

Castles in the Sand

Chapter-57

Sex Off the Wall; The Imam and the Rug

After several years working in the kingdom, the expat, at least from this guys viewpoint, doesn't give two hoots and a holler what month it is, or even the day. Saturday through Thursday it's all the same; you are up before six a.m. and at your jobsite by seven a.m. and stay at it until half past four or five p.m., Six days a week for the length of your contract. Little changes. No matter how diversified or exciting the job might have been at the beginning, in time you would be bored stiff. Those who were office bound really took it on the chin. I was one of the fortunate who could get out in the field and roam ,at will, the confines of a one hundred ten square mile jobsite, plus the chance to sneak off site and drive into the city or out to the ruins of the old capital, Dariyah.

As boring as the job was there were times when things really bounced out of control and took off in a wildly different direction. The incident concerning the Imam and the rug took place sometime during the late summer of 1989. The exact date is not important and has no bearing on what took place, what is important is how cultural and religious differences are sometimes blown out of proportion and to what extent the repercussion's affected both Muslim and non-Muslims alike.

One has to see first hand the grandeur and scope of the King Khalid International Airport to fully appreciate and, if possible, comprehend the phrase, "With money, all things are possible." The centralized gateway into the Kingdom, the Capital City of Riyadh, is almost but not quite, dead center of the country. The city is situated at an elevation of somewhere between seven hundred and a thousand feet on a gently rising plateau. The city is home turf for the ruling house of al Saud, and the center of religious study. The Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud Islamic University located on the northern fringes of the city is the first of the

imposing edifices one sees upon leaving the airport. Surrounded by an imposing wall of white marble and interspersed with magnificent arched gateways, the wall is topped by a classic wrought iron fence. It goes without saying that first impressions are lasting, so in keeping with that tenet, the Saudi's went all out to impress, in spades, visitors and the business community with just what they were about.

Disdaining anything achiturally Western in style or scope, the Saudi's had designed and constructed an eye and mind boggling series of buildings accentuating the arabesque style of design that is not only functional, but is above all, pleasing to the eye. In one grand move they made the rest of the world's major airports look like hollow shells of utilitarian design they truly are. I need not remind you of barn-sized photos glaring down at you from every conceivable angle, crowing over the fact that this or that city is the home of the umbrella, or the nations leading manufacturer of soap or cornflakes. One can't turn a corner without being blitzed by rotating signage in living color of everything from Automobiles to Zinc plating. I'm aware that the great P.T. Barum extolled advertising as a way to riches but do advertising executives really believe the bikini clad model draped over the hood of that 500 HP convertible is what we are about? Sad to say, yes.

Rather than clutter the arriving lounge wall space with the debris of the huckster, the Saudi's made a rational decision to greet the traveler with what they are and had been for a thousand years or more. Scenes of Arab lifestyle both rural and urban are woven into wall-hung carpeting in beautiful subdued colors that are most pleasing to the eye. Some of these wall hangings are of immense size, covering spaces as large as thirty by forty feet. Instead of rotating billboards enclosed in glass cages, the traveler is greeted with a lavish and well kept array of potted plants and flowering shrubs set about flowing waterfalls and pools. This is of course, a far cry from what you experience the minute you step through the exit door into the real world. Nevertheless, the terminals are for the short space of time you are within, a most welcome break from the weary, boring flight from which you have just disembarked.

I used the phrase, “Pleasing to the eye” just a paragraph before, It depends on whose eye is doing the looking and what lays behind the thought processes of the one who is looking. Open-minded people can look at a scene whether actual or depicted and make a rational judgement as to how it affects them. In this instance the observer on the scene eyeballing the wall hangings was an honored and revered Imam. For the unwashed among you, an Imam is by definition, a Muslim leader to be divinely appointed, sinless, and infallible in religious matters. Sort of like the Pope. (Bite my tongue.) In other words, what he sees, regardless of what or how others may perceive it, his interpretation is final.

Arriving at KKIA for the first time, the old gentleman along with his retinue of clergy made their way into the huge cavernous arrival terminal and stopped to gaze in wonder at this miracle in the sand. Never had he in his seventy odd years beheld such a grand and glorious rendition of the Saudi soul. “Praise the Prophet and Allah for such a sight” he uttered.

The Imam stood spellbound as his eyes drank in the splendor before him. Restricted by his infirmities to a slow and shuffling gait, he and his brethren made their way towards customs, at times stopping and discussing the décor of the building. Shifting his eyes upward to look at a particular wall tapestry he caught his breath and froze in place. Lifting his arm and pointing a long bony finger he let out a scream of indignation. As if possessed by the devil, the patriarch ranted and raved, waving his arms and gesturing at the wall all the while, imparting the worst of curses on this travesty and especially on the person who had the gall to display such blasphemous idolatry. With a final curse of indignation he passed out cold, such was his rage. But why? What was the cause of this pious old fool’s anger?

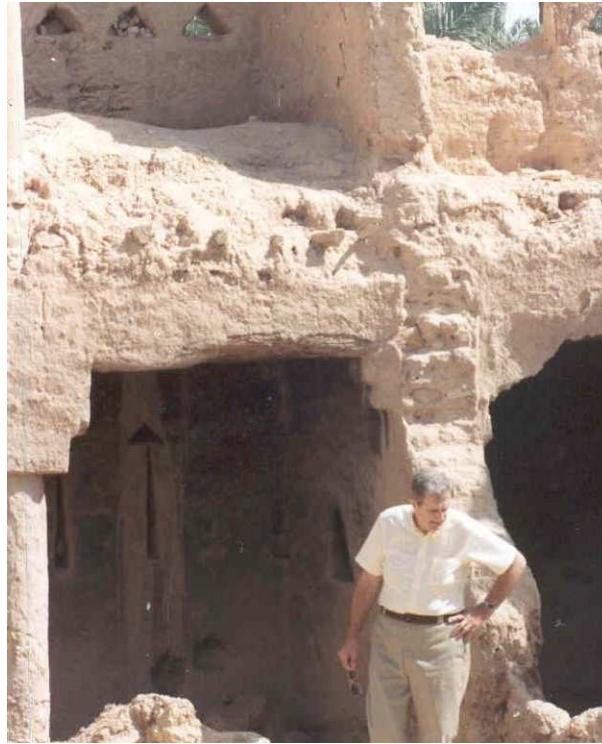
None in the vicinity could understand what it was that set him off. One minute he was pleased as punch with what he saw, and the next he was bringing down the wrath of Allah upon the King’s house. As he slumped to the floor his assistants hurried to administer aid and at the same time looked about in dismay and astonishment at what had just taken place. Airport security, always at hand, especially when such an eminent

religious scholar was in their midst, rushed to secure the area effectively blocking off entry into customs and immigration. This caused a lot of grumbling from run-of-the-mill travelers who now were forced to wait the situation out. Medical help was summoned. The scene was right out of “Bedlam.” Security had its hands full securing the area, as several hundred deplaning passengers were descending upon the scene. Upon returning to civilization, newcomers would have more grist for the mills. Welcome to Saudi Arabia.

The prostrate form of the revered Imam was placed on a stretcher and whisked to the medical clinic where doctors would work their magic. Medical personnel were extremely cautious in their approach as how to handle the Imam, especially this Imam. It was as if God himself had walked upon the scene and had a gall bladder attack. How do you medicate God? What if he died? Such was the aura of the Imam.

In time the venerable old goat came around and, blinking his eyes, sat up, then demanded an audience with the director of the airport. Informed that the director had left for the day, it would be next to impossible to meet with him. Brushing aside the medical staff the Imam left in a huff, but not before promising to return and take care of urgent business.

In the meantime, airport personnel including security were agog over what happened, or to be precise, what did not happen. None had the slightest idea of what it was that set the old man to scream, rant and rave until he swooned. Security set about seeking the unknown. Every one and every thing was suspect.



Author exploring the ruins of the ancient city of Dariyah. Built, according to the Saudis, in the ninth Hijira century, it was destroyed by the Ottomans in 1223H.

Within a day or so Riyadh's elite group of Mullah and Imams, followed closely by the mattawain, those who enforce religious tenets, descended on the airport. Their goal, the international arrival terminal, and in particular the area where all the fuss and bother took place.

Sweeping en-mass into the terminal, and pushing aside security, the mattawain, using bamboo switches usually employed to lash the legs of those thought to be ignoring the religious laws, swatted their way through passengers and employees alike. Airline employees panicked and dove for cover, as did those who knew the ferociousness and zeal with which the mattawain approached their task. Security stood aside for the mattawain were a power not to be questioned. A call was placed to the Director's office from the courtesy phone. "The Imam insists that the terminal be closed down and emptied of all persons!" As if by magic, the director appeared at the Imam's side. Babbling incoherently, the Imam tugged at the Director's sleeve and pulled him to a spot where in anger he pointed at

the woven tapestry wherein lay the object of his frustration and vehement anger.

Facing the wide expanse of carpeted wall before him, the Imam turned, spread his arms and closing his fists waved them in the Director's face. This was one really pissed off Imam. Stepping back he pointed the finger of doom skyward. In the ensuing silence you could hear a moth breathe. No one moved. The largest passenger terminal in the world became as quiet as Pharo's tomb. Those in the vicinity gazed upward along the line of the Imam's pointing finger, the director, not knowing what to look for and too scared to ask, squinted his eyes attempting to pin point the imam's target. Breaking the spell of silence, the Imam shouted in Arabic, "See, see, they are sinning. There, for the entire world to see, sinning in public! Can you not see?" He continued, his voice an octave higher, "They sodomize, they fornicate! This is against all we stand for, you must remove this blaspheme, this trash, and burn it immediately. The persons who did this must be brought before the Sharia (religious court, superior in all matters religious, civil, or criminal) and condemned as will the people who allowed this to be displayed. To forcefully end his edict he shouted, "All that had a part in this shameful display shall be punished; tear it down!"

Screwing up his courage the director asked the Imam if he would show him exactly which of the figures woven into the carpet tapestry were engaging in illicit sex. After a few moments the offending characters were identified and with relief the director explained the images. What the pious man of the cloth perceived as fornication were a group of children woven into a tableau of games played at school. They were playing leapfrog.

To the suspicious mind of the Imam and with an eye that only saw evil, this was evil incarnate. Brusquely waving the explanation aside, The Imam demanded, "Who is responsible for allowing this to be hung?" The Director, his face showing great relief calmly answered, "Why, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, his majesty the King." Spreading his arms wide he continued, "His royal person has approved of everything

you see about you” The old man, unable to speak, stood with his arms hanging dejectedly at his side. In a low voice the Director asked, “Would you question the authority of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques?”

The Imams and the Mullahs conferred in hushed tones for some moments, then with their heads held high, and with a defiant step they whisked through the terminal, letting all who witnessed the scene know that, “We shall have ‘Majlis’ (Audience) with his highness, then we will decide.” The Director smiled as he returned to the business of welcoming travelers to the Enchanted Kingdom in the Sand. The incident caused quite a stir in the local press, however it died in less than a week. Friends of mine who were passing through often asked me to show them the offending tapestry. I would let them try to figure out what and where the depicted scene of lust and depravity was taking place but they could never find it. Upon my pointing out the offending scene, they would just shake their heads and walk away saying, “Where but Arabia?”

Chapter 42

The Prime Minister’s Machinegun

There are very few women prominent in Muslim politics. An exception was Ms. Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan in the early 90’s. A beautiful, well-educated woman, Ms. Bhutto followed in the footsteps of a famous father as the leader of her country. Her father had been imprisoned and executed by a military court convened by the Pakistani Army Officer, Zia Al Huq who seized the government in a military coup. Not too long after seizing power, Huq died when a crate of fresh papaya put aboard his plane, exploded just after the plane took off. A few years later the ceaseless turmoil of Pakistani politics boiled the Bhutto name to a position of prominence again and the daughter of the martyred former president was brought to power. Ms. Bhutto retained use

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of her family name in her political life rather than her married name, as did Ms. Indira Ghandi of India and her son, because it gave her immediate recognition by the voting masses.

Wherever Ms. Bhutto traveled she was easily recognized by her beautiful carefully styled black hair peeking out from the front of her headscarf. Unlike many Muslim women, she did not wear the traditional head covering that hid everything other than the eyes. The Muslim heads of state in the Gulf area are a tight knit group, meeting frequently to discuss questions of mutual security and often, how best to go about sticking it to the western powers who depend on their oil. There has never been in all of recorded mid-east history, prior to the emergence of Indira Ghandi and Ms. Benazir, a women head of state. Historically, the mid-east was strictly a male oriented and dominated society. Suddenly and with consternation, political protocol was turned on its ear.

The macho image would now take a back seat in dealing with the opposite gender on a one on one basis. As much as these leaders despised the very thought of it, times were changing in their world, and in due course, Ms. Bhutto, replete in her colorful and modernistic western style, landed in the Saudi Capitol city of Riyadh, for an audience with the Saudi monarch, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.

King Khalid International Airport, (KKIA) located just 14 miles north of the capital city of Riyadh, bills itself as the world's largest. That may be true depending on how you measure size. In terms of air traffic it is insignificant, however in terms of area, then hats off. The outer perimeter fence encompasses an amazing 110 square miles of mostly empty desert, which in the past had been prime grazing grounds for the herds of camels and flocks of goats belonging to the local Bedu. The inner working part of the airport has a security fence to keep at bay the livestock that local herdsmen would allow to wander unhindered.

The Bedu thinly disguise their disdain for majestic titles and pompous manner, feeling that the King unjustly took away their prime winter grazing area, forcing them further east to a long stretch of almost absolute

barren sand dune waste land. Compounding the dislocation, the King confiscated for his personal use several thousand acres of prime land for what is locally called, “The King’s Farm.” Fenced in by a ten-foot high chain link fence topped with several strands of razor wire and planted in rows of trees to obscure vision, a country retreat sits and awaits a visit by his majesty.

In the two years I spent working at KKIA, the King, to our knowledge, never once made a visit to his “farm.” KKIA is a magnificent collection of buildings in the modern arabesque fashion, combining both the latest in architectural steel and glass, finished in beautiful interiors of color and design such as seen nowhere else in the world. They say to the observer, “See, we Arabs have the money and the grace to create these great structures.” And indeed, they make the collections of tacky postwar metal sheds and exposed piping and ductwork such as you find at London’s Heathrow airport, and Frankfurt Am Mien look like the incredibly ugly and dysfunctional structures they are.

At KKIA there are four giant domed halls serving domestic and foreign air traffic. Matching these but larger in size and several hundred yards east of the four terminals is the Royal Terminal. What appears to be a large pedestrian bridge, but in fact is a taxiway, spans the highway separating the two sets of terminals. Run of the mill diplomats, Heads of State and other assorted Big Shots arriving at KKIA land on the Commercial side. The Royal’s have their very own 14,000-Foot runway that is parallel to the commercial strip. Ships of state making official calls taxi up and over the bridge separating commoner and royalty to stop in front of the royal digs. A wide and very long escalator then transports the passengers up to where the King awaits his visitors. In such manner, did Prime Minister Bhutto of Pakistan reach Riyadh in early 1990. Her baggage, however, took a vastly different and much lower, more mundane, route.

Every piece of luggage is examined by X-ray and or searched when it hits the ground, whether it belongs to a visiting salesman or the head of state. This was the rout taken by the ample baggage of Ms, Bhutto and her

companions. Diplomatic baggage is, supposedly, immune to search by world treaty, but Ms. Bhutto's luggage was at the least, x-rayed by the Frontier Police, (Customs and Immigration) charged with protecting the purity of the Saudi Nation. Sitting in front of a bright screen watching an endless array of unexciting, personal paraphernalia jog by gets to be pretty boring. Yet when a certain piece of luggage belonging to Ms. Bhutto rumbled into view the bored operator sat up and took notice. Bug-eyed, he stopped the conveyor and sat staring at the screen. This guardian of the desert could make out the fuzzy outline of a machine gun.

"Whoa Jamal!" This is something a head of state is not expected to bring to a meeting with the King and his Royal Ministers. The excited inspector began to shout and point to the screen; as he backed off his stool he spread his panic to other Frontier personnel present. Within seconds they had fled the hall in absolute fear for their lives. Before abandoning his post the inspector had managed to restart the conveyor which then moved the bag to the end of the line where it sat vibrating up and down as the belt kept turning. "Surely", thought the inspector, "Where there is a machine gun there are explosives!" As panic swept the area some one thought to call the bomb squad.

A solidly built Texan known as Owen Jeffords, and called by his close friends "CN" (A plastic explosive compound) who hailed from the Lone Star State, was the nominal head of the Bomb Squad. The Director of the squad, a Saudi, was seldom at the airport, thus when the call came it was CN who picked up the phone. Attempts by CN to round up the members of the duty section were futile, they having decided on business elsewhere. CN donned his explosion suit, sprinted to the bomb truck and headed towards destiny.

Approaching the freight bay where the suspicious luggage lay bouncing on the still running conveyor belt, CN noticed that the place was empty of personnel. Shrugging his well-padded shoulders he thought to himself, "Shit! Another solo job." CN cautiously made his way over to the still running conveyor that by now had almost burned a hole in the bag. Reversing the direction of the belt he waited until the bag was in full view

of the screen and shut it off. Frozen on the screen was the image that had caused panic among the stalwart guardians of Islam. Turning aside he reached in and pulled the bag from the conveyor. In the dark recesses of the room, behind protective barriers of concrete walls and partitions a hundred pairs of eyes watched his every move.

CN had been trained stateside by the Bomb Disposal Section in a school run by the FBI. He was thoroughly familiar with the type of luggage containing the object of interest and in short order had it open. Emitting a great sigh of relief, CN removed the protective hood from his head. At that moment as if by magic the onlookers bravely stepped out and appeared at his side. As CN walked away he tossed the Prime Ministers hair dryer to the chagrined guardians, and shaking his head drove back to his office.

Three months later a small ceremony was held at the Royal Terminal. The Commanding Officer of the Frontier Police and five of his subordinates stepped forward to receive medals and commendations from His Excellency, The President of the Saudi International Airports Authority, in recognition of their bravery. CN, an infidel American, of course was not invited. Later that same winter, CN was fired and deported for having the gall to insist on better housing for his wife and children. Only in Arabia.

