

The Fever Dream of Captain America

by

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DESCRIPTION

Muslims Muslims everywhere—and barely time to round them all up. A mosque frequented by taxi-cab drivers is the latest threat to American ideals.

CHARACTERS

- Uddim Bukhari (Bengali), a cabdriver
- Galal “Jimmy” Omar (Egyptian), FBI agent

SETTING

- Interrogation room: table, two chairs. On or under the table is a buzzer button of some sort.
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BUKHARI seated, wearing a white kufi, loose shirt and pants, sneakers.

Waits.

OMAR enters, wearing a suit, badge clipped to this belt, folder in hand.

They look at each other.

OMAR

Uddim Bukhari. Yes. No.

BUKHARI

Yes.

OMAR

You have prayed today.

BUKHARI

I am praying right now.

OMAR

For.

BUKHARI

I am praying for this to go away.

OMAR

I can understand that. Uddim. Bukhari. I am special agent Galal Omar.

BUKHARI

Have they given you an American name to use?

OMAR

Jimmy. But not for you.

BUKHARI takes a deep deliberate breath, then lets it out slowly. He scans OMAR, cocks his head as if listening.

BUKHARI

Egypt. You still haven't rinsed it out of your voice. In Egypt you were—

OMAR

My parents' son.

BUKHARI

Poor parents, probably, by the sound of you. Smell of you. I know some Egyptian slang for your mother.

OMAR just stands and looks at BUKHARI.

BUKHARI

Because I know several languages, is all I am saying to you—I would never insult your mother. I am going to assume you do not—know several languages, I mean.

OMAR

Assume what you want.

BUKHARI

Perhaps—but I need to be careful—your employer may have repealed the right to assume between the time you took me in and—

OMAR

Mr. Bukhari, no one took you anywhere.

BUKHARI

But—

BUKHARI spreads his hands as if to say, "But I am here."

OMAR

You were asked to come in—

BUKHARI

Being asked by your badge is not being asked.

OMAR

You could have said no.

BUKHARI

You are a funny man: "I could have said no."

OMAR shrugs. He leafs through photos in the folder.

OMAR

Quite a hopping mosque there on First Avenue, Madina Masjid, especially in the morning—so many cabbies, like yourself, coming to the mosque for prayer.

BUKHARI

We pray first, pick up fares after—it maintains a proper balance in a proper life.

OMAR

So much information gets passed around, eh—so much to say, so much to say, so much to say—

BUKHARI

Your script is not working, Mr. Omar—

OMAR

You don't like Dave Matthews.

BUKHARI

The FBI script they gave you—it is not working.

OMAR

Well, true—true true—because I am bored. Because you, Uddim Bukhari, don't really interest me at all.

BUKHARI

Then send me home.

OMAR

What interests me is the “so much to say, so much to say, so much to say” going on at Madina Masjid. Who knows what. Who knows who.

BUKHARI

Whom. You should use “whom.”

OMAR laughs without humor.

OMAR

Who knows whom. Who does what to whom—yes? Who gets to go back to driving his cab. Whose paperwork can get lost. Whose life, after talking with me, can get—difficult.

BUKHARI

Talking with you is not difficult—Egyptians are not difficult. Talking with what you hold in your hand—that—

OMAR waves the folder.

BUKHARI

What are we talking about in what you've got in your hand—

OMAR

The details are not important.

BUKHARI

Because you have no details.

OMAR stands to BUKHARI's left. He indicates the floor area.

OMAR

Here is what is in here for you. Al Qadr—right here, Al Qadr, on your left.

OMAR moves to BUKHARI's right side, indicates the area.

OMAR

And then we cross over to Al Qaria. There is Al Qadr on your left—you know Al Qadr—

BUKHARI

Of course I know what Al Qadr means.

OMAR

I knew you would know because I do have that kind of detail about you. And then you travel to Al Qaria—

BUKHARI

Al Qaria—my judgment day—is that what this is—all that is? Is that what you're trying to tell me, Mr. Omar, with “on the left is Al Qadr, on the right is Al Qaria”—

OMAR sits.

OMAR

Let's say “no”—at least about your judgment day, at least that part—“no” about that for the moment.

An active silence.

OMAR

But a time is coming, like it comes for all of us.

BUKHARI

Your parents—

OMAR

Not important.

BUKHARI

But if you want me to do what you want me to do for you—it costs you nothing to tell me. And it's a good interrogation technique—even your FBI says—

OMAR

My father was a civil servant, in Cairo—lowly, you could call him. Would call him. My mother—a teacher.

BUKHARI

Observant?

OMAR

They observed. They liked Salah Ragab and his jazz, hated the Israeli war, came here, had me. Done. You, I already know details about. From you—the only thing left is for you to give me what I need.

BUKHARI

I have a better mind than you do.

OMAR

I don't doubt it, given your background—

BUKHARI

"We have indeed revealed this Message in the Night of Power / And what will explain to thee what the night of power is?" I can recite all of it, in Arabic, in English, in—

OMAR

And I can't. You are from a better class than me.

BUKHARI

Than "I."

OMAR

See? There you go. What a hick I am. So?

BUKHARI says nothing.

OMAR

What makes you think we don't already have informants in the mosque, in our hip pockets?

BUKHARI still says nothing.

OMAR

How do you think you ended up here with me? Who can you really trust?

BUKHARI

Whom.

OMAR laughs his humorless laugh as he opens the folder again, scans a paper.

OMAR

Tell me, Uddim Bukhari, about Captain America.

BUKHARI looks at OMAR, just the barest hint of a smirk on his face.

OMAR

Tell me about Captain America.

BUKHARI

May I have some water?

OMAR

No.

BUKHARI

Another effective interrogation technique is to offer the subject certain comforts in order to build trust and coöperation.

OMAR hesitates, then leaves. He comes back with a paper cup of water. BUKHARI drinks the water slowly, then deliberately and neatly flattens the cup, and leaves it to one side. OMAR waits.

BUKHARI

I told some of the cabbies the story of the comic book hero Captain America—to amuse them. You know, because of the movie that came out? Jack Kirby, the man who dreamed up Captain America, created a very amusing story.

OMAR

You called what you told them the “fever dream of Captain America.” From my hip pocket.

BUKHARI

It is.

OMAR

I don't think most would call "fever dream" amusing.

BUKHARI

From where your badge sits, no. From where a cabbie sits, who comes to Madina Masjid to pray with others and keep his life proper and straight—"fever dream" can be an amusing pastime.

OMAR waits.

BUKHARI

Why do you want me to tell you this? Americans are responsible for the craziness of Captain America, not I.

OMAR

I read Captain America comics when my parents brought me here—one of the things I did to learn the English I needed.

BUKHARI

This is said to warm me up, like the glass of water, right? You never read them.

OMAR

I did.

BUKHARI looks OMAR over. OMAR pulls a Captain America comic book from the folder, holds it up.

OMAR

Fever. Dream.

BUKHARI

Then you know that this fever dream, the one you read to improve your English—this fever dream started not far from Madina Masjid, right down on Suffolk Street. The story of Steve Rogers a.k.a. Captain America, created by Jack Kirby—immigrant kid, orphan on the Lower East Side, art student wimp. The eugenics serum of the fevered scientists turns the artsy New Yorker wimp into the heaving shield-thrower, justice fighter—

OMAR

"Fever dream"—

BUKARI

The FBI, like the cabbies, has access to the news created every day around the world by the United States—by Captain America—my cabbies, knowing this news, understand “fever dream” right away.

OMAR

As a [threat]—

BUKHARI

Special Agent Omar—really—

OMAR

Because to me, “fever dream” should be read as a threat. “Fever dream” leans towards you having made a threat.

BUKHARI

Against whom?

OMAR

Uddim Bukhari, I know you’re not stupid.

BUKARI

“I’m loyal to nothing except the American Dream.” A direct quote from Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America—he’s not being loyal to the government, your employer. He is being loyal only to his conscience. Would you consider “I’m loyal to nothing except the American Dream” a threat from Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America?

BUKHARI laughs.

BUKHARI

It seems that Captain America had his own “fever dream”—being loyal to the ideals, not to the institutions—fiction can be very amusing—“my cabbies,” as you call them, know this.

OMAR chooses a few more papers.

OMAR

"Fever dream" is a threat against the United States—that much is clear, even if you are trying to be subtle, subtle, subtle like the serpent. Now, let's see—what else are you involved in?

BUKARHI

I am not involved in anything.

OMAR

That's not what I have listed here.

BUKHARI

Extracted from those in your hip pockets.

OMAR

People are eager to be loyal.

BUKHARI

People are eager to feel safe.

OMAR

You tell me the difference, oh subtle one.

BUKHARI

It is not a difference—people will lie to be either one.

OMAR

If a court buys it, that's all that matters to me.

BUKHARI

Lies are not evidence.

OMAR

Ideals, ideals. It doesn't matter, Uddim. We go to war with the army we have. If my hip pockets say you're involved—you're involved. If I want to attach your name to a locker full of explosives—done. If I want to link you to, oh, Yemen—done. "Fever dream" is a threat not because it's the wrong description—

OMAR closes the folder.

OMAR

Definitely not because it's the wrong description.

An active silence.

OMAR

The longer we sit here, the more fares you lose. The longer we sit here, the more Uddim Bukhari's immigration status shifts. The longer we sit here, the more the evidence ripens.

BUKHARI

I'll find another mosque.

OMAR

That won't take you out of our sights. Word will get around that we have talked to you—if it already hasn't—after all, “so much to say”—who talks to whom—

BUKHARI

I'll pray alone.

OMAR

Like Captain America frozen into his block of ice—what a life. And there's always that shifting immigration status thing to worry about. Tick. Tock. Uddim. Bukhari.

An active silence.

BUKHARI

Tell me in what I received my degrees.

OMAR

We're past that.

BUKHARI

It's a simple request.

OMAR

Math was one.

BUKHARI

Pure math.

OMAR

And—

BUKHARI

That's enough. From here, Mecca is—

BUKHARI calculates.

BUKHARI

Roughly at 59 degrees north. Six thousand four hundred and—
eleven miles. May I stand?

OMAR

Stand.

BUKHARI stands.

BUKHARI

Front of the building.

OMAR points. BUKHARI gets his bearings.

BUKHARI

Roughly this way, then.

BUKHARI takes off his sneakers, then takes up the proper first posture for prayer: hands raised, palms out, at the level of the ears and in line with the head. It also looks like an act of surrender.

BUKARHI

I know that you get to leave at the end of the day in perfect
knowledge that you are safe and with the belief that you are loyal.
Take some of that and pray with me.

OMAR

Sit down.

BUKHARI

At least come say the takbir with me, and we'll call it even.

OMAR

Sit down.

BUKHARI

A supplication praising God is usually said—

OMAR

Sit down!

BUKHARI

I am sure you know all of this.

BUKHARI does not sit. Instead, he murmurs a prayer to himself, then lowers his arms, puts on his sneakers, sits.

BUKHARI

Do they provide a place here for you to—

OMAR

Shut. Up.

BUKHARI

Not part of the “fever dream”—I understand. A shame. A shame some—most—of the fiction does not turn out to be real.

OMAR gathers up papers, stands up.

OMAR

You will report to me—

BUKHARI intersperses the lines with the Captain America theme song, sung or spoken.

BUKHARI

When Captain America throws his mighty shield—

OMAR

Every other week—

BUKHARI

All those who chose—

OMAR

Shut up.

BUKHARI

—to oppose his shield must yield—

OMAR

Stop it.

BUKHARI

Freedom of speech. “If he’s led to a fight and a duel is due / Then the red and white and the blue’ll come through”—catchy.

OMAR

I will want to know—

BUKHARI

When Captain America throws his mighty shield—that’s it.

OMAR

Will you bring home enough today to feed your family? The clock is ticking.

An active silence.

BUKHARI

What would you like to know?

OMAR

This is where your degrees will not help you.

BUKHARI

What would you like to know?

OMAR

Are you done being stupid?

BUKHARI

What would you like to know?

OMAR

I want you to be my lower east side ghost. I want you to see if there’s someone at prayers, or at the halal cart, or at the Madina Deli or Sahara East or Atomic Wings who thinks too much about this “fever dream” of yours. In fact, I want you to talk it up even more, really put that “fever” out there and see who rises to the dream—“who,” right, not “whom,” right? Every other week we will confer about Captain America.

BUKHARI

Look at me.

OMAR

No. We're done.

An active silence. OMAR presses the buzzer button.

OMAR

You have to be escorted out of the building. Stand up—someone is waiting for you.

BUKHARI stands up. He and OMAR finally exchange looks.

BUKHARI

We should fear for our souls, you and I. We just shouldn't fear for them the way you want me to fear for mine. Doing that makes you—well, you know what it makes you. I am sure, now, you know what it makes you.

BUKHARI leaves; he takes the flattened paper cup with him. OMAR alone, looking disgusted.

OMAR

Thank you for your coöperation.

OMAR slams his hand or fist down against the table.

OMAR

Allahu. Fucking. Akbar.

A pause, then OMAR pivots to face the way BUKHARI had faced. OMAR's lips move as he says the tikbar to himself, though he cannot bring himself to raise his arms and hold his face toward Mecca.

Blackout as the Captain America theme plays in some distorted fashion. Or not.