

# Arsonist

## Jennifer Linnaea

The first thing that happened was they moved him to a larger room. When they left him there he stood, looking at it, wondering what it meant. The new room was as plain as his old room – a cot, a squat toilet, a recycled plastic chair and a table for writing – but it was ... different. It had been freshly whitewashed. The furniture was, not new, but without the quality of neglect that his old had. His new room had a window that looked out on an empty lot. Weeds grew through cracks in the concrete. He lay down on the cot and closed his eyes.

The second thing that happened was the old man. A prisoner like himself, in a prisoner's green clothing. Green, the prophet's color, the color to remind them of God, that they might repent. The old man came into the lot one day and gave it a long, hard look. He and the jailer exchanged words – their mouths moved but the sound did not carry.

Beyond the empty lot, a high fence topped with razor wire and punctuated with guard towers. Beyond that, a world that the man, whose name was Jamil, tried to forget about. It had changed. The skyscrapers had been dismantled to reveal the hills beyond. The call to prayer still sounded, but the other noise – the highway into downtown Amman that ran past the prison walls – was less. He wanted to wonder what these things meant, but he did not dare, for to wonder was to care, and to care only led to suffering.

Jamil was called into a small, square room with a table and two chairs. He sat in one chair. In another, a small, smiling woman, her headscarf mauve with black spirals. Jamil flushed with nervousness and desire.

"I am Na'ima Majali, from the Center for Restorative Justice. King Talal the Second has decreed that all prisoners who so desire may have their sentences re-assessed."

Jamil did not care.

She looked at a stack of papers before her. "It says here you were imprisoned for starting a fire. It says the fire spread and killed three people, two of them children."

Jamil did not care. He had never meant to kill any children. He had been angry at Mr. Abdullah, his boss. He thought about that while Na'ima Majali read the names of his victims. He plucked at his green sleeve.

When she was done with that she said, "The next of kin, Ms. and Mr. Abu-Taleb and Mr. Sa'id, have all agreed to meet with you. They say they are ready to put the past behind them. What do you say to that?"

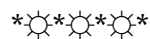
Jamil opened his mouth to say, "I don't care." He got as far as "I" before the words stuck in his throat.

Na'ima Majali gave him a kindly look. He loved her, he understood then.

"Yes," he croaked.

The third thing that happened was a truck came and poured gravel over the concrete lot. The solar panels on the truck flowed across its curves like a second skin. Later the old man returned, though the afternoon was blindingly hot, and pulled a rake through the gravel so it left long, straight rows of grooves. The old man spent many hours at it, and when he was done the lot looked like gray corduroy cloth.

Jamil could not sleep that night for being tormented by burning children. Their blackened, peeling fingers dug in his pockets and clutched tiny handfuls of his corduroy *kaffiya*.



They came and took him out of the prison, right under the razor wire, down the dusty lane to a smaller building in the prison's shadow. He wiped his palms on his thighs; even this early in the morning the air was stifling.

He was the last to arrive. Like a late dinner guest he slunk into the room while everyone turned to stare at him. They were older, now, than at the trial: Ms. and Mr. Abu-Taleb, who used to be parents; Mr. Sa'id, who had lived with his sister in an apartment next door to the shop where Jamil worked. Their jaws were set in hard lines, and he looked around for Na'ima Majali, but she was not there.

A mild-voiced man introduced Jamil and said that they were to begin. He did not call Jamil a murderer, but one of the guards gave Jamil a pitying glance, which shamed him. Across a wide table, Ms. Abu-Taleb met his eyes, her lower jaw trembling only just slightly.

Jamil had not been allowed to speak at the trial. Now they asked him questions and Jamil heard himself answer. He told them about Mr. Abdullah, and about his old room, with the neglected furniture, and his new room, with the view of the old man and the rows of perfectly raked gravel. Mr. Abu-Taleb sat with his hands in his lap where Jamil couldn't see them, but Mr. Sa'id held a handkerchief in his right hand which he used to unashamedly and frequently dab his eyes.

The children had been brothers. Ms. Abu-Taleb told everyone in the room about it, looking not at Jamil but at the man in charge. They had been bright children, gifted children who loved to sing and who brought their mother bouquets of the jasmine flowers that grew on their balcony. It was not fair for them to die because Jamil was

unhappy with his job. Jamil was an arrogant son of a whore.

Mr. Abu-Taleb put his hand on his wife's shoulder. They had been good children, he said. Bright children. Was Jamil sorry for what he had done? Mr. Abu-Taleb wanted to hear that he was sorry, that he burned with guilt and shame. Then maybe he would be able to stop thinking about Jamil with murder in his thoughts and forgive, as God intended men to forgive one another.

Mr. Sa'id blew his nose, softly, into his wet handkerchief.

"I am sorry," Jamil said. He was sorry with every fiber of his being.

Mr. Sa'id stood up. "You killed my sister. I found out on a business meeting in Sudan. I hope you never have to experience anything like that in your life." He sat down again. His shoulders shook.

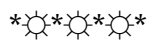
"I am sorry," Jamil said.

"I didn't ask you to be sorry!" Mr. Sa'id said.

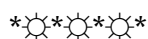
"I'm sorry," Jamil said again. On the wall behind Mr. Sa'id's head, a fly crawled out an open window. The guards had left the room, leaving only Jamil and the man in charge and these people.

Ms. Abu-Taleb said Jamil had been in prison a long time, and prison was a terrible place. But she didn't want people like Jamil running around and killing innocents.

Jamil said prison wasn't so bad anymore. He was filled with the need to reassure Ms. Abu-Taleb. Mr. Sa'id said prison is a very bad place, because it takes away a man's dignity. Jamil said nothing. The man in charge told them it was time to adjourn.



Every afternoon someone came and raked the lot. Mostly the old man, but if he was not there another prisoner took his place, smoothing out yesterday's lines, contemplating the empty lot, starting anew. In their green jumpsuits they looked like the pieces of turquoise sold at the *souk* in Jamil's childhood.



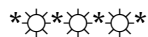
Jamil was back in the room outside the prison walls, which had become more real to him in the half-dozen times he'd been there than his prison room had ever been. Today, the mild-voiced man told them, would be their final session. Mr. Abu-Taleb wanted to know about Jamil's mother, so Jamil told him. Then Mr. Sa'id wanted to know if he was able to download photographs in prison. He told Jamil when he got

out he should look up the famous rock gardens of Mr. Matsumoto. Did Jamil know that the garden in the prison was modeled after it, as part of the Prison Beautification Project?

“No,” Jamil said. “I don’t think I’ve seen it.”

“Sure you have! It’s right outside your window!”

Next, Ms. and Mr. Abu-Taleb told him all about their sons again. They cried some more, but their crying was different this time. Jamil no longer needed to watch the wall behind their heads when they spoke.



The fourth thing that happened, six months later, was that Mr. Sa’id sent him a New Year’s card. On the front, a picture of carefully raked gravel. The fifth thing that happened is that Na’ima Majali came back.

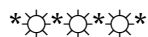
“The Council for Reintegration has reviewed your case,” she said. “Your sessions went extremely well. Assuming your continued good behavior, you’ll be released next month. We’ve found a place for you in a prisoner’s reintegration co-op until you can find a job and an apartment. Don’t worry — you’ll have lots of help.”

Jamil said nothing.

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t know.”

Na’ima Majali smiled at him.



The world had changed. Beyond the razor wire, fewer cars drove on the highway. Jordan had a bullet train now, and buses ran quietly down the winding streets. He went to the *souk*; he sat in the high seats in the old Roman coliseum; he listened as his new friends explained how to use the latest smart pens, and virtual libraries, and dish sanitizers. He bought himself a prayer rug and remembered how to use it.

A few months later he found an apartment in a new part of town, out in the hills. It looked like a rock, like the hill had sired it; the inside was clean and comfortable. His bedroom window looked out over the dusty hillside, stubborn weeds clinging to cracks in the rocks. These were the first things he saw every morning when he opened his eyes.