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*Alf laila wa-laila...*she repeats the title in his language...*Alf laila wa-laila...*a charm to ward off rising panic. The muscles inside her throat are suddenly so tight the unfamiliar/familiar words sound like a muffled wail. Up until a moment ago, she had thought it would be an easy visit. After ten years away she had been keen to see old friends and family and exhibit her Roman cityscapes. She had hoped their intense colours—great gashes of ochre, orange and pink—would show how far she had come from her mentor Sydney Ure Smith and the whole Sydney Charm School. Yet all these old faces in the glitzy gallery in Bay Street Double Bay look suddenly remote as the news comes through from Munich. She pushes her way through to where a TV screens to the empty chairs in a deserted backroom.

Seven seas separate them.

She focuses on the black and white image of a jet being repeatedly blown up. Over the airport scene she picks up key words: 'Arab Killers...Black September...Arabs Murder nine Israelis in Airport massacre'. Her view is momentarily blocked by a young man in an awkward bow tie and red waist coat bringing a tray of martinis from the kitchen. He reminds her of when Wael dressed up to audition for the part of the waiter at a cocktail party in *The Pink Panther* with Peter Sellers. That was a fiasco, for while he could hold the attention of a mass meeting in half a dozen languages, he froze with a two line script when they said: 'Ready! Shoot!'

She struggles to steady her feet on the deep red carpet. She knows that his years of intense work had been undone overnight by those events in Munich. The Palestinian Cultural Centre dismantled. The PLO become monsters, once again.

When she returns to Rome the Arab witch hunt has already begun.

The poet, Ghassan Kanafani is dead.

The Israeli Prime Minister Golda Mier announces that 'the Palestinian resistance would be destroyed, wherever it was'. Wael is one of those watched through gun sights. The threat only makes this wanderer from occupied Nablus, more determined than ever not to act like a hunted beast.

Years later she can recall their conversation on that last day:

He was at my flat all afternoon...I had to go out and buy some food and when I got back I found him reading *A Thousand and One Nights* and laughing out loud.

I knew it was the fourth time in a month that he had read that particular volume.

I asked him how he could possibly still be laughing 'It's very funny. This is my culture and the more I read it the more I appreciate it. I shall always laugh at it.' He had photocopies of the first edition—all four thousand pages. He was translating from the original, though the work was slow as he always insisted upon consulting every one of

those other editions he had accumulated. That night he closed the book and slid it into his breast pocket and rose to go. He was leaving early to write on the historic place of Jews in popular Arab cultures. He said as he left 'in *Alf laila wa-laila* the Jews were treated with affection and humour.'

He never reached home.

The following day, the 17 October, 1972, the headlines scream: 'Arab killed in North Rome' above a photo of the crumpled corpse, head to camera, it was Wael Zuaiteh, mistakenly identified by his passport as a Jordanian.

Golda Mier declared a job well done...that 'the bullets had reached the right person.'

When Janet Venn-Brown gathered together the thoughts of his friends and comrades for *Per un Palestinese*, Arafat wrote of Wael's role in the revolution, others of his love of language.

Leilo Bairdo, the novelist who worked with him on translation said: 'He didn't translate *Alf laila wa-laila* out of literary ambition or because he had a mania for linguistics. I would say that Wael loved the stories the same way one loves one's mother or nature...the thing that was most difficult for me to believe was not that Wael was dead but that anyone could have thought of killing him...The truth is he was himself a character out of *Alf laila wa-laila*.'

The journalist Pietro Petrucci, who Wael had convinced to edit *Palestinian Revolution*, recalled his study of dialects, particularly his admiration for the Assyrian dialect which claimed direct descent from the ancient Assyrians. 'He loved every type of minority. The smaller the minority was, the more he defended them, gypsies, Bedouins...I criticised the Transjordanian Bedouins for their political position. He said that they were not 'the king's men' and that they had a totally autonomous culture of their own that deserved to be recognised, loved and defended.'

Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, professor of Islamic Culture at Rome University, spoke of his down-to-earth knowledge of the popular Arab masses as being no different from his love for *Alf laila wa-laila* in which 'he could see analogous 'collective' tensions, sentiments and aspirations. He saw this literary work as a way of conceiving of the existence of a specific civilization—his own—without any bias of cultural superiority or anachronistic mythology of the past.'

Janet Venn-Brown could only think 'I'm alive and he's dead'. On the walls of her Rome apartment beside the bookshelf hangs her portrait of him. The handsome head of black hair, strong features, full lips (nothing like the avuncular victim of Spielberg's *Munich*) makes clear why Genet preferred his company to the Roman *literati*. His head framed in the tie and suit of a diplomat does not suggest quite how much he lived from hand-to-mouth, mostly wearing hand-me-downs. His extraordinary intense black eyes still demand attention.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ann Stephen.