

KHALED WATCHES - Hayla Alawi

(A screenplay)

NOTE: All dialogue and writing are in Arabic with English subtitles.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY (1979)

The dining room is decorated with a china cabinet, family pictures, and Arabic religious and superstitious charms and symbols. The home is clean and cozy.

A small group of YOUNG MEN SITS around a table. They SING and CLAP along to happy birthday for MUSTAFA (21), who's dressed better than everyone else. ZAKIYAH (48, stout, aged face) carries a dish of painstakingly-arranged trifle to the table.

After they finish singing, Zakiyah serves up plates of trifle. The men dig in while Zakiyah fusses around them.

MUSTAFA

Thank you so much for having us,
Mrs. Hasoon.

AHMED (20, HANDSOME)

Didn't I tell you the trifle would
be amazing?

(to the table)

Nabil asked her to make it for my
birthday last year.

Several men nod, remembering.

NABIL (20, SKINNY, CHEERFUL)

It was my favorite growing up.

Zakiyah squeezes Nabil's shoulders. Nabil smiles.

ZAKIYAH

You're all too kind. Now eat, eat more.

Everyone eats in silence for a moment.

AHMED

Did you all hear about Khaled?

Several men make sounds of acknowledgement.

MUSTAFA

No, Ahmed, what happened?

Some of the men exchange glances but don't meet Mustafa's eyes.

AHMED

Disappeared. Apparently the Suits hauled his brother off, and when he didn't come back, Khaled left service to go find out what happened.

MUSTAFA

He left service?

AHMED

Yeah.

MUSTAFA

Was he crazy? Did he think Saddam himself would come down and apologize for the misunderstanding? Let his brother go, just like that.

NABIL

Wouldn't you have done the same?

MUSTAFA

Are you insane? I'm not like those stupid rebels. If they want to rot

in prison, letting their torture wounds fester, they can be my guest. I'm not planning on joining them.

NABIL

Easy for you to say.

Mustafa glares at Nabil.

MUSTAFA

What's that supposed to mean?

Nabil looks pointedly at Mustafa's expensive clothes. Uncomfortable silence follows.

MAJID (21, heavy, timid)

His poor parents.

NABIL

Majid...

MUSTAFA

His parents went, too?

MAJID

Oh-- no-- you didn't hear about them, either? They...passed away. Both of them, in the same week. From grief.

AHMED

Didn't have anything to live for after losing their only kids, I guess.

ZAKIYAH

Stop. It's Mustafa's birthday. We should be celebrating, not discussing such painful things.

MUSTAFA

(grumbling)

Yeah, and who knows what the
government can hear these days?

Nabil studies his trifle. He's no longer smiling. After several moments of tense silence, the men move on to another conversation. Nabil checks his watch, shovels the last of his trifle into his mouth, and stands.

NABIL

I have to go, but please stay a
while. My mom's going to make tea.
Happy birthday, Mustafa.

He heads out. The men save Mustafa chorus a "goodbye" and keep talking.

INT. FOYER - DAY

As Nabil's tying his shoelaces, Zakiyah approaches him.

ZAKIYAH

Where are you going?

NABIL

Mama. Don't ask me that.

ZAKIYAH

Do you want the same thing to
happen to you? Think about Khaled--

NABIL

You think I'm not? He was my best
Friend.

Nabil looks like he's trying not to cry.

ZAKIYAH

I know, my darling. So listen to
me. What if you die, too?

NABIL

I won't.

ZAKIYAH

(forcefully)

You don't know that. You boys, you're young. You think you're invincible. Khaled did, too. Only a man blinded by such stupidity would walk willingly into the Security Headquarters. If you keep doing this, working for this...resistance, you will die in vain, just like Khaled and his brother!

NABIL

You sound like Mustafa.

ZAKIYAH

Maybe he has a point.

NABIL

No, he's just a rich idiot who's too privileged to see the problem for what it is. And besides, Khaled's brother was innocent.

Nabil pauses. His words are sincere - he's every bit the young student with huge, improbable dreams - but he's also shaken.

NABIL

I know how easily I could get caught, and I know what would happen to me. But I can't just quit. I'm doing this so no more innocents die. That's what Khaled would want.

ZAKIYAH

(desperately)

But Khaled's death is a sign from God, Nabil, I know it is--

NABIL

It's not a sign. I'll let you know when there's a real one, because no

God would allow us to suffer under
this oppression forever.

Nabil and Zakiyah glare at each other. Nabil finally softens.

NABIL

Don't worry about me, Mama. I
promise I won't get caught.

He kisses Zakiyah on the cheek and walks out the door.

EXT. PARK ALONG TIGRIS - DAY

The sun's high overhead and people are walking and picnicking. The city streets of Baghdad are visible in the background. People are enjoying themselves, but they also keep to tightly-knit groups.

Two MEN, one thin and one stocky, and a WOMAN chat idly on the bank of the Tigris.

SHAHAR (22, tall, severe features) stops talking as Nabil approaches, unhurried. She's holding a folder. Nabil's smoking a cigarette.

SHAHAR

You're late. Everything okay?

NABIL

Fine. I was at a birthday party.

SHAHAR

Oh, I see. Sorry our silly little meeting about, you know, *democracy* got in the way of something as important as cake and tea.

Nabil grins.

NABIL

Always so dramatic, Shahar. Don't worry, I'll invite you next time. And it was trifle, not cake.

Shahar doesn't return the smile. She turns her attention to the group.

SHAHAR

Down to business. Here.

She glances around, then hands papers from her folder to the three men.

SHAHAR

There's rumors going around.
Saddam's about to make a move.

THIN MAN

What do you mean?

SHAHAR

For presidency.

NABIL

Why bother? He's pretty much in
charge already.

SHAHAR

If I had to guess, I'd say he's
grown addicted to the power. He's
got the political influence, but
he probably wants the title, too.

STOCKY MAN

Greedy bastard. Even if he gets
total control, what more can he do?

THIN MAN

Don't even ask. You think it's bad
now, wait till he takes over.

SHAHAR

Or not. We can't let that happen.
We need to delay it as long as
possible.

THIN MAN

You think we're equipped to do
that?

As Shahar starts explaining, Nabil notices a MAN (early 30s, tall) watching them over her shoulder from a couple hundred feet away. The man is wearing an expensive suit. Nabil's eyes WIDEN.

SHAHAR

So if you look at-- Nabil? What's
wrong?

NABIL

We need to leave. Now. A Suit's
watching us.

The thin man jumps and glances around. At the motion, the Suit starts toward them.

SHAHAR

Oh-- the papers, give me the
papers--

NABIL

No time! He's coming toward us. Go!

The thin man and the stocky man immediately beeline toward the city streets beyond the park.

SHAHAR

But if he catches any of you with
these papers--

NABIL

Shahar, GO! I'll make sure he
doesn't catch us.

Shahar looks torn but acknowledges Nabil's words with an almost imperceptible nod of her head. It's her first sign of respect toward him.

SHAHAR

I'm responsible for your safety. Do
me a favor and don't die.

Shahar takes off in a different direction.

Nabil stuffs his papers into his pocket, allows the Suit to get closer to him, and then heads toward the city as well. He peeks behind him to make sure the Suit's tailing him, not the others.

NABIL

(mutters)

Let's do this, you fascist bastard.

EXT. BAGHDAD CITY STREETS - DAY

A couple hundred feet from the banks of the Tigris, the park melts into the city streets of Baghdad. The streets get progressively more crowded with people, shops, market stalls, and eventually cars. It's all very colorful.

Nabil slips into a street filled with people, trying to blend in with the crowd. Most people stroll as they peruse the many vendors, so his antsy speed-walking is fairly obvious.

Nabil pretends to inspect a fruit display and glances over his shoulder. The Suit isn't far behind.

This close, a cord is visible snaking up the Suit's neck to his ear. He scowls at the people in his path and shoves an older man out of his way before his eyes fall on Nabil. The Suit rushes toward him.

Nabil jogs away. He swerves around old ladies and vendors peddling their wares. One shoves a hookah pipe in Nabil's face.

HOOKAH VENDOR

Young man! Look how finely detailed
my pipes are! Perfect for Eid--

NABIL

Sorry-- I'm in a rush--

Nabil whirls away. The hookah vendor shakes his fist at him. He turns to stop the next person he sees but shies away when he sees it's a Suit. The Suit barrels past the vendor, knocking over and shattering a glass hookah.

EXT. OUTDOOR COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Nabil skirts around a teenage boy helping an elderly woman stand from their table outside a coffee shop. He attempts to avoid toppling the woman.

In the process, Nabil knocks over another table's coffee cups. The couple seated at that table gasps and jerks back from the spilled coffee.

AGITATED MAN

Hey! Get back here!

NABIL

Sorry! Sorry!

Nabil dashes into an alley.

EXT. NARROW STREET - DAY

This street is quieter, less crowded. Nabil rounds the corner at the other end of the alley and leans on the wall, catching his breath. He's sweating profusely in the Iraqi heat.

After a few moments, Nabil looks around. He doesn't see the Suit. Relaxing, he ambles down the street.

EXT. INTERSECTION - DAY

Nabil breaks into an intersection filled with honking cars and buses. Pedestrians clog the sidewalks and several lanes of traffic stretch in front of him. At bus stops on either side of the street, people hop on and off double-deckers.

Nabil reaches into his pocket for his cigarettes and heads for the nearest bus stop. He just misses a bus, so he sits down on a bench to wait for the next one.

As Nabil's about to light a cigarette, a car veers out of its lane and squeals up to the shoulder. The Suit jumps out, shouting at the driver and pointing at Nabil.

NABIL

Oh, shit.

Nabil leaps into the street. A car squeals to a stop in front of him. The driver yells at Nabil.

Nabil apologetically waves at the driver and continues into the traffic. Some cars brake; others swerve around him.

Once he's across the street, Nabil searches for somewhere to hide, but the sidewalk's too exposed. He spots a bus pulling away from a nearby bus stop.

Nabil glances over his shoulder to see that the Suit's halfway across the intersection; as the Suit runs, he pays no mind to the people he's inconveniencing.

Nabil sprints to the bus just as the doors are closing and the bus is pulling away. He follows and pounds on the glass.

NABIL

Hey! Stop! STOP!

The bus driver huffs in exasperation but opens the doors without slowing down. Nabil almost trips in his surprise, but he manages to scramble inside just in time.

INT. BUS - DAY

None of the passengers pay any attention to Nabil's disheveled state. He sits down in the nearest seat. His legs shake and he pants.

Outside the bus window, the Suit looks back and forth, confused. He can't figure out where Nabil went. Nabil sees him and laughs.

The laugh starts quiet and shaky, then grows in volume, as if Nabil can't control it. Tears leak out of his eyes and the laughing turns to crying. Nabil holds himself and alternates between laughing and crying at his ordeal.

After Nabil calms down, he digs a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Along with it is a crumpled photograph.

Nabil unfolds the photograph. It's an image of him and another man of about the same age, both smiling at the camera. At the bottom is scribbled a note:

"Don't miss me too much while I'm gone. Keep the fight alive.
-Khaled"

Fresh tears trail down Nabil's cheeks, but he smiles down at the photograph. He clutches it to his chest and stares out the window.

INT. FOYER - EARLY EVENING

Nabil walks in the door and kneels to untie his shoes. He's shaken and dirty from his mad dash. Zakiyah rushes up to him.

ZAKIYAH

Nabil! Thank God! What happened?
Why do you look like such a mess?

Nabil stands up. He pulls his mother in for a hug.

NABIL

(still holding Zakiyah)
I got my sign, Mama. Khaled is
watching over me.

ZAKIYAH

What?

NABIL

Just trust me. God is on our side.

FADE OUT.