God, we shall get to the bottom of this,” a group of men climbed on stage and started to dismantle the glass container as most of the locals fled in terror and the tourists took pictures from a safe distance, nudging and congratulating each other. Al-Miflih ran for his life, holding his head kerchief in place with his hand. The scene onstage turned into a full-blown brawl, with various groups manhandling one another for various reasons or no discernible reason at all. The container soon fell to pieces and swept the assailants off stage, injuring a few. In a moment the police intervened to clear the stage, but the diver was nowhere to be found.

A search was conducted, the area was sealed off, eyewitnesses were interrogated, and still no trace of the diver was detected. As Bandar Al-Miflih was fabricating information regarding his erstwhile sidekick to the police (he was apprehended just before reaching his car), a handful of local fishermen gathered facing the sea, far off behind the stage, with their thin legs planted in the wet sand like spears. They directed their gazes toward the horizon and whispered amongst themselves as the sea receded farther and farther.