

The Good Son

Chin Ying Nang panicked. The party thugs were coming up the stairs of the lab and, as usual, not being quiet about it. The Chinese physicist quickly scribbled the formula on a scrap of paper. He found an empty glass bottle of Sprite, rolled the paper up like a tiny scroll and shoved it in. He forced a large test-tube cork into the mouth of the bottle to seal it. Chin went to the cleanroom. After removing the drain screen, he fit the bottle down the large pipe reserved for non-toxic waste. He opened the valve and flooded the big sink with water. The bottle disappeared down the drain just as the People's Peacekeepers broke down the lab door. As Chin came out of the cleanroom, one of the soldiers knocked him down with his rifle butt and pulled him through. Two others drug him by his feet from the Nuclear Research Center, leaving a thin red line of blood streaked across the white tile floor.

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An icy wind blew off the dark Atlantic. There was no shelter for the refugees in the shadow of the English cliffs. They'd have to wait until morning to find a way up to the town above.

Ali Ahmed Hassan was a good son. His mother's burqa was soaked with sea water, and he could tell by her blue lips behind the veil that she was cold. As the moon set over the vast ocean, he and his younger brother, Mohamed, went down to the hightide line to gather some driftwood for a fire. Ali's father had joined the other eleven men from the little boat to drink arak and discuss the next part of the plan.

Ali and Mohamed brought up two armfuls of brittle branches. They formed a little stick pyramid in the shallow sandpit Ali had dug. Ali struck a wooden match on a bit of shell. It flared in the dark. He held it to the stack of kindling. It was immediately blown out. He tried three more times with his brother trying to block the wind but had the same result.

"Give me your money, Mo," Ali said in Arabic. "We need something dry to start this."

"Forget it," Mohamed said. "Freeze."

"It is not worth anything here. Give it to me!"

"I worked hard for it. Use your own."

Ali looked at his brother shivering in the dark and thought: *'too bad he is not a girl. He would have to wear a hijab, and I would not have to see his ugly face.'*

"Try to keep mother warm," he said instead. "I will go down and find some dry seaweed or something."

Ali walked back down to the edge of the sea. The pale moon rested on the horizon and scattered broken shards of light across the rough water. On the leading edge of foam, something glistened in the fading light. A bottle. It rolled up to Ali's sandaled feet like an omen from Yam. He reached down and picked it up. There was something inside that looked like an old parchment. Ali pulled out the cork and shook the paper into his hand. He opened it.

It was just some lined paper with weird scribbles that reminded Ali of little piles of bones. But it was wonderfully dry.

“Allahu Akbar,” he muttered.

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“Did he talk?” The People’s intelligence officer asked the inquisitor as the big man came out of the dark room.

“Of course,” the inquisitor said. “They all talk in the end.”

“We’re you able to get the formula?”

“Almost.”

“What do you mean, *almost*?”

“He died before I could get him to write it all out. I got this much.”

The inquisitor handed a crinkled paper to the officer. It had the beginnings of a formula describing a method of getting unlimited energy from cold fusion that would electrify the world safely and make China the dominant superpower forever.

“Where’s the rest of it?” the angry officer asked. “The important part.”

“In Nang’s dead brain, I suppose.”

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The paper from the bottle lit the small sticks easily. Ali fed larger branches into the flames until it was a bright hot blaze. He brought his mother to the edge of the roaring fire and sat next to her.

He was a good son.