



THE *C*ONTAINER  
SHIP

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I was a foreigner in the land of my birth. I was born in Kuwait of Pakistani descent. My parents had emigrated from their country of origin to this desolate and unforgiving country after the British partitioned India in 1947 to create Pakistan. As non-Arabs in Kuwait, we were looked down upon, denied rights accorded to Arabs, and frequently treated with contempt. The racial prejudice I experienced was extreme and unrelenting, and growing up in Kuwait was a continuous battle of wits, determination, and survival.

I remember as a young boy when my mother would send me to the local market, called the *bakala*; calling it a grocery store would be a great embellishment. It was a run-down little shack, meagerly supplied with vegetables in boxes, some canned goods on the shelves, and stray bottles of Coca Cola in a small, aged, and battered refrigerator. I'd run into Nidal and Bassam, the sons of the owners, when I was there, and we'd often get into a scuffle, as young boys tend to do. Nidal was a stout Arab twice my size, and Bassam was tall, lean, and stronger than I. Both of them had toothless smiles because of their many brawls. I never knew when I encountered them whether they wanted to play with me or get into a brawl; they could switch between the two demeanors in a matter of

seconds. One could never know with them. A fight could begin with Bassam grabbing my shirt; I would push him off, and then both of us would launch a flurry of blows on each other. The next day, all would be forgotten, and we'd play together as though nothing had happened.

One good thing about going to the *bakala* was the TV set that was always turned on in the window of the TV repair shop next door. On some occasions, I'd get a few moments of peace and just stand there watching television. One day, as I was leaving the store with bags of groceries, Nidal and Bassam tackled me from behind, and the groceries I was carrying tumbled helter-skelter onto the dusty, unpaved road. In the midst of our brawl, I got a glimpse of an event so powerful that it completely distracted me from the fight. Through the prism of the small TV screen in the repair-shop window, I saw what appeared to be a man dressed in a puffy outfit with a big glass helmet descending a ladder. I didn't know who was stepping onto that pristine surface that day in July 1969; I was mesmerized as I watched his boot touch the ground and the dust from the surface swirl up around his foot. I turned back to Bassam.

"Look! At the TV!" I screamed in his face.

My shout distracted him and Nidal. The three of us stopped fighting, got up, and walked closer to the window for a better look.

As I witnessed the moon landing unfold at the age of nine, I shared the moment with two Arab bullies standing under a blinding sun in 110-degree heat. Thanks to the man walking on the moon, my fighting for the day had ended.

Afterwards, as I gathered up the strewn groceries, my mind raced with questions. I ran back home as fast as I could.

Who were these people who traveled to the moon? How did they get there? I fidgeted in our two-bedroom apartment for hours, waiting for my dad to get home from work; surely, he would have the answers. Finally, at about 8 P.M., the front door opened. No sooner had my father come in than I started peppering him with questions. He calmed me down and asked me to wait a few moments while he changed, and my mom made tea for the family, an important ritual in Near East countries like Kuwait. When the tea was ready and we sat down together, I exploded with, “Who are these people on the moon?” My father was amused at my line of questioning and caught on to my desire to understand.

“They are Americans,” my father replied. “They have been trying to get to the moon for years, and now they’ve finally done it.”

He went on to regale me with stories of countless other American visionaries: Thomas Edison’s inventing the light bulb and founding the Thomson-Houston Electric Company that eventually became the General Electric Company; the Wright brothers and the first airplane; J. Paul Getty’s establishment of the Getty Oil Company; and Henry Ford’s first mass production of automobiles. Coupled with Dad’s tales of American ingenuity, Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the surface of the moon provoked my imagination about the United States.

My father and I had lengthy discussions on space travel, the likelihood of visiting distant planets, and the impossibility of humans breaking the speed-of-light barrier. On Fridays, we would go to the local market and rummage through stacks of old books to find the ones on physics and astronomy. On one such visit, we stumbled upon an old telescope, that we

promptly bought and spent the next six weeks fixing. After we finally got it to work one night, we actually saw the multiple moons of Jupiter. I think we even saw the rings of Saturn. My father supported my interest in scientific theories and favored such pursuits.

Eight years after seeing Neil Armstrong step onto the moon, I was seventeen years old and had graduated from high school. I had developed a strong interest in the physical sciences during this time. My grades in non-scientific subjects, however, were mostly C's and D's, punctuated now and then with an F. My father had only graduated from high school and had never attended a university. He started his work life as a telephone operator, but was laid off as automation made his activities obsolete, and now sold airline tickets to support our family. He was an avid reader of self-help books written by such famous people as Napoleon Hill and Norman Vincent Peale, and he would spend hours explaining their concepts to me. The way I presented myself was of utmost importance to him; to that end, he would rehearse handshakes with me. "Look me in the eye when you shake my hand and give it a good, solid shake," he would say.

To his enduring credit, he cared for me deeply, buttressed my self-confidence, and supported me in whatever I wanted to do. Although he didn't get a chance to educate himself, he believed that his children must do so, even if it meant making sacrifices. He cared so much about this that he sent me to a private high school in Kuwait City, at considerable expense to our family.

In retrospect, I understand that I may have suffered from a learning imbalance. As I stated, science concepts came easy

to me, but subjects like English, geography, and history were a nightmare. And while I had a passion for physics and mathematics, I never wanted to do homework or study for tests. Instead, I'd choose my favorite chapters from a textbook and spend hours reading them. If a question came up on a test from these chapters, I did well. Otherwise, I'd *flunk* and incur failing grades in my subjects.

My father and I talked often about my future, and as much as he wanted me to go a university in the United States, my grades were simply not good enough. Our conversations ended with his recommending that I learn a trade. "Be an auto mechanic," he urged. "There is nothing wrong with learning a trade. Some people are meant to go to universities. Unfortunately, you have the desire, but not the grades." All those years of dreaming about studying at a U.S. university came to a screeching halt. Instead, my father used a connection with a long-time friend to arrange for me to work at a shipping company in Kuwait Harbor.

At the time, Kuwait did not manufacture any goods; everything had to be imported. Hundreds and thousands of container ships came into the Kuwaiti port. My meeting with my father's friend took place near the docks in a rickety shack that looked like it would fall apart and fly away in a strong wind. The interior was dimly lit and sparsely furnished. When I entered, the supervisor glanced up at me and continued his phone conversation. An empty water cooler stood in the corner, its plug on the floor removed from the wall socket. A metal desk that had seen better days had two drawers missing, and a broken chair that may have been comfortable 20 years ago now looked like it belonged in a junkyard with its metal

skeleton piercing the upholstery. The smell of tobacco pervaded the room. Three men who looked like they hadn't bathed or shaved in a week sat around smoking a hookah. By their Arabic accents, I could tell that one of them was Iranian and the other two were Syrian. They were complaining about the heat, work, their wives, and life in general.

Again, the supervisor glanced up at me and continued his phone conversation. When he hung up, he squinted and took a long drag on his cigarette. "Are you Razi Imam?"

"Yes."

"Well, we've been expecting you." Without pausing, he asked me why I wanted to work there, but gave me no chance to respond. "Let me tell you, I'm not looking for young guys like you who want this job just to buy a fancy car. This is a job for real men with families to feed."

As I talked with him, I explained that I had a high school education and could read and write in English and Arabic. This seemed to impress him enough to overcome some of his reservations about me; yet he still stated, "I'm betting you don't last four days."

He wrote a note, gave it to me, and told me to report to the foreman outside. "Now, get out of my office." The other men smiled as he barked at me and watched me leave. The foreman took the slip. "Report here tomorrow, 6 A.M. sharp. Don't be late."

When I arrived for work the following day, I received a clipboard, a pencil, a beat-up flashlight, a piece of chalk, and a manifest. The flashlight puzzled me, but I asked no questions and barely gave it any thought. The foreman led me to dock

number 11 where—for the first time in my life—I laid eyes on a container ship.

It looked like a floating building piled high with containers, and its flaking paint and rusted edges suggested that it had weathered many years at sea. The foreman escorted me aboard and handed me off to another person in charge—an Iraqi who led me toward the aft section of the ship to a large opening above the hold. He explained that my job was to go down into the hold and confirm that the containers were to be off-loaded. This required cross-checking their identification numbers with the manifest and marking them with the piece of chalk.

In those days, container ships were converted cargo vessels or converted tankers that transported up to 1,000 20- or 40-foot containers. The ships were equipped with two or three onboard cranes that offloaded containers. A hatch cover—closed over the hold while at sea—was opened when the container ship docked, leaving a large, open space on deck that allowed the onboard crane operators to load and offload the containers below deck. There were no ramps, stairs, or an elevator leading down into the hold; in fact, there was only one way down. I had to stand on a platform that was lowered into the hold forty feet below.

“Step on the platform and be quick about it!” I heard the Iraqi yell to me. As the crane landed with a thud on the floor of the hold, I dismounted, and the crane withdrew upwards. The air in the hold was hot, humid, and had a fetid smell, combined with the suffocating stench of urine.

I couldn’t see much as I surveyed my surroundings. The lighting was poor, and even with the flashlight, the rows of stacked, weather-worn containers faded into darkness. I could

make out a few workers walking around or driving forklifts. As I moved slowly among them, shining the flashlight here and there, my eyes became accustomed to the dark, and I saw rats as big as cats—startled by the light and my approaching footsteps—scurrying away. My exploration revealed mushroom-like growths of fungus in a few places, sometimes amid a gathering of rat droppings. It was like threading my way through the subterranean realm of an alien world. I soon learned to take extreme caution whenever I was working in the space directly below the hatch opening of the hold, as this area was aptly called the “slip zone.” Failing to remain alert here could result in one’s slipping and falling, not to mention getting drenched by a falling urine stream from laborers working topside. Since the ship’s lavatory facilities were off limits to them, the hold became their toilet. Neither they nor I gave this much thought; it was just the way things were done aboard ship.

My work day started at 4 A.M., six days a week. After breakfast, I caught the number 17 bus at the main highway that ran near our apartment building, changed buses at a transfer point for the last leg of the trip, and arrived at the harbor around 5:45 A.M. Work aboard ship started at 6 A.M. and ended at 6 P.M., with an hour lunch break at mid-day when the crane operator hoisted me topside. During lunch, the work crews gathered into small groups to eat bagged lunches, and wiled away the time smoking and regaling each other with stories about their homelands—India, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, and other places.

I avoided the work crews at first, but not out of hostility. We just didn’t have anything in common. They were older, seasoned laborers; I was a young, inexperienced teenager

working my first job. I enjoyed using my private time during the lunch hour to sit alone at the prow of the ship and watch the sea gulls float aloft or dive for fish. My constant lunch companion was an old physics book that I hid in my shirt when arriving for work so as not to be seen with it. I wasn't sure how kindly the laborers and my superiors would regard my bringing books to work; so I had to find places in the hold where I could hide them. Lunch was my time when, however briefly, I could escape the reality of working in this damnable place and immerse myself in the world of science. The work was nonstop, and I thought I might be destined to labor in the hold of container ships for a long time to come.

One day at the end of my work shift, a fellow laborer by the name of Abdul fell ill just after arriving for work. At my encouragement, he went home, and without giving it a thought, I took his place and worked his shift for him, simply because this was the right thing to do. Working in Abdul's place saved him from getting docked a day's pay for his absence. Word spread quickly about the incident, and the next day, like magic, I was promoted to a job above deck. I could hardly contain the happiness I felt when I heard the news. At last, after four months, I would no longer work in the dampness of a container ship hold. No more rats. No more breathing in the stench of urine. My job now was to check the containers hoisted out of the hold and make sure they were the correct ones to be off-loaded. I embraced the Kuwaiti sun and heat any time over the hold of a container ship.

My long work hours often left me exhausted for days on end. The bus ride home after work came as a welcome break during which I could relax and take a much-needed nap. The

job was taking its toll on me. Four months turned into six months, and six months turned into a year.

One evening, when I caught my bus to head home from the docks, I sat down, slumped over, and fell sound asleep. I was awakened by the bus driver poking my shoulder. He explained that we had arrived at the end of the line and that I needed to get out. Dazed and still sleepy, I realized that I had slept past my transfer stop. I cursed, got up, and slowly exited the bus. Something seemed strange; a lot of young people were coming and going. I could tell from the books they were carrying that they were students. There were homes nearby and a large building straight ahead of me. I was completely lost, and didn't recognize a thing. Then, just as I was about to sit down on the curb to wait for the next bus, my eyes caught sight of a large gate with a sign that read "Kuwait University."

The guard at the entrance gate was an Arab with a heavy moustache and beard. To me, he embodied everything repulsive about Kuwait. He scowled like someone who would hit first, no questions asked. I debated whether I should attempt to walk the grounds, and figured I might as well, since I was already there. I approached the gate cautiously, not sure if I would even be allowed to enter. I walked up to him as nonchalantly as I could. He was smoking a cigarette as he eyed me with vague interest. I took a deep breath and kept on walking. The university gate loomed closer. I continued on, my eyes shifting from side to side, waiting for the moment when the guard would stop me. My steps grew more confident. As I neared the gate, my heart beat faster. I started to take bigger steps. I needed to put distance between myself and the guard.

"Hey, you!"

He stood up and threw his cigarette to the ground. I froze. But just as he started to approach me, the telephone rang in the guardhouse. He turned around and sat back down to take the call, and I continued walking. I was not going to stop now.

I walked along as though I belonged there, looking at the buildings and an open area where most of the students gathered. Some of them glanced my way out of curiosity. I continued with a positive stride, acting as if I were headed to a meeting. I could see from the glass windows of the building that night classes were in session. Students were seated at desks taking notes, and I wondered what they were studying.

I decided to head toward a building through which a stream of students was flowing in and out. I had no idea what was inside the building or why so many students had chosen to congregate there, but as I drew closer, I soon understood. The sign on the building read, "Kuwait University Library." I hesitated at the door and stood there for maybe three minutes deciding whether to go in or not, when I caught sight of an announcement board next to the library doors. Though most of the notices were about trips and rallies, the one I saw read: "Now hiring. University students needed to work in the library." Though I was clearly not a student there, I wondered if I would be allowed to apply. At first, I decided to leave, and turned around to walk out of the university; but after taking a few steps, I stopped, took a deep breath, turned right back around, pushed open the library doors, and walked in.

The library seemed like a foreign land populated by row upon row of books. I had never seen such a collection. My days on the container ship were spent working in the dark amid rows and rows of containers, the farthest-removed atmosphere

imaginable from this well-lit library. A hushed quiet hung over the place, and was interrupted only by the occasional whisper or book shuffling from students. I noticed a main reception desk with a Kuwaiti woman dressed in a long black dress and a *hijab*—a traditional Arab head covering—sitting next to a man in his *disdasha*, a white flowing garment worn by Arab men. They both noticed me immediately, How could they not? I was wearing my dirty work clothes. My face was unwashed. My lips were crusted with sea salt, and my hair was sticky and thickened by hours spent in the ocean air. I was a sight, and I didn't look anything like a student. I refrained from making eye contact with them and immediately took solace between two rows of books.

Propped up on the shelves were books on astronomy, physics, and mathematics. What a find! The collection contained books on every aspect of these disciplines. I pulled out the thickest physics book I could find. As I leafed through it, I noticed theorems, formulas, and laws that were all foreign to me. My hands shook from a mixture of exhilaration and anxiety. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the man and the woman behind the reception desk talking with each other and occasionally glancing toward me. I was sure they knew I did not belong there, and were probably wondering if they should call security. Nonetheless, I closed the book and laid it down gently on a nearby desk. I hesitated, and then started walking toward them.