

The Candlelight Patrol

Extract from a story by Peter Sheal

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Next on his checklist is the derelict electrical substation, standing isolated in the wasteland like an abandoned Second World War pillbox. Power lines droop down from the telegraph poles spaced along the track towards it. But he's only driven for a few minutes when a large boulder appears unexpectedly in the headlights, barring the way forward. Mounds of dirt and building rubble border the track but this seems deliberately placed to stop a car driving on. The boulder looks too heavy to move so he edges his patrol car off the track onto the sand and dirt. Immediately he feels the vehicle sinking, the wheels slipping out of control. He stops. There's been heavy rain over the last few days and he could get bogged down. Shifting into reverse and pressing the accelerator, he struggles to back up onto more solid ground, sweat gathering on his forehead, droplets trickling down under his arms as the engine revs. At last, the wheels jerk back onto firmer ground and he can straighten up.

He decides to walk to the substation: he puts Cilla on the lead, takes the heavy flashlight from the passenger seat and steps out of the car's warm security. His headlights shine ahead, picking out more rubble on the track, scraps of litter blown against the substation's wire fence.

Something shifts, a flicker of movement by the wire fence, and in the corner of his eye he sees something. He halts, shining his light around the substation, but everything seems still. He steps forward, scanning the area, giving an intruder the opportunity to run. Still nothing. Conscious of leaving the safety of his patrol car further behind, he advances, planting his feet firmly on the ground. Cilla's barking, pulling him forward - a flicker in his vision, and the flashlight almost catches a low shape fleeing across the waste ground, then lost behind mounds of rubble.

Shocked, he yanks Cilla back. A wild dog or maybe one of the desert foxes that scavenge round the waste dumps? Or a man? Could it have been a man crouching low as he ran for cover? A man escaping from behind the substation? Cilla's still barking, standing up on her back legs and straining to run forward. Rob stays still, forcing himself to calm down, control his breathing and listen into the night sounds - but there's only the steady chirping of the cicada, the wind's low moaning over the wasteland. Was it someone running, hiding behind the mounds of rubble, and escaping now across the spray-fields?

He advances and slowly walks round the substation, examining the chain link fence and holding Cilla close, alert to any movement in the shadows. His flashlight shines through the wire, sweeping round to the grey metal door of the control building and a DANGER sign - a white skull and crossbones and electrical shock markers radiating out. Below is KEEP AWAY in Arabic and English. More Arabic letters are scrawled in white paint on the door and a large rusty padlock hangs safely in place. A polystyrene cup lies trapped under the fence,

some flattened Pepsi and Dr Pepper cans gleaming in the light and a Domino's pizza box has blown against the gate. People have eaten here. But recently? No damage to the wire, no sign of anyone breaking in. Maybe he's getting over-excited, imagining things.

A last sweep of the area with his flashlight and all's clear. He walks back along the track to his patrol car, feeling like a returning hero bathed in welcoming headlights. He opens the door for Cilla to jump inside and settles back into the warmth and Easy Listening sound of John Denver taking him back where he belongs. Past eleven o'clock and time to check in again with the Big House.

"Assalam alikum," Al greets him. "Where are you my friend? Anything to report?"

"I'm near the electrical sub-station. The lights are out in this area."

"Mafi muskallah, no problem my friend – we're testing the system."

"Think I saw a desert fox or dog, something by the substation." Rob almost jokes about Cilla chasing it, but then remembers dogs aren't allowed on patrol. If Rick or Al found out...

"Sure it's an animal?" Al's on the alert. "What did you see?"

Rob isn't sure but if he says that, they'll drive round and catch him with Cilla.

"OK, calm down Al. Four legs not two," he jokes.

A sudden eruption. Cilla cowers on the back seat and, even with his hands clasped over his ears, Rob recoils at the shriek and reverberation as jets rise in formation over the perimeter fence and burst into the air. He watches four heavily laden planes climb and recede into the distance, the gold and purple flare of afterburners fading behind into the night sky. Only three days left before the war starts.

This is taken from the opening chapter of a novel written from the perspective of a Scot working in the Saudi Arabian oil industry.

see POTB 14 for the full chapter