

## The Attic

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

On a damp and overcast fall morning, the Levinstons arrive at Prospect Cemetery in their family electric vehicle. After a quick turn into the south entrance, they meander slowly through the different plots of the oldest cemetery in Fenshaw County. After a slight uphill section, they spot the familiar fountain spraying water upward from the center of a small duck pond. Once arriving at Plot D, they station their vehicle on the side of the narrow road and exit to pay their respects to Maude and Ebenezer Levinston.

“Don’t forget the wreath, Alexander!” Helen Levinston says to her son.

“Got it mom.” Alexander replies after grabbing the botanical offering from the trunk of the car.

At the foot of the familiar sycamore tree where the grave of Alexander and Heidi’s grandparents was located, Helen and her husband Tom say a few words by the headstone as the wreath is delicately placed in an upright position.

“See you next fall dad.” Tom says just before his family leaves the grave-site and get back into their car to drive back into the downtown core.

Just nearby in the adjacent plot, another oval-shaped headstone can be found with the name “Jabari” inscribed in letters accompanied by succinct Arabic text. Due to tragic circumstances during the War in \_\_\_\_\_, the Jabaris vanished and were never found at the end of the prolonged and brutal conflict. Based on a will retrieved by their mosque following their disappearance, the name of the two parents and their three kids is inscribed in the headstone without any date for their passing. A simple message can be found that reads: *“Lost but never forgotten”*. A yellow ginkgo tree providing shade over the grave had begun to shed its fan-shaped leaves partially covering the Arabic portion of the inscription.

Taking advantage of the slightly above-seasonal fall weather, the Abbotts plan to finish their renovations which had been on-going since the spring when they signed the lease to their new home in the trendy and slightly upscale Forest Glen neighbourhood. After excavating the small attic, visible from the street as a diminutive circular window with wood panels creating a barrier from the sun’s rays, Wayne Abbott accidentally knocks in a small portion of the wall in the darkened space where a small empty bookshelf stood.

“Honey! Come check this out! There’s another section here behind the shelf!”

“What do you mean Wayne? You said we were going to repaint that part of the wall by the shelf with a slightly lighter colour.”

"I accidentally knocked through the wall without realizing there's a whole other hidden part back here! Come check it out!"

Soon, Wendy Abbott joins her young husband after climbing the small flight of stairs to get to the third floor of their new Victorian home.

"Change of plans, Honey. Let's see if we can create a big enough hole here to look inside. Can you go get the flashlight?"

"How much room is there behind the shelf, Wayne?"

"Judging by the wall and how it slopes along the roof, I'm guessing there's a whole small secret annex like in Anne Frank's home."

"Ok, I'll be right back. Why don't move the shelf so that there's more room to maneuver."

After putting on safety glasses and some other renovating PPE, Wayne Abbott uses a sledgehammer and a few other tools to knock down a small portion of the attic wall. Also donning safety glasses and a face mask, Wendy shines a small flashlight into the opening.

"Holy smokes! There's a whole bunch of stuff in there!" Wayne shouts out with excitement.

"I might be able to squeeze in there. Looks like a hidden storage area. Let me try to get in!"

"Careful, there could be nails and other hazards, Honey!"

"Wow!" Wendy shouts out from within the annex. "There's a whole set of paintings here!"

"Really?"

"Not only that, there's a small crib and a few boxes that look like photo albums and journals."

"How did this stuff get put back here?"

"Good question... Way a sec, there's another part of the wall here that opens up like a small wooden door."

At this very moment, Wendy pulls a hinge on another section of the attic wall with cobwebs around it to let her husband into the secret portion of the attic.

"Never would have guessed this wall would be a door. The seams are all hidden and you have to give it quite a push."

"You think this artwork is worth anything, Honey?"

“They must have been Muslims... You notice these prayer mats. They must have hidden in here at times to pray or something.”

“I’m going to get an expert to look into this artwork. It looks like Islamic art... I can’t quite read the name of the artist signing in Arabic at the bottom here.”

“Maybe we should contact the Islamic Heritage Centre of \_\_\_\_\_ or something.”

The following morning, Wayne and Wendy skip their daily renovation work and head over to the Islamic Heritage Centre for a special appointment. Along with them are images of the art pieces and a dusty and worn book containing daily diary entries written primarily in Arabic. After stationing their small SUV in the parking lot, they head into the Centre through a series of rounded doors, aligned with a large crescent moon high atop the roof. Upon entering the Director’s office, they are offered to take a seat by his bureau.

“Thank you for taking the time to stop in today. I understand you made a find when you were renovating your attic.” The Director says with a slight foreign accent.

“Yes. We were quite surprised to find a small part of the attic that was hidden behind a wall. Inside we have found a set of five paintings... We’re not sure about their value, but judging by the state of the annex, they must have been hidden away for at least thirty or forty years.”

“Let me have a look at the photographs you took.” The director says after Wayne puts his tablet on the desk, revealing a larger tableau. “What an astonishing triptych! I think that could be an authentic Al-Hajj panel art piece!”

After assessing four other art pieces signed with the prestigious Arabic lettering for Al-Hajj, the Director delves into the leather-bound book containing diary entries from the late nineties and turn of the millennium. After quickly perusing the short blurb in the cover page along with some short entries, the Director removes his reading glasses and says to the Abbotts: “Judging by these passages, it appears the attic annex was once the property of the Jabari family. Like many well-off Muslims from that era, they may have felt at risk of being reported to the National Security Information Services (NSIS), who were involved in mass deportation during the Great Purge. Many families from Islamic milieus like this one lost their homes and prized possessions when they were rounded up and flown to camps like \_\_\_\_\_ where they most often died as experimental subjects.”

“This is a whole lot to take in today.” Wendy Abbott says to the Director.

“Why don’t we go home, talk about this together over supper and come back tomorrow once we’ve decided whether to donate or sell what we’ve just found here.” Wayne Abbott says to his wife.

“I’m available tomorrow afternoon at 1:15pm. Please consider that these possessions are not only of substantial monetary value, but are reveal the true fabric and resilience

of the Islamic people of \_\_\_\_\_, in particular during the Great Purge of 2001-2025.” The Director says before the Abbotts prepare to exit his corner office.

Four days later, a small gray van arrives to the Abbott home just before noon. A man and a woman with name badges exit the van and walk up to the front gate where renovations are still on-going. After heading up the front steps, covered by ocre-tinged Maple leaves, they ring the door-bell. Soon, the art pieces are handed over by the Abbotts to the representatives from the Salah Khan Museum. The pieces, which were confirmed to be painted by Al-Hajj, were listed in an Iranian registry for art lost or stolen during the early years of The Great Purge.

One day prior, the journal entries and photo albums of the Jabari family were also donated by the Abbotts to the archives of the Islamic Heritage Centre of \_\_\_\_\_. From this brief and compelling chronicle of the end of their lives in their Forest Glen home and hidden-away attic annex, an inscription is added to the family headstone in Prospect Cemetery by the current Imam of the Jabari family’s mosque.

*“To the Jabari family, who were deported and killed in \_\_\_\_\_ camp between the years of 2001-2005 of The Great Purge. You are part of the shining light that guides us eternally.”*

The End