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BUSINESS IN PARADISE

In the beginning… the Lord God planted a garden in Eden away to the East…
Genesis

My introduction to traditional Arabian medicine was Khalti. I never called her anything but Khalti, which means *my auntie* (mother's side). It did not occur to me until much later to ask her real name, perhaps because my friend Abdallah called her Khalti, as well he should have for she was his great aunt. It was he who told me about her, he who took me to her.

She lived in Ar-Rakah, named for a thicket of *arak* bushes that once grew there about 5 miles from Dhahran in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The twigs of the arak bush, which taste faintly of licorice, are used as toothbrushes throughout Arabia, and Bedouin have used the branches as sticks to steer their camels. I don't remember seeing those bushes when I first visited Ar-Rakah in 1974. The bushes are not there now.

I remember a lone tree, a great thorny *sidr* that grew there, rather miraculously it seemed, living off the sterility of sand. Ar-Rakah wasn't a village; it wasn't that big. It was just a place, a place that had a name because enough people had stopped there where there was a thicket of sweet-tasting branches and later, when there was a tree.

Bedouin had stopped there, for coffee or tea, for shade or shelter, and for awhile Bedouin had lived there. Perhaps they had dug for water, as they had dug everywhere in the desert, for they were wanderers who had traveled the same paths for so many generations that no two of them can remember how long it has been, although each will argue into the night that his tribe is the first, the best, the noble tribe, the one that descended from Abraham and represents the true Arab.

I don't know how long the Bedouin stayed in Ar-Rakah, nor do I know why they left. But while they were there, they erected wooden shacks, and when they left, Khalti moved in. She was not a Bedouin, at least not by birthright. She was born and raised in nearby Al-Khobar, which was originally settled by fishermen and pearl divers. At one time thousands of Arabian men—villager, townsman and Bedouin alike-- came from around the peninsula to get a job on one of the Arabian Gulf pearling boats every spring. Until the 1930s and the success of Japanese cultured pearls on the world market, pearling was the major source of income for the people of the Gulf, including not just Saudi Arabia but also Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain. This old way of life gave way to a new one—the oil industry, and Al-Khobar became a town and by the 1970s, it had taken on the proportions of a city.

Beyond their common roots of Al-Khobar and family, Khalti and Abdallah had little in common. Khalti was illiterate, as were Abdallah's parents. Abdallah's father, when he was alive, had been a pearl diver. In a sense, Abdallah's world was closer to mine. He had a recently earned bachelors degree from an American university, as I had. Indeed, he would go on to become the president and CEO of the largest oil company in the world, Saudi Aramco. But that was many years hence. For now, Abdallah and I were in

a simpler, kinder world, a safer one too, in the Saudi Arabian desert. Had he not been so proud of his heritage, I doubt that he would have told me his aunt was a “folk doctor,” as her mother had been before she died.

The night I first went, it was too dark to see much. We were, after all, in the open desert. All I could see were a few wooden shacks surrounded by sand. There was no running water, no electricity, no telephone.

The sound of Abdallah’s car, a beat up Peugeot, awakened his aunt. He was slightly embarrassed about this. “You sleep so early,” he said.

Khalti shrugged. “There’s no TV,” she said.

She fired up a kerosene lantern and we followed her into a small shack and sat on the floor. The ceiling was so low, Abdallah had to keep his head down. With the lantern by the circle our bodies formed, Khalti and I got a good look at each other.

So, this is a folk doctor, I thought. And what exactly was that? The Arabian folk doctor cauterized the flesh to rid the body of infections, burned resins to spook unwanted jinn, and prescribed medications—all kinds of substances, some of them useless or harmful, and some of them of real therapeutic value. This type of healing had all but disappeared from Arabia, although the drugs the folk doctors prescribed were still sold in the suqs and occasionally, a victim of a so-called folk doctor ended up at the hospital in Dhahran with severe wounds caused by some well meaning practitioner trying to burn out or beat away the devil.

Khalti looked not the least bit sinister. She was a little woman, almost doll-like, with high cheekbones and a heart-shaped face framed in an odd veil, like a nun’s habit. It was not the women’s veil typical of the area.

Abdallah introduced me as his American friend Nasrah (Victoria). Khalti scrutinized me in the light of the lantern. "*Dam khafif*," she declared. Literally: *Light blood*. I had never heard the expression before. "It means nice," Abdallah explained.

One of Khalti's housemates presently joined us. This was Fatimah, a big woman with a gold ring on every finger. She was dark, as they say. They say: When God created man, he mixed milk and chocolate together. But there was too much milk in this batch, and the white man was born. God tried again, this time careful not to overdo it with the milk. But God added too much chocolate and the black man was created. He got the next batch perfect, and the Arab was born.

This is hardly an official version of the Creation. According to the Qur'an, God created the first man Adam with a live germ, among other things. But the story, told to me by a Saudi, illustrates a flavor of bigotry in that land. The anecdote does not include the sentiments of the Bedouin, who feel infinitely superior to their settled brethren, no matter what the skin color.

The word "dark" was virtually synonymous with slave. In this case, it was true. Fatimah had been a slave. She was freed, as the law provided, after giving birth to a son whose father was her master, the man who owned her. This was before Saudi Arabia outlawed slavery in 1962.

Fatimah wore the black face mask typical of Bedouin women of Arabia—a piece of cloth that tied around the head. There were slits for the eyes attached to a large square of cloth that covered the nose and the mouth. On Fatimah, this mask rode up on her nose. I could see her somber expression She never smiled. She didn't seem to breathe. She sat cross-legged, a hand on each knee, and on each finger, a gold ring.

Abdallah thought this first visit was too soon for me to start questioning Khalti about her trade. I tried to behave myself. I asked Fatimah what the rings were for.

On each was carved one of the ninety-nine names of God, she said. God the Merciful. God the Almighty. God the Compassionate, and so on. (The Bedouin say only the camel knows the hundredth name, which is why the camel always looks so arrogant —it's got a secret. At least that is what Westerners say the Bedouin say.)

Fatimah said the inscribed rings protected her. She did not say from what.

How long have you lived here? I asked the folk doctor.

She and Abdallah started counting together. Perhaps forty years, she said. When there was no road, not so long ago, she would walk every week the miles from Ar-Rakah to Al-Khobar carrying on her back the palm frond mats she had woven. She walked still more miles collecting the palm fronds in the desert. She said she made the mat we sat on.

Remembering her comment about television, I asked her if she had ever seen TV.

Yes, of course. She saw TV in Rahimah, where her daughter lives.

Khalti's family is embarrassed at her primitive, that is, her Bedouin life style. In the Eastern Province among the settled folk of the oases and towns, the word "Bedouin" is often used as an insult. Being called a Bedouin may be tantamount to being called a dirty, crude, uneducated, untrustworthy gypsy. Obviously, Khalti did not think so.

Suddenly, the voice, that is, the shriek, of another presence filled the shack. This was Umm Ahmad, another companion of Khalti's. As is the custom in the Arab world, she had taken on the name of her first-born son In one sense, she had sacrificed her

identity to become known forevermore as Mother of Ahmad. But in that part of the world, especially among Umm Ahmad's generation, a woman has virtually no identity until she bears a son.

Umm Ahmad began to tell a story, something about a jinnee, a real ghost story complete with shudders and screams. Like Fatimah, Umm Ahmad was no relation to Abdallah, and she properly wore a veil, but she got so carried away with her story that her face was usually uncovered. When it occurred to her, she would grab a corner of her veil and hold it over her mouth. But it never stayed for long. She needed both hands to tell this story. Now she slammed her hands to her bony chest and screamed. This, apparently, was to illustrate the point at which some innocent girl, who was minding her own business drawing water from a well, meets up with a jinnee, one of those ubiquitous spirits of the desert, who might be friendly or mischievous. This one was clearly the latter.

I glanced at Fatimah. She sat like an unsmiling Buddha, hands unmoving on her knees; her rings, those golden protectors, shined in the darkness. The night and the lantern drew eerie shadows on the walls. I tried to interrupt Umm Ahmad. "Is this a true story?" I asked.

Of course it was true!

But when did that happen? And where?

It was time to go, Abdallah suddenly announced.

We said good night, but I would be back and soon.

It must have started, this healing—this need to feel and look good and to mollify, if not extirpate, jinn—with life. It started, if you like, in Eden. We have the Bible to tell us what a paradise it was before the snake appeared. There was no sickness or war or old age or hunger. And we have, long pre-dating the Bible, stories written in cuneiform thousands of years ago, stories that locate Paradise where I was, where I grew up— in, of all places, Saudi Arabia. *Paradise?*

Ancient Mesopotamian texts of wedged characters pressed into clay tablets relate the story of Dilmun, where there was no sickness or old age or hunger. A paradise, just like Eden. A Sumerian poem found in Nippur in southeast Iraq says:

> The land of Dilmun is holy, the land of Dilmun is pure…
> In Dilmun the raven utters no cry,
> The wild hen utters not the cry of the wild hen,
> The lion kills not,
> The wolf snatches not the lamb…
> The sick-eyed says not “I am sick-eyed,”
> The sick-headed says not “I am sick-headed,”
> Its old woman says not “I am an old woman,”
> Its old man says not “I am an old man.”

The poem goes on to say that the god Enki endowed this holy land with plenty of sweet water, and the goddess Ninhursag caused eight plants to grow there. For some reason, Enki ate the eight plants and came down with eight different ailments. His action so angered Ninhursag, that she determined to leave Dilmun and not return until Enki died, but she changed her mind (a fox convinced her to) and she gave birth to eight gods and goddesses, one to cure each of his ailments.

One of those Dilmun gods birthed by Ninhursag was Inzak (or Enzak), a name discovered in modern times inscribed in stone on Bahrain, an island nation about a

dozen miles off Saudi Arabia's northeast coast, and on pottery found on Failaka Island off Kuwait. Both inscriptions say: "the temple of the god Inzak."

Aside from the legendary Dilmun, there was a real Dilmun, which was renown throughout the world of the second millennium as a leading trade center. Indeed, it was the first sea-trading power in recorded history, according to Geoffrey Bibby, who was an archaeologist with the Prehistoric Museum in Aarhus, Denmark and did extensive research in Arabia. Archaeologists have located Dilmun in the Arabian Gulf area— the island nation Bahrain, Failaka Island off Kuwait, Qatar, Tarut Island off Saudi Arabia, and along Saudi Arabia's east coastal mainland. These are not necessarily the limits of Dilmun, only the places where so far evidence of it has been found.

For some 2000 years, Dilmun was a thriving civilization contemporaneous with those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, Magan in southern Arabia, and others. Dilmun's ships sailed into the world's major ports, carrying copper, bronze, wood, spices, "odorous plants," coral, tortoise shell, lapis lazuli, antimony, cornelian, "fire stones," wheat, sesame, ivory, dates, "fish eyes." There is also mention of the "Dilmun tree," which seems likely to be the date palm. The "fish eyes" are probably pearls, which were abundant in the Arabian Gulf. (And still are.) The coral and tortoise shell certainly could have come from the Gulf region, and the dates from Arabia.

Were at least some of these items part of ancient Arabia's materia medica? Plants have been used as medicines for thousands of years, probably long before anyone recorded them in their documents of healing. Pearls and stones, precious or not, were prized in antiquity for their beauty as well as their purported medical or magical power. Coral is part of Arabia's modern folk pharmacopoeia and so are dates.

The ancient Egyptians, who did record their remedies, often in great detail, used dates for stomach trouble. So did the people of Mesopotamia. An Assyrian herbal calls specifically for “dates of Dilmun.” The date itself was eaten for deafness in Mesopotamia; the date pit, in powdered form, was used for eye disease and swellings. “Water of dates” was to be drunk “when the stomach will not retain food;” it was also taken in Mesopotamia by those suffering from difficult or painful breathing.

The ancient Egyptians used the dark blue stone lapis lazuli in a remedy for eye trouble. Tortoise shell is also listed in their pharmacopoeia. They used antimony (*kuhl* in Arabic), among other things, on their eyelids. This was not only cosmetic but also a protective or preventive measure. Arabians today still use kuhl.

We also meet Utnapishtim in the ancient tablets of Mesopotamia. The god Enki saves Utnapishtim from the great flood, an account much like the biblical Noah and the great flood. Utnapishtim tries to help a young Babylonian king called Gilgamesh who was seeking the plant of immortality in the “Holy Garden.”

Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh:

> “Let me uncover for you, Gilgamesh, a secret thing…
> A secret of the gods, let me tell you.
> There is a plant. Its roots go deep like the boxthorn.
> Its spike will prick your hand like a bramble.
> If you get your hands on that plant, you will have everlasting life.”
>
> Gilgamesh, on hearing this, opened the conduit.
> He bound heavy stones to his feet;
> they dragged him down into the Abyss, and he saw the plant.
> He seized the plant, though it cut into his hand;
> he cut the heavy stones from his feet;
> the sea cast him up onto its shore.
>
> …A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant.
> It came up through the water and carried the plant away.

Geoffrey Bibby thought that it was to the holy land of Dilmun that Utnapishtim sent Gilgamesh in his quest for immortality. What is more, Bibby thought the plant of immortality was a pearl. When Gilgamesh lived, between 2800 and 2500 B.C., it is likely, he says, that the people of the Arabian peninsula and neighboring islands were diving for pearls, doing what Gilgamesh did, doing what Abdallah's father did for a living—tying a weight of stones to their feet to quickly reach the floor of the Gulf to search it for oysters.

Of course an oyster is not a plant, and a pearl does not smell; it was the fragrance that alerted the snake that kept Gilgamesh from the plant called The-Old-Man-Will-Be-Made-Young. But these are ancient stories whose authors do not share the sensibilities of our modern age about the power of a special odor or a pearl to heal.

Whatever the case, these ancient stories tell us how important and how very powerful plants (and pearls and other items of nature) were to the peoples of antiquity. They took from the bounty of Nature, not only for their physical nourishment but also their healing needs, including the need to never grow old.

Since that snake slithered into Eden, since Gilgamesh's search for immortality, we have needed the goodness of healing—for our bodies, our souls and our minds. Western medicine, with its physicians who tend to the body, its priests who focus on the soul, and its psychiatrists (and others) who try to heal the mind, is no exception.

Khalti learned the healing trade from her mother who, according to Abdallah, probably assisted at the birth of at least one baby from virtually every family in Al-Khobar. That was when Al-Khobar was still a village. And how did Khalti's mother learn

about healing? She claimed that all she knew about healing came to her in dreams. She gave her young grandson, my friend Abdallah, pulverized oyster shell for a “dirty stomach.” The balance of the cure, according to tradition, was for Abdallah to cut off the tail of the lizard that had poisoned him. A lizard was to blame for certain stomach aches. While you were eating, the lizard scampered, usually unseen, across your plate (which of course is on the floor) and poisoned your meal. If you could not find that culpable lizard, any lizard would do because, as everybody knew, you gained twenty *hasaniyah* (good points) toward Paradise when you cut off a lizard’s tail.

It is not an easy task to trace the roots of traditional Arabian healing. The historical record is extremely limited. The first known Arabic inscriptions, which are in Aramaic letters, date from the fourth century. The first known book in Arabic is the Qur’an, which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the sixth century. Nowhere in the Qur’an is medicine mentioned. There are some references to medicine in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic poetry and the Hadith, the collected sayings and recorded behavior of the Prophet Muhammad that were written in the two centuries following his death. These sources mention only a few of the hundreds of medicines in Arabia’s present-day folk pharmacy.

But there are other clues, some of them right there in Ar-Rakah, pointing the way far back in time. Fatimah’s inscribed rings—in the ancient Middle East, the written word could be a means of powerful healing; it could be part of a talisman such as a ring. The ancient Egyptians inscribed their supplication on a piece of pottery such as a bowl and

placed this at the gravesite of someone they hoped would intercede for them in the Otherworld.

Another clue was Umm Ahmad's beloved mischievous jinn—throughout the ancient world, it was a common belief that those in the Otherworld could both heal and cause disease.

Khalti declaring that I had "light blood" was still another clue. Her expression dates to at least 500 years before Christ when healers began to reason that the human body could be understood in terms of "humors," each representing a certain elemental quality. A person's dominant humor was thought to affect not only one's health but also one's disposition. Thus, a more accurate translation of *dam khafif* (light blood) might be sanguine, which my very modern Webster's dictionary defines, however inadvertently, in quite ancient terms as: "a warm, passionate, cheerful temperament and the healthy ruddy complexion of one in whom the blood is the predominant humor of the four."

On another visit to Ar-Rakah, Khalti said to me: "*Ba'd chabdi*." Literally: *After my liver*. In another time and place, given a different understanding of human physiology and anatomy, the organ of endearment would be the heart.

Khalti has news. She does not wait for me to ask. She knows I will have questions. Today, she says, was a busy day. Today, she cauterized a woman. …