

DAVID BUCHANAN

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*Third Country Nationals*

**B**EN BUZZED MY DOOR BELL the first week I was in Jubail, a town on the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia. When I opened the door he asked me for something that sounded like “Teenoo?” I had no idea what he wanted, so I offered him Kiwi-Strawberry Snapple from the chow hall; I offered bottled water; I offered Dr. Pepper. But he didn’t want any of it. I stepped back and gestured for him to just come inside, but he threw up his hands and said, “Nooooooooo. Noooooooooo. No, Sir!” and walked away.

Three days later the door bell buzzed again and Ben stood there in the same blue cotton coveralls. This time I extended my hand, “I’m Dave.” He shook it and said, “Bendar.” I repeated it, but my honky accent made him cringe so I said, “Ben?” He nodded and smiled.

This time though, Ben had been practicing. After the introductions, he slowly and clearly said, “Tooo-nah,” opening his mouth wide on the “nah.” I ran to the kitchen, grabbed a can of albacore tuna in spring water, and gave it to him. He nodded thanks—“Shukran”—and disappeared out the front gate. I felt like a great man, the master diplomat.

Ben stopped by our villa every week. I stocked up on tuna from the commissary in Riyadh and watched out the front window in the mornings. Eventually he started accepting Snapple and bottled water, slipping them into the back pocket of his coveralls. He offered to wash our truck, a Toyota Land Cruiser, and I paid him \$15. And every week he disappeared out the front gate with a can of tuna. I joked with my coworkers that I liked Ben so much I wanted to take him home with me to be my butler.

Ben told me that he first came to Saudi Arabia three days after his wedding in Bangladesh. That was thirteen years ago. Since then, he’d been home twice, and he

has three children. I told him I was in the United States Air Force and that I didn't have a wife or kids. Our conversations were short, always under a minute, and when I ran out of things to say or ask I handed him a can of tuna and a can of Snapple and he left.

Once, back inside the villa, a coworker of mine paused his Play Station II game. "You know," he said, "there are more TCNs in Saudi Arabia than native Saudis. Good thing you and that guy are such good friends; maybe he'll remember you when the TCNs revolt."

I asked him why there were so many.

"Because the Saudis are lazy," he said, "it's below them to do any manual labor so they just bring in these guys from Pakistan or Bangladesh to do it for them."

Ben worked a number of villas in the area. We passed him once pushing a lawn mower down the middle of the street with meter after meter of looped extension cords hanging from his neck. I beeped my horn and waved. "Where did ole Ben find grass in Saudi Arabia?" I asked.

Once I interrupted him taking a nap on a weight bench inside the air conditioned tent that served as our gym. Another time I was cutting behind the post office on the way back to my villa. I turned the corner behind a truck-sized air conditioning unit and tripped over Ben kneeling there for his afternoon prayer. I saw where he stashed his prayer rug, and I saw a row of bottled water stacked against the foundation.

He was cleaning our truck once when, through the window, I saw this great arc of water spraying towards our Land Cruiser. The water hose was too short to reach and so instead of asking us to move the truck closer Ben was standing back, thirty feet away with his thumb over the end, trying to shower the whole vehicle like he was watering grass.

Another time our drain in the kitchen got plugged and I asked Ben to help us out. We agreed on \$5. He came in, pried up the drain cover and reached down through the pooled water, feeling around for the clog. Eventually, he found what he was looking for, stood up, shrugged out of his coveralls and took his T-shirt off. With the arms of the coveralls tied around his waist he reached to the bottom of the drain again and fished around, scraping with his fingernails. He pulled back a handful of hair and dirt and sludge and dead cockroaches, and the water rushed down with a great slurping sound. He reached over, gently piled the crap on top of his spread T-shirt, declined the paper towels I offered, bundled up the T-shirt around the gunk and went outside. At the road he shook out his T-shirt and put it back on.

"That Ben," I told the guys in the office over my shoulder, "really sacrifices for the job."

A few weeks later, I saw a skinny feral cat run around the back of my villa when I pulled up. Public Health had emailed that we could get rat poison to kill any cats we found since most of them were rabid. I went to see where the little brown cat ran to, and around the back of my villa was Ben, poking a hole in a tuna can with a screwdriver.

“Wait,” I said. And I ran inside to get him a can opener and a fork. Ben took them without a word and put them in his back pocket.

After that, I didn’t see Ben for a while. A bunch of US Marines were coming ashore to train some Saudi Marines and I got tagged to be part of the planning cell. So I was busy and away from the villa most of the time except to sleep. The US Marines were going to sleep in some old barracks that were built back during the first gulf war. My job was to walk through and make sure everything was up to American standards. And everything was for the most part. Each bunk was engraved with “Made in Detroit” and the concrete floors were stamped with “Navy Seabee,” the Navy’s mobile construction force. I had a bundle of money from the Saudi government so I ordered a dozen air conditioners and 200 new mattresses and linens to go with each bunk. I bought pallets of bottled water and three big screen TVs.

The sleeping area was just a little dirty, but the bathrooms hadn’t been used since 1991. The pipes were all rusted out and dripping and the floors were covered with a light green fuzzy mold. Along one side were what my boss called “Saudi-style shitters”: there was a hole in the floor for squatting and on the wall above the hole was the shower head.

“I guess without toilet paper, you definitely want to shower after you shit,” my boss said.

I made a note to buy toilet paper.

We were afraid we might have to do the cleaning ourselves, but during our meeting the next day the Saudi general, General Shami, pointed at me and said he’d bring in “one hundred TCN” to scour and scrub.

On the morning before the Marines came ashore, I got a call on my cell phone. It was General Shami, “Cap-ee-ran, the TCN, they clean now. Everything.” I drove over to the barracks and there were three beat-up old school buses out front and TCNs in blue coveralls lounging everywhere. Some were napping underneath the buses; some were grudgingly picking up trash. TCNs on trash duty didn’t carry bags; they just picked up a couple pieces of trash and moseyed back to the truck which was usually parked in the shade a hundred yards away. So I called the General back and he sent over Sgt. Bakir, a lean smiling man, who came over with a megaphone and started giving orders.

I decided to get out of the way so I went and listened to NPR out of Bahrain in my air-conditioned truck while they worked. When I thought of something

that needed to be done, I told Bakir and he told a group of TCNs. He had them painting rocks white and raking the sand out front and scrubbing the bathroom floors and fixing the plumbing. Sgt. Bakir shouted over and over, "The Americans they be here tomorrow!"

I saw Ben. I wanted to say Hi, but he was busy loading some old air conditioners that were stacked in the corner of one of the barracks into a flatbed truck Bakir brought with him. I kept an eye out for him later, but I never saw him again.

At the end of the day, I brought the truck with all the new bed sheets and linens and had Bakir explain that one set went on each bed. When I left, a dozen TCNs were carrying in the last of the blankets.

In the morning the Marines hit the beach and moved in. But when they moved into the barracks, each bunk had a stack of laminated pamphlets and flyers on the pillow. The top flyer was a color image of the earth draped in the American flag. A spear stabbed through the flag and into the earth directly through the Saudi peninsula on the map of the earth. The spear drew a great welling of blood from the pierced earth and flag. And the usual field of stars on the bleeding American flag had been replaced by one large Star of David.

I thought it was pretty benign and quite clever even. But the Marine colonel was furious and the Saudis were contrite. "You invited us here!" he shouted at a meeting that afternoon.

General Shami shrugged and said, "You are friends. We find who do this. And they be happy not long."

As the exercise was going on, rumors flew about the TCNs that had been cleaning out the barracks the night before the Marines arrived. I thought that Ben might tell me something, but a new guy took over working around the villa right after the exercise began.

"The Saudis don't mess around when they want to know something," my boss said.

Four weeks passed; the exercise was over; the Marines went back out to their boat, and I still hadn't seen Ben. I asked the new guy where Ben was, but he didn't speak English and didn't even want to try to figure out what I was asking.

Two weeks before I was set to go home, I got in my truck and was hit by a nauseating smell and I jumped out fighting the urge to vomit. It was like a cat had peed all over the seats. But it was worse. Something was dead too. The truck hadn't been driven for days and it was well over 100 degrees every day.

I opened the back window and there on the floor was that feral cat that lived around my villa. It was bloated and leaking. And somebody had dumped out two or three cans of tuna all over my seats. Beside the cat was a cardboard box full of flyers identical to the one they found in the barracks.

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