

‘The Prophet’

God does not dwell in nightclub queues. Kadeem has learned this.

He is always wary of Pandora’s at 5am, when her box is opened and her many evils spill into the street to form a taxi line. But there are fares to be earned from those whose fingers are too addled for rideshare apps.

He prefers to drive the young girls on teetering heels whose masks have slipped, though their improbable eyelashes remain. They are lambs at a time when wolves prowl, and he must be their shepherd.

He pulls alongside a girl swaying in a miniskirt who crumples into the backseat. Her perfume fills the cab as she searches for someone who is not there, then closes the door.

‘Where can I take you?’

‘Murray Road, Preston.’ Her eyes do not see him.

Kadeem nods.

He drives and she stares at the space between them. When next he checks the rear-view mirror, her face is lit by the glow of her phone and she is crying. She smears mascara with the back of her hand.

‘I am sorry,’ Kadeem says. He does not have to speak but knows God would want it.

She regards him now.

‘My boyfriend ... just left me there.’

Through the pre-dawn streets of Melbourne’s north, Kadeem listens to the many instances of commitment ambivalence on the part of Jarrod until they arrive at Murray Road, Preston. As the girl settles her fare, he says:

‘Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.’

She ponders this as she opens the door.

‘I feel like you stole that off Instagram.’

‘Or maybe Instagram stole it from someone else?’

The girl smiles. ‘Thank you.’ She turns and waves.

His father was wrong when he said studying literature would be of no use to anyone. The soothing words of Gibran had saved his life.

Here, in this new country of second chances, students of medicine clean toilets, engineers park cars and scientists remove chewing gum from shopping centre floors.

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Kadeem had chosen well. Literature, like taxi driving, provides direction, especially at night when terrors can erupt from the dark and quiet. This is his time to offer safe passage, just as he has been offered. God is good. He must not allow himself to think otherwise.

The rising sun bleeds crimson over the Westgate Freeway.

It is pension day and Kadeem has a regular booking to collect Allan Johnston from outside Aldi at Keilor West.

Allan catches the first bus to get his groceries before the crowds, but he says it's beyond him to carry his bags home on the bus anymore.

Kadeem likes to arrive early just to see the look on Allan's face when he finds his taxi waiting for him next to the trolley return. It reminds Kadeem there is always joy to be found, even outside Aldi.

'Mate, you're a bloody lifesaver.'

Kadeem bows. 'Not yet, Allan. I am still learning to swim.' Kadeem thinks this is a good Australian joke.

Allan talks about the weather, how much things cost and how nice it is to sit in a warm car. Then he talks about the weather, how much things cost and how nice it is to sit in a warm car. Allan doesn't notice and Kadeem doesn't mind. He likes the way Allan talks to him like an old friend. He doesn't have these anymore.

They pull into Allan's driveway and Kadeem lifts Allan under the arms and guides him up the steps.

'Stay for some tucker, mate?' Allan says.

'That would be lovely,' Kadeem replies.

Allan chooses a tin of tomato soup and Kadeem warms it over the gas stove. They eat together at the table in Allan's old kitchen where he's stuffed newspaper into all the cracks to keep it warm in winter.

Allan tells his favourite story of how he met his wife Bonnie at a dance in a country hall. Allan forgets many things, but he remembers everything about Bonnie. He remembers how they used to plant their spring garden together. He wanted more veggies; she wanted more flowers. Now every time he sees a bloody daffodil, he thinks of her.

One day Kadeem will tell Allan about his wife, but he cannot speak of her yet.

Allan has toast with his soup but Kadeem never does because he knows Allan's loaf of bread has to last the week. They always share a teabag though.

When they raise their chipped china, Kadeem says:

'In the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures

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For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.'

'Too right, Shakespeare,' Allan says. They clink cups and drink their weak tea. There is a street in South Yarra Kadeem cannot enter. Perhaps it is the white lines of the apartments, or the date palms, or the sweep of the road, but it sets his heart hurtling in his chest until he struggles for breath.

It is in avoiding South Yarra on a winter's night Kadeem sees a woman and a child leap in front of his taxi.

Some white electricity detonates inside him, melting time and place, and he understands God's message.

He pulls to the kerb and the woman bundles a small boy into the back before throwing herself after him. They cower on the floor and Kadeem pulls away quickly. The woman's heart is hurtling.

'You are safe,' he says.

The last time he said this, he was wrong. But now he is here, in the land of second chances.

The woman is looking for a place. She can't remember the name, or even where it is, but Kadeem knows. He calls it the House of Women and he understands he must never take any man to this place.

It is a bitter night and the woman and her child are wearing pyjamas. Kadeem passes his coat over the seat and turns up the heater. As they drive into the quiet of the suburbs, Kadeem sings the song he once sang to his own little boy. It is low and sweet, even through tears.

When it's clear they are sharing the road with no other cars, the woman and child rise from the floor and huddle together on the back seat, Kadeem's coat draping across their shoulders.

The woman is lost somewhere. She closes her eyes.

Kadeem watches the boy in the rear-view mirror as his song reaches its end. Neither of them wipes their tears and they draw the bravery of that from one another.

When they arrive at the house on the edge of the city, there is a yellow light above the door. It looks like any other house, except the light is always on.

'I'm sorry,' the woman says. 'I don't have any money.'

Kadeem turns to her. He pulls out a slim fold of notes from his top pocket. 'It is not much but take this.'

She clasps his hands for a moment and cries. She does not believe she deserves such kindness. This will be her lesson to learn. The boy is stirring on her lap.

Kadeem carries the child wrapped in his coat as the woman rings the doorbell. They wait to hear movement in the house.

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The boy fits perfectly in his arms. The familiar smell of a small warm child sets his bones weeping.

'What am I going to do?' she whispers.

Kadeem has asked this question of God many times. But he also knows the answer:

'You shall be free when your days are not without a care nor your nights without a want and a grief, But rather when these things girdle your life and yet you rise above them naked and unbound.'

She laughs. 'Seriously, what are you? An angel or something?'

The door opens and a large grandmotherly type who does not expect sleep takes the woman in her embrace.

When it is time for Kadeem to return the child who does not belong to him, he holds the boy's small fingers briefly to his lips. The child permits the indulgence, as if understanding there is another small boy somewhere, or perhaps nowhere, this night. Whose fingers cannot be kissed.

It is then the book falls from Kadeem's coat pocket. Its words were written in the old world where no serious student of literature would ever admit its prose had sung to him. It had appeared unexplained on the front seat of his taxi on a night with no moon when terrors stalked him on every street corner.

The book is beloved, sacred, magical; however, Kadeem understands what God intends. He picks it up and presses it to the boy's chest. 'One day you read this,' he says.

As he walks back to his taxi in this land of second chances, he thanks God. He is naked, but perhaps one night closer to being unbound.

1,499 words

Kadeem's wisdoms originate from his hero Kahlil Gibran, from his work 'The Prophet', first published 1926. The words appear in the 1971 edition, published by William Heinemann Ltd London, on pages 16, 56, 70.