



FEARFUL MASTER

ARTHUR LAWRENCE

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How soon we forget history ... Government is not reason.
Government is not eloquence. It is force. And, like fire, it is
a dangerous servant and a fearful master.

— George Washington

ONE

“HOW LONG WILL THIS TAKE?”

“Until your risk factor is determined.”

“I was sent here by an agency of the Canadian government.”

“We don’t trust all our own agencies, let alone Canada’s. What agency?”

“It’s ... in our Department of Public Safety.”

“Accident Prevention?” Heavy sarcasm.

“My friend is meeting me here at the airport.”

“He will be paged and told you are delayed. A *courtesy* we provide.” He pushes up his glasses, perhaps to be recognized for this accommodation, but immediately lowers them again to refocus on his monitor. Jason sees him as a man of fifty-something with an expression close to scornful. He wears

the gray SECOR¹ uniform, the peaked cap on his desk. He would be one of a million men around the world, mostly in uniform, who are empowered by some authority—the state, the military, the church, the school—and who bar the way of travelers, refugees, applicants, students, any kind of supplicant. They are the gatekeepers of society.

“You went to Egypt last year.” Spoken as an accusation.

“It’s there—on my passport. To visit my aunt and uncle.”

“You come from Egypt.”

“You can see I was born in Canada. My parents came from Lebanon.” He had expected a friendly welcome from SECOR. He still does, but this chilly guardian has to be bypassed first. Bil will have driven fifty miles to meet him and must now be fretting in uncertainty somewhere in the terminal.

He was peeled off right at the ramp. After the hours of encapsulation on the flights from Ottawa, pawing through the debris of his mind; after descending through clouds that he finally recognized were not just cloud but cloud thickened by smoke; after he noticed the wavering orange of brushfires below; after scanning the acres of lights before debarking, glassy-eyed, he was too numb to be surprised when he was elbowed by a pair of SECORs in gray and led through the back hallways on the perimeter of the terminal. A door had

1 SECOR: The United States Security Corps. The hugely expanded replacement of the Department of Homeland Security.

opened only after prompting from a keypad.

It had crossed his blurred mind that this must be an official, if private, welcome. He must be about to meet his new superior. He hesitated to ask, remembering his orders. After traversing several passages, all exuding the sterile atmosphere of any airport, they had turned into a subdued chamber like a great cave. Then a long wait. He had expected SECOR technique to be immaculate, but not to be used on him. He's not a candidate for intimidation: he's clean. He works for an agency of his own government; he's been seconded now to an agency of an ally. Anyway, his psyche is bruised enough nowadays that these SECOR preliminaries are almost a welcome diversion.

He hasn't visited this country for years, but he knows something of what to expect. His own post in Ottawa falls under the umbrella of state security, and here it's far more intense. Crossing their border is touchy. You can't take your bags until SECOR verifies them as the same ones you checked in, duly tagged as having been sniffed by both dog and machine. Then the scrutiny in the Immigration line, where you look into a digital reader to compare your retina print to the one on your passport. SECOR scans all incoming passenger profiles. Since Canadians of foreign birth are so often shunted aside for interrogation, few now travel here. The country's inhospitable fence has reduced tourism to a trickle. Jason appreciates such vigilance; Canada is also less hospitable now toward visitors of questionable pedigree. But this Gray Man seems more

than meticulous—he’s hostile. The gray uniform gives him the heft of authority. If he wore a suit like a clerk, would he be so intimidating? As a clerk he might be courteous, even obsequious. In uniform, he’s disdainful.

As Jason waits for him to finish punching keys and absorbing the hidden data on his monitor, he listens to the indistinct exchanges nearby, presumably shielded in cubicles like this one. He can just make out sharp voices questioning and muted responses, some hesitant, some overeager. A spurt of accented English is incomprehensible. A tang of fear infuses another reply. A group of applicants must be waiting nearby for another Gray Man to be freed up; he picks up a murmured exchange, several voices in a foreign cadence, suddenly silenced by “*Shut up there!*”

He looks back at his own Gray Man, who returns a flick of his eyes in Jason’s direction. He can feel the hostility without understanding its origin. Perhaps just resentment for foreigners nurtured by the endless chain of them that serve up problems at his desk.

“Do you have dual citizenship?”

“No, just Canadian.”

“Did you go to any other countries during your trips to the Middle East?”

“None. There would be a stamp on my passport.”

“If you passed through a border checkpoint.”

“You think I sneaked into some other country?”

The interrogator is unruffled. “You speak Arabic?”

“Enough to manage.”

“So you communicated with your contacts in that language?”

“Contacts? I spoke with my relatives and friends. In Arabic. Also in English and French. They’re mostly fluent in all three. Lots of educated Egyptians speak several languages.”

“You Canadians are proud of all your languages, aren’t you?”

“We only have two. And most people speak only one.”

“Your religion?”

“Nothing to speak of. My parents are Maronites.”

“Do you believe in God?”

“*Pardon?*” Only an intimate friend (or perhaps a minister) would ask such a question in Canada, and coming from an official it’s just bizarre, like being asked your sexual inclination by a bank teller. He studies his interrogator—he’s not sure whether he’s being baited. Gray Man’s mouth, tight-lipped, shows a hint of upturn at its corners, as if having scored a hit. “I suppose everyone accepts that there’s some kind of pattern in the universe, whatever we call it,” Jason says.

“Atheist.” He appears to key that in, then looks up. “Lots of them in Canada, so I hear. We have to be careful about you people.”

“We’re less dangerous than you believers.” But it gets no rise from this remote bureaucrat.

Jason is very tired. Not just from the long flight and arriving in the darkness, but from the accumulation of nights

when his mind had run from sleep and then days when it crawled through the hours with half-lit attention, all of that ongoing for weeks.

“Canada is a friendly country,” he says, almost whispering, disjointedly, losing focus.

“So you say. Some of us consider Canada rather unfriendly.”

His frustration breaks through. “What if I just take the next plane home?”

Gray Man crows, not in amusement, rather in triumph at having caught him out. “You’d like to get *away* from here now, would you?” He taps a few more keys and then fixes Jason with a chilly smile. “You say your name is Currie?”

“It’s on my passport.”

“What was it in Lebanon? Not Currie.”

“Our family name is Kouri.” Jason spells it for him. “My father anglicized it when they immigrated into Canada.”

“I thought so. I have a couple of Kouris.”

“It’s a common name. There are probably legions of Kouris in Lebanon.”

“And one of them on my list is Jason Kouri.” While Jason weighs the change in tone, the Gray Man touches some signal beside his desk. A buzzer sounds nearby.

“Perhaps I should mention that I’m here to work with General Hawk on special assignment.” This is a desperate move; he’s been told never to mention his mission.

“Never heard of him.”

A different guard in SECOR uniform enters, wearing a

sidearm, his unfriendly stare piercing Jason. “Take Mr. Currie to the holding cells,” his Gray Man says. “He’s to be our guest for a while.” He rattles a few more keys and looks with satisfaction at the screen. He gives Jason only a sidelong glance as he’s whisked off. It says clearly, “One more disposed of.”

As Jason is escorted across the Immigration hall, he looks toward the exit, which he had expected to clear hours earlier, and sees the illuminated greeting: *Welcome to the United States of America.*

FEARFUL MASTER

America is at war in several Middle Eastern states, and anti-Muslim sentiment is everywhere. Jason Currie, a Canadian intelligence analyst, has been assigned to SECOR, Homeland Security's far more powerful replacement. Because of his Lebanese background, Jason is falsely detained with innocent Muslims, but is rescued by his SECOR superior, General Hawk.

While on assignment, Jason discovers that his childhood friend Nabil "Bill" Maron is too compliant with the Administration's hard-right policies. Meanwhile, Miriam, Bill's sister, Jason's ex-lover, and an ardent protestor, has fled to Guadalajara.

Upon their return to LA, Hawk sends Jason to Mexico to lure Miriam back but, before he can help her, Jason is held captive, and is forced to confront the dark and covert world of US anti-terrorism.

Fearful Master is the debut novel from Arthur Lawrence. Through Jason Currie, you will experience firsthand the razor-thin line that divides security and terrorism. Currie's world twists and turns, leaving him caught between two Americas: one founded by freedom; the other controlled by fear.

Price: \$19.95

