

PILLARS OF THE NATION

When Emir was a week into his tenure at the mausoleum, he had two severe confrontations in one day. On the relevant morning, he was restless to be stationed at the cusp of the temple proper, manning a sideline guard-post that avoided close scrutiny. The mausoleum was among the most visited attractions in their country – and was by far the crowning glory of the capital – but the morning crowds were low, the daily school groups yet to arrive. A man came within five metres of the spot where Emir stood rigid and said, with an implacable sneer, that his chin resembled a donkey's vagina. How much animal husbandry supported the claim was unclear. The man repeated the insult. Then he studied the young guard's crotch and loudly speculated he had a bean-dick. The stranger briefly crossed Emir's proper line of sight. It was possible to observe his being older (in his forties), shorter, and contrastingly haired (small beard, eggshell dome). Whereas Emir wore the dark peacoat, black gloves, and knobby helmet of officialdom, the man had wandered over in a loose cardigan. And given the bayoneted rifle slung over Emir's shoulder, it seemed also safe to assume the man was crazier.

Much as Emir was intrigued, he was paralysed. Like a rolled-up fly, and here came his spider. As a mark of their fortitude and their respect for the founding father, the guards were to remain perfectly still throughout the hour-long shifts, come what may. It was unclear whether an incident such as this would so far have qualified Emir to descend his post, grab the man by the cardigan's lax threads, drag him to further handling by other authorities. The man may have been booted from the complex, or given a worse punishment for abusing a ceremonial guard, desecrating the hallowed site. But if he'd contested Emir's charge, it would have become a game of one person's recount against another's.

Emir was a big fellow with a brown olive complexion and plump hotel pillows for lips. Indeed, he had a significant chin cleft. Also, a massive nose, like it was fitted to his face as an extension, and a forehead vein famed for inflating synchronous to his moods. He was twenty-three, and prior to earning this stint at the founding father's resting place, he'd spent two years in a volatile part of the mountains. To this point, his life had included very little time in the capital.

In peacetime, standing dutifully beside the solemn black sarcophagus was one of the armed forces' most glorious roles. A hundred years earlier, the founding father – an esteemed military general, in his own right – had been credited with the counter-attacking which had reclaimed their country's independence. In applying to join the mausoleum guards, Emir felt he'd been equally spurred by devotion to that sacred figure and a wish to evidence his own development. Whilst a recruit, several years before, he scarcely would have tolerated a total stranger arriving to insult him, as was happening now. Surer he'd have attempted snapping a man such as this in twain.

And the man was showing no preparedness to move away. A buzzing nasal voice harped on about the bean-dick. Then it changed tact, said Emir was probably a fairy, that he'd be better off doing a job which suited little girls.

Emir's head didn't swerve, and he was determined not to acknowledge the abuse by real eye contact. As such, with the morning sun's backing, the man loomed as a stunted outline in Emir's peripheral gaze, a somewhat heavenly shape, although his dialogue was absurd. Not without some excitement, Emir felt himself sliding into a practiced mode. He cycled through short wisdoms he'd gleaned from a young captain in the mountain years. *If I am strong, any insult does more harm to the wielder than myself. And: I cannot properly control others' opinions, only my own reactions.* The source conversations – as he and the captain had inspected border-wire, or were en route to hassle a shepherd for their papers, say – were aggrandised as seminal moments in the history of human thought, rather than bastardised retellings of ideas from long ago. Wearing the tenets as assuredly as his peacoat, Emir became less attuned to the man's hectoring, even as fresh angles were trialled. He vaguely heard, for instance, he was unlovable, pathetic, worthless. Such labels might really have irked him, were his defences not already in place. Other visitors, milling around in the large square that spread between the temple and its colonnaded wings, were out of earshot, too far away to be of any help.

Clearly, the stranger's arduous campaign to unsettle him, to provoke him at least to some degree, had gone on long enough to justify Emir's snapping out of his ceremonial performance. The man's peripheral shadow even appeared to be flinching. He was braced for what he must've considered an inevitable physical rebuke. Yet internally Emir recommitted to the greater dignity of holding his nerve, even though he was standing at one of the lesser posts. The stranger's persistence was casting doubt as to whether he was properly crazy, or instead rationally pursuing a secret agenda. He repeated many of the previous insults, making a dreadful 'highlights' reel, before resorting to what might've been his most potent barb.

The low voice said, *I'm going to fuck seven generations of your family. Fucker.*

A mighty pledge. Seven whole generations. But rather than finally goading Emir past the boundary of his tolerance, the ridiculousness of the idea encouraged a smile the guard implored his facial muscles to suppress. Were this occurring two years earlier, the repulsive shadow, significantly less built than Emir, would have been flattened upon the concrete.

A different shadow came to lurk behind the first. The cardigan-man began listing exactly which family members his horrific promise applied to – *great-grandmother, daughter, great-granddaughter, great-great-...* – with a giddiness that may have signalled he'd never really expected to get so far into his armoury. Emir, still aided and frozen by his precepts, half-suspected the new shadow planned on taking over. He imagined the cardigan-man beginning to tire, stepping aside for a partner with more energy. In fact, the arrival was a wandering colleague, a 'casual' guard on an active surveillance shift, plodding the mausoleum grounds with his own rifle for company.

What do you think you're getting up to here? the colleague barked.

The shadow of the cardigan-man displayed no shock. In fact, he might have welcomed his sinister effort finally being interrupted. But Emir noted, in himself, that he wasn't necessarily relieved by this intervention. He doubted his telling forehead vein had even come into play. The colleague had probably

overheard too little to deliver a serious punishment, and Emir wasn't prepared to break his stillness to inform. The two shadows moved away, and Emir spent what remained of his hour trying to subdue self-congratulations about his own strength of character. When it was time for the changeover and the aggressive march back to the distant mess, his patriotic chanting contained a few notes of celebration.

*

More on Emir at eighteen. During national service, he'd been a renowned hothead, tormented by dozens of fellow rookies. Favourite entertainment in the juvenile mess-hall was to trick him with false scenarios, pranks, slander, only for the thrill of his explosive reactions. They would claim he'd talked weird smut in his sleep, that his uniform was awry when it wasn't, that his breath was discernible five metres away, that another cadet had designs on his sister. They teased him about the bum chin, the nose, and the indignant forehead vein. He got most annoyed when they'd lower their conversations to simulate, for him, hearing loss. He'd shake his head, like he was winding up, then give rumbling protest. In an environment which demanded stifling emotion, his outrage was naked. Among common retaliations were head-locks upon the necks of those who'd goaded him too far, but these were tempered somewhat by the extent he'd been outnumbered, which even his size couldn't surmount. And yet he'd consoled himself, on occasion, that he was teased so much because he was essentially liked, because they all liked talking about him.

Emir had a decorated uncle – a colonel – who'd prophesised his nephew would never be a person of significance, in any sector of their country, without doing more to restrain himself. The uncle's solution had been to push him towards boxing, as an outlet and dose of humility, and only after several months' practice did Emir gather the courage to object to his sensitivity being literally beaten out of him. Next, he'd briefly sought the guidance of religion, but was discouraged by a perception it wasn't the preserve of 'sophisticated' men in their modern state. Despite his challenges with comrades, Emir opted for extending his military career beyond the necessary national service, although viewed as a punishment his subsequent posting to the far-flung mountains. He suspected his uncle of intervening to place him at such margins, at a safe remove from his own legacy. In the border region, many villages were undercut by separatists, and wandering army patrols were notoriously sabotaged or made to hear unsettling 'curses'. But friendship with the captain had changed Emir. He expected anybody he met from his 'former' life to scarcely believe his transformation.

The ceremonial guards of the mausoleum were drawn from each of the land, sea, and air divisions, and so it was somewhat fortuitous the current crop included a man who'd shared Emir's national service stint. One of the old tormentors, no less. Yusuf was his same age, and had definitely provoked many an energetic head-lock. Yet when they'd renewed acquaintances on the very first morning of Emir's tenure, crossing paths in the changing room,

they'd managed friendly conversation. Yusuf had served at the site for several months, which amounted him to a quasi-stalwart.

Now, in the aftermath of Emir's brush with the hostile stranger, they were seated in the lunch-room. Yusuf was re-circling the details.

What would a donkey's fanny even look like? he said.

Amazingly, Emir pointed to his own chin, permitting laughter.

Yusuf was shrewder than Emir. And more white, more wiry. In light of the old teasing, and the intense interest he was here showing, Emir seriously suspected Yusuf of contributing to the trial, of recruiting an 'outside' friend and loading him up with insults. Perhaps he'd been jealous of reports of Emir's bright start as a guard – in so far as early successfulness at doing nothing could be lauded as 'bright'. Perhaps bets had been placed on Emir's resilience, with the various insults arranged as stages. Elsewhere in the lunch-room, several clumps of servicemen were playing cards, a couple for money. Would any have wagered on such an endurance feat as Emir had just shown? Beside Yusuf sat Mehmet, the one who'd intervened. He was quieter, more settled. Supposedly, Mehmet had repelled the cardigan-man from the precinct without learning much of what he'd said.

Why didn't you call for help? Yusuf continued, to Emir.

Emir had been turning through a newspaper while he made a decision. Eventually, he opted against accusing the rest of the room of a betting conspiracy, figuring he'd only receive denials.

And replied, *I didn't mind the challenge, to be frank.*

On their table were bowls emptied of creamy ravioli. The guards could track the advance of afternoon shifts on a wall-mounted clock. Within its face was a romantic picture of the founding father, his expression rather blank. Emir intermittently overheard men on different tables explaining the cardigan-man ordeal, in their own words, to neighbours.

Mehmet asked Emir, *So what's your program?*

In training, the recruits had been encouraged towards developing mantras or favoured topics that could fortify the long hours, staving off wandering thoughts and the worst of muscle cramps. Most reported leaning into lofty patriotic ideals – the sacrifice of distant family members, for instance. Nobody admitted to spending their shifts in the grip of common themes – like sex and football – which may have suggested such diversions were rife. Certainly, Emir wasn't immune to these, although his mind could readily attach to mountain conversations if ever he was 'under fire'. He might have worried that explaining his tenets with Yusuf in earshot would only have empowered a sterner test in the future. On the other hand, he in some ways felt compelled to spread the word.

A philosophy of emperors, you might say, he began.

Both lunch companions listened quietly, as Emir went on to explain slivers of what the captain had taught. *There are no adamant values besides those a person ascribes. And: I exist to pursue the establishment of my own character. And: The whole universe lies within ourselves, thus all the resources we need are at hand.* Yusuf's face was drained, quickly bored. He regarded Emir's proselytising as though it was set in another language.

Have you, somewhere along the line, received a lobotomy? Yusuf asked.

Mehmet tutted him, while Emir smirked.

The one they call 'growing up', said Emir

Yusuf said, *Congratulations, I suppose.*

There was plain regret in the tone – Emir had submitted to 'loss of self'. He'd proclaimed his adulthood, but many a serviceman in that mess was slouched in a posture of extended prepubescence.

What are your programs? Emir asked the other pair, just to be polite.

Yusuf sighed, checking the clock.

I think of poetry, Mehmet said.

I don't really have one, said Yusuf.

That can't be true, Emir insisted. *How do you get by?*

Okay. I think of the coast, the sea, Yusuf explained. *In training, I said I'd be thinking all the time of The Father's legacy. When I had my first shifts at 'position A', I'd imagine myself, embarrassingly, getting filled up with his spirit. Like it was wafting out of the tomb, you know?*

That's not embarrassing, Mehmet insisted.

Well, it is. But then I started wondering whether The Father himself would have tolerated keeping still, as we have to do. Whether his strength in those campaigns required him being more of a man of action. If anything, having his spirit would make this job harder.

So you don't think he had our patience? Or discipline? Emir asked.

More a case, perhaps, that we don't have his vitality.

That's why societies never settle, said Mehmet. *The restless go about achieving their ideals, then ask for more subservience than they'd ever possessed themselves.*

At our age, he was a junior soldier, too, reminded Yusuf.

But he was also in underground groups. Against the sultan, Mehmet added.

They'd strayed into rank, seditious thoughts, they knew. All fell quiet, establishing a compact they'd move on to other topics. Owing to his vague distrust of Yusuf, Emir had barely made a contribution anyway. The founding father eyed them from the clock-face, and the simple expression could equally have told of scorn or sympathy.

*

In the afternoon, due to another man's sickness, Emir was the one to take up 'position A'. This was how the guards referred to the post closest to the black sarcophagus. It was only three metres distant and inside the barrier rope.

Within the grand, marble hall, the whispers of visitors were the real roaming spirits. Emir maintained what was fast becoming a customary fierce gaze. Behind it, he sporadically replayed his earlier success. If the cardigan-man really had been a stunt arranged by his comrades, he'd surely responded well enough to earn their respect. He couldn't help being pleased towards signs of his progress, even though this suggested he wasn't impervious to other's opinions. A very small part of him would have lamented being exempt from future pranks.

Emir enjoyed the responsibility of being closest bodyguard to their nation's supreme icon, along with the busyness of the temple. Schoolchildren would

turn from the fallen monolith of the coffin to study *him*. The less discerning wondered aloud if he was a mannequin. The wiser searched for little breaks in what they knew was his assigned stillness. Classmates hissed about the flutter of a hand, a slight shift in a knee, an extended blink, a quick gulp, like these were treasonous offences. Not lured into defending himself, Emir reset and carried on. There was no way for him to be totally still, short of the universe itself participating. Short of late afternoon light pausing as it meant to cross the entranceway, all their thoughts running dry, all blood clotting, everyone becoming as inert as the icon's hidden bones. The schoolchildren appreciated this situation too, and they'd eventually drop it, drift away.

There were tourists with cameras who'd come very close, trying to incorporate Emir's head, with its knobby helmet, and the sarcophagus in the same shot. Many remarked, while reviewing their images, that Emir's expression was very serious. He took it as neither compliment nor criticism. In his vanity, he imagined those pictures celebrated in futurity for the bargain coincidence of *two* great men. Imagined himself, with a few more years' training and experience, being the type to guide their country out of a modern-day mire.

As the hour wore on, the school groups were extracted, replaced only by slanting afternoon rays, and the whole precinct neared its closing time. For the last stretch, crowds were sparse. After a day of challenges, Emir felt cheated by an unexceptional close. The final pilgrims walked fast to the barrier rope, pitched their mental 'prayers' at the sarcophagus, and hurried off again. Emir tipped his agitation into the final march back to the mess.

As a newcomer to the capital, he was lodging in an apartment with four other soldiers. They were quiet, unremarkable men, guarding lonesome after-hours hobbies. Music, television sport, pornography. The fact Emir was only to remain at the mausoleum for a few months, then fling to a different place, somewhat deterred the effort of friendships. After a slow first week, Emir already felt that showing an interest in these housemates may have registered as disingenuous. He'd begun a pattern of dining solo at a local café, which had football on television and bands at weekends. On the evening of the day he'd been harassed by the cardigan-man, the café was largely quiet. He'd brought a book, but was slow to read it, favouring his own mental drift as entertainment. Ordered a dish of beans that reminded him of his mother's cooking. His family, including the uncle, were in a distant mega-city. But the capital, to him, presented as the larger, more impenetrable setting. For example, it was replete with university students; for Emir, the path not taken. If that saving captain hadn't been reassigned, he would have happily spent longer in the mountains.

He was surprised by a couple who chose to sit close, when they might have picked a more secluded spot. Apart from them, the café was hosting only a handful of diners. The couple were more academic than Emir (articulate, well-dressed, but their skins wanted sunlight) and slightly older (thirties). The man's sight was worse than Emir (glasses), and his job permitted longer hair. The woman's hair was longer still, her breasts slightly bigger than Emir's, her manner with the waiter more distracted. Although they were the equivalent of two chairs' distance away, the couple truly paid him no attention, and resumed

a pacy conversation. Emir had finished his food. Given he felt no urgency to return to the apartment, he was making a modest effort at reading after all. But he paused a sentence upon overhearing that proximal woman slip into her discussion, as if by ambush, an accusation the man was having an affair. Her evidence: a positive test she'd recently received. She was largely asymptomatic, but went on to describe a host of unpleasant effects she may have experienced had she gone untreated much longer.

Glad he'd finished eating, Emir presumed other bystanders were halting their meals. The man vigorously denied the charges, his tone wavering from either deceit or the pressure of its own surveillance. The woman said he was a coward for not just admitting it. When their own food arrived – three plates – they observed a short pause, still without any regard for their neighbour. Emir wondered why the woman had chosen this as the environment for a blow-up. It was the sort of conversation better saved for their apartment, or a park bench. Did she fear her partner's moods, feel safer when his reactions could be blunted by strangers? Was she clinging to Emir as a security guard? The man didn't present as a violent type, but one couldn't be sure. Or perhaps the woman hoped to humiliate him via a small crowd, to draw out a quick confession only by his wanting to get it over with? But in such a case, she might have picked a *busier* spot.

The man said he had no idea how she'd acquired the disease. For him, it only stoked suspicions she was the one who'd been unfaithful, and now wanted to obscure her own detours with the path of aggression. The woman replied that, at this point, she really wished she had cheated, what with him conceivably running around behind her back. Her arms flailed to support her anger. The 'security guard' theory turned doubtful. Emir found it extraordinary that even as they'd become stuck on this topic, even as it was escalating, they hadn't decently moved away. He had the uneasy sensation of his limbs filling with energy. There was no painful affair in his own story that could have biased an assessment. He had no fellow-feeling for the man, but neither was he particularly impressed by the woman's staging. She declared her partner was boring, timid, sexually unimaginative. Then, small-minded, with unhealthy dependency on his family. The man rejoindered that she was arrogant, unreflective, a hurricane in all the worst ways. She ironically needed to listen more to herself, he suggested – albeit *objectively*, as a curtailing ploy. Their food was all that was cooling, neglected on the plates between them.

It may have been little surprise that Emir couldn't get back to reading, but his serious discomfort, the activation of his whole organism, was trickier to place. The precepts were sliding off, and it had to be for a stronger reason than the absence of his peacoat, his uniform. He'd maintained polite aversion, for the most part, but now tried eye contact. He even widened his gaze, stupidly, but got nothing in return. He cleared his throat, for the same result. Went louder. His next recourse had to be speech, and the outburst felt regrettable even as he delivered it. He couldn't intercept himself. The words and a wiser, inhibitory reflex were on parallel tracks.

I think you both need to listen to yourselves, he said.

His voice wasn't over-loud, but echoed in the absence of music and football. Yet this definite sound – it rung in his own ears – had no proper

effect. The couple continued barrelling into each other's defects, all the shoddiness they'd endured for a partnership that probably had been dishonoured anyway. They were determined to ignore Emir, or were so blinkered they truly hadn't registered his advice, couldn't imagine it. He was a twenty-three-year-old talking up to blatant elders, after all.

None of us need to hear your conversation, Emir went on, without support. Nevertheless, he tried pointing around the room to imply the rights of other diners. There was a woman (smaller, greyer, timider than he) huddled over a soup-bowl, like it was respite. A seeming father and daughter had only glasses of tea – they were further away from the fracas, better at ignoring it. A waiter and the manager absorbed themselves in the polishing of cutlery, as if they'd each seen such blow-ups dozens of times before, to Emir's 'one'. He may have been similarly unconcerned, if not for his proximity and the corresponding disrespect. After two statements, still no recognition from the fighting couple.

Above the counter that was protecting the waiter and manager, the café kept its obligatory gold-framed picture of the founding father. Benevolent, monochrome face ahead of a billowing national flag. He, at least, was meeting Emir's gaze, and surely would have taken the same side.

Emir pleaded at the couple, *Do you really expect me to just sit here like nothing's going on? Listening to all your weird little details?*

Like how the woman so often looked upon her partner's face with disappointment. Like how she felt herself to be festering with the same emotion, post diagnosis. Like how her sense of worth was obliterated – as if her person were a currency no longer taken seriously. Like how the man now self-reported as a pessimist, whereas once he'd been anything but. She, someone he'd so loved, collapsing into an abominable person had brought him around to the view that time and its pressures could've similarly ravaged anyone; they were part of a doomed race, and truly he was too dark on the whole situation to even contemplate an affair. On and on and on, the shards flying so close to Emir.

The ridiculousness had him scanning the café once more, attempting to spot Yusuf (or somebody of that ilk) monitoring from a corner. He found only a large mirror he hadn't noticed previously, and the forked vein rippling on his forehead, as he'd feared. Emir looked down to his empty plate. Collected his book. Of course, the couple ought to have been the ones ejected, yet he found himself shoving his chair into the table. He scowled back at the staff to condemn their doing nothing. No acknowledgement once more. The founding father, his lone supporter, may even have deserted him for the manner of his exit.

Emir leant over the couple's table, said, *Fine. I'll go fuck myself, then.*

All his cooler selves decried what he was about to do, yet couldn't reach. He spat onto one of the couple's plates, a rice dish – a sharp cobra act, rather than a slow globule. He turned for the door uninterrupted, having at least bought himself a head-start by the surprise of the act. Arms, hands beamed from all the surplus energy. He went out into the cold black night, the busy street, and he took a loose direction, given he was only searching for a path back to the drawing board.