



# Harbour of Tales

Short Stories Translated from Arabic



**Edited by:**

**Shihab Ghanem**

**Aziz Thabit Saeed**

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## Preface

By: Shihab Ghanem

*Harbour of Tales* is the third group-written book, produced by the **Literary Muntada of Shihab Ghanem** (LMSG), a WhatsApp literary group that I founded in March 2017 with support from Dr. Abdul Hakim Al Zubaidi. Currently it has 95 members from 15 Arab countries in addition to two Arabic speaking Indian members. Most of the members are poets, writers, university professors, translators and journalists. Many members are well-known figures in the Arab world.

The Group has been acknowledged by Arabian World Records to have achieved the record title: “World's First WhatsApp Group” to publish group-written books. It has so far published 13 books available to readers at the LMSG’s website: [www.shihabghanem.com](http://www.shihabghanem.com). Half of the books have also been published in hard copy form. The books are in Arabic but a couple of them are both in Arabic and English.

*Harbour of Tales* is the first book of the Group to be translated to both English and Malayalam.

The book includes 24 short stories by 24 of the members, 8 from UAE, 4 from Jordan/Palestine, 4 from Yemen, 2 from Saudi Arabia, 2 from Syria, 1 from Bahrain, 1 from Egypt, 1 from Iraq and 1 from Lebanon. The themes of the stories are varied and so are the styles of writing and the literary schools to which the writers belong.

The editors would like to thank all those who translated the stories. They *did not* touch the quality or style of the translations but merely obvious errors and/or typos. Finally, I would like to thank the editors and the cover artist Hanadi Bader.

**Dr. Shihab Ghanem. Dubai, October 2022**

## Carnation Flower

Written by: Iklas Francis

Translated by: Naimah Al-Ghamdi

Every evening on the way back home, he carries a rusty shovel in his hand and a carnation.

He passes her door, makes a shy greeting, leaves the flower in her hand with a gentle smile, and goes on his way.

For him, the exit and entrance gate were a gateway to enter a temple, and the morning and evening were a date with a brown-colour lover, and the sun at noon was a haven for his heart, whose burning eagerness demanded him to peek at her from behind many marble monuments engraved with names, birthdays and death dates.

Every evening he passes the wooden kiosk, opposite to his workplace in the city cemetery, a man of brown hue tinted by the sun of that hot summer, with tough muscles, calm in features, with deep eyes uttering a love poem.

His work is to care for tomb gardens, watering flowers, digging graves, cleaning white marble, and collecting fallen leaves.

In his eyes, the silence of the graves resides, certainly due to the long time he spent there. Most people steered away from him for their superstitious belief that his company is ominous to everyone who talks to him. I always wonder how this young man ended up in this place! I don't know, but he is here now, a thought that spilled a hundred times in her mind, a twenty-year-old girl, gypsy-like in complexion and behaviour, with a gentle smile, as if she drew from roses delicacy, splendor and radiancy, and her two eyes roaming in an endless journey to a far-off world.

Like other people, he was a mystery to her, and most surprising was the carnation that he used to leave every day, to settle in the bosom of her hand. She gathered all her courage one day and resolved to ask him a question and ask she did.

I sell roses and jasmine followers all day long, and you come back to me with a flower every evening. I recognize it when it settles in my hand, whispering to me: I am back, you will not be able to get rid of me -- who are you? What is the secret behind this carnation?

Carnations, like all flowers, he said, have many meanings that speak to the soul. You sell carnations as wedding decorations and decorations for graves. True, I sell them, she said, but none has presented me with a carnation to put in my hair or to wear it as any female does to look beautiful. You come to me after you have spent a long day with the dead, entangle a carnation in my hair and walk in your path without speaking, as if death has snatched your tongue.

She paused for a while, she could not say that she had seen herself like the rest of people, seeing nothing in him but death, not a person. This thought makes her scared and therefore resorts to silence.

As for him, he just smiles, how beautiful he is when he smiles, and how much those eyes overflow with life.

Where is, then, the ghost of death, and why did fear take hold of her heart whenever she saw him?

Fear confuses her as she takes a carnation from him involuntarily and, without realizing it, entangles it in her hair in response to a deep inner voice that says: "Put it in your hair in order for it to look prettier because of your beauty and to be given life." She asks: how do you talk about life while you dwell among the dead? How do you smile? You see with your own eyes the waves of people who mourn and bereaved and silent souls, how do you live with death every day?

Let me correct your information, he responded, saying: "I do not reside with the dead or among them, but I live life in a cemetery. Those people whom you see are striving as hard as they can, they try hard to beautify the graves with flowers, and they spend a great deal of money on the marble panels of inscriptions and words, they are afraid of death a lot, because they see in it only the end of things, or the end of life."

He wanted to continue, but the girl's eyes were covered in tears.

He fell silent, holding himself by force. He picked up his shovel and went on his way with a smile that revealed the hidden things in his heart, and left a part of it in the hands of the girl who was playing with the red carnation flower and fondling its white sister from the day before. She was astonished that the colour of the flowers was different every day. She wanted to ask him, but he disappeared from her sight.

She waited anxiously for the next day to learn the story of colours and the story of death and life among the graves.

As usual, he came carrying a white carnation in his hand. She greeted him with a smile that radiated a strange light, "thanks, she said," and planted it in her hair, "What do you think?" she asked. He stuttered, unable to answer, as he was surprised by the question, which he did not know how to answer. By the way, before he uttered a letter, she added: "Is death anything but sadism? I'm still thinking about your words from yesterday. Whoever does not know love, death has a dire end, and whoever perceives love will realize that death is the beginning."

There is nothing that will bear fruit if we do not plant it in the ground first.

For example, where do flowers have their roots, and where does life derive from? It is buried in dirt, hidden from light, working in silence, sucking food from soil, to infuse life into the carnations. Love, yes love, my little girl.

The red carnation is love, the white one is purity, and you are a pulse of them that I wish to wake me up, and to wake up life in the paradise of love.

## The Big Gate<sup>1</sup>

Written by : Thoria Alorayed

Translated by: Naimah Al-Ghamdi

The timeworn places with all their happenings creep into the depths of our deep consciousness and set their unseen traps. Childhood shades ooze in my dreams and my poems, history that is inscribed into recesses of memory: breezing curtains of the neighbors' half-opened windows, bashfully waving to passers-by, the sand scented with the sea lures we make therewith our palaces and castles, the piles of sea-shells clustered outside my grandfather's house wherein pearl dealers laydown their pearl season-harvest, the flexed public alleys and rough walls, the family front yard crowded by nephews and nieces, its gates and doorways which are friendly gaping to diverse streets. Huge gates that could accommodate a camel and a wagon although it was locked from inside except for a small passageway.

It was once said that the memories of childhood foot-steps are deep-rooted in our consciousness, which is true, as I still recall in my memory a map of old Manama which breaks up to "Freej AlHattab "(The Quarter of the Wood), my dreams confirm that and my nightmares, too.

I used to dream of the alleys, butterflies, the sea, the thorny lote tree 'sidrah' and school days.

A passionate bond has existed between the sea and me since day one.

The seashore was not far away from home, I could easily walk to it in fifteen minutes, passing by an Ice-factory. I was not allowed to do so and never told anyone about my secret visitations to the sea. The sea was a little further away from my school 'Aisha Um Almunneen' and my aunt Nusrah and uncle Salem's houses.

Maybe I was seven or eight back then.

Uncle Salam (May Allah's mercy be upon him) was my favorite uncle as he was in the habit of giving me a hundred pence whenever I saluted him on my way to school.

I never imparted to him how happy I felt whenever I saw him as the shaggy beggar who daily adapted to leaning against the school's wall stretching his jet-black, skinny, extraordinary long and boney legs alongside my way home, almost half-naked, scared me to death especially when the streets became empty of passers-by except for a lonesome child trying to make it to her school. The beggar erotically enjoyed exposing his sexual parts, delighted in her clear panic. I tried to find peace in the thought that my aunt Nusrah's house is by the end of a long alley near my school. I never articulated to my uncle Salem or my father or my mother what the

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<sup>1</sup> In Arabic , it is called Alderwaza , a label of either Indian or Persian origin

frightening beggar did. After school, I used to play with my fellow youngsters. Sometimes, I played with Naima who lived nearby, and her grandmother sold homemade pickle. Other times I played with Salwa, the daughter of the school principal, who worked as a Cinema guard at night. I was not allowed to play with any children other than my relatives, and Salwa convinced me, instead of going home, to accompany her to day-time cinema show on Monday noon. That is how I used to visit my auntie Nusrah's house so often. One day, I was heading to it across an empty alley, I turned around suspecting that someone was following me. There was a man with a walking cane crying out "O' God, I beseech you from God's goodness." He was blind, and his eyes were closed. I was confident that he was not the frightening school beggar and continued walking the alley to my aunt's house. There was something in the echo of his footsteps making me certain that he was approaching me. I started to move and hurry up and he did, too. I started to run, and I could hear him running, too. I turned back and to my surprise he was neither leaning on his stick nor was he eye-shut, instead he was staring at me, stretching out his hand. Finally, I reached my auntie's house, yet clearly feeling his breathless gust on my neck. I started impatiently to knock the door with its copper handle repeatedly. I was about to faint, the shut gate ahead of me, and the beggar's hot breaths at my back. Maybe this lasts just seconds, but it seemed to me a long run. My knees started to shiver, my mouth dried out completely and I started feeling the world turning around me. I continued knocking on the door forcefully. Suddenly the small dormer in the gate was opened and Maryam, the old house maid working in my auntie's house showed up arguing "You were about to break the door", I don't recall how I managed to open my mouth trying barely to utter "there is this man... this man was trying..." Maybe she was not heeding to what I was saying as he kept begging loudly and repeatedly " O' God, I beg you from God's goodness." To my surprise his eyes were shut this time as before. Maryam got me inside the house and returned to him with a charity.

Eventually, I never go to my auntie Nusrah's house unless accompanied by my mother and clinging to my older sister whenever I go to school. I grow up and forgot the incident, yet the hidden terror inhibited my memory, unintelligible panic from beggars and alleys. Every time I go through stress, I have nightmares revolving around gates that I do not comprehend. At certain times my husband would awaken me up from a nightmare in which I would be fighting an unfamiliar enemy in front of a gate, trying to cast him off it, with my tears running abundantly. By then I recollected the incident that happened to a seven-year-old child. At that juncture, I knew that childhood terror escapes from the recesses of memory in the form of incomprehensible nightmares.

## The Wedding Sofa Incident

Written by: Jassim Al-suhayyih

Translated by: Naimah Al-ghamdi

(You do not know, my love, to what extent I will miss you. I cannot believe that this phone call will be the last one between us. I do not believe it at all.)

These words fell on his heart like claws jumping from the telephone wires before she (Huda) hung up and waxed her last farewell call bluntly to leave her lover behind the distance begging the phone to ring and the wires to disclose his words but in vain; while on the other shore, she turned into a slender cane with a lantern hanging in it, that is constantly scattering sparks memories.

The face of that night (the sixteenth of Rabi` Al-Akhir / year ...) was looking from the balcony of time, frowning, and polarized, never resembling wedding nights, and there (Huda) sits next to her groom on the wedding sofa where the thorns of truth had grown and sprouted the velvet that was coating the sofa. Huda felt thorns entrenched in her body, but fear of a public scandal prevented her from screaming in the crowd. She whispered to herself pulse to pulse:

This earthly fate is too dark for heaven to make it my destiny. Isn't a woman like a rose whose petals cannot be opened against her will? And what is beyond the most patent meaning of loneliness than an intercourse with someone you do not have a feeling for?

Cameras were snapping her while she was gazing like mournful pearls to the faces of the women around her. Suddenly, a pearl splintered on a face plowed by the oxen of time, and the wrinkles scattered its seeds in it, so the makeup elements went back to her mines shamefully unable to stop the raid of times from that face. Huda took a close look to that remote complexions which happened to be of her mother who recognized the sad look on the bride's face. The mother and her daughter began to draw a sad caricature in the air with silence and gazes, each symbol took the form of a snake, and every sign took the form of a serpent, a drawing that was hardly complete and would be interrupted by a kiss from a friend, or a hug from others amid the wedding ceremony.

At a time during which the details of Huda's face were fading gradually, a smell emanated from the recesses of her feeling, and that scent hardly embodied in its final form until it turned into a map that leads to the voice of her lover in an old dialogue with her:

A: What if your family forces you to marry someone else?

B: This is impossible. Nobody can stop water's flow when the river is running.

A: This is a poetic talk that adds up nothing to my argument.

B: My dear, forgiveness is a parent's job, and I don't think my parents will give up their job.

Huda dragged a slight sigh and before it slipped from her throat, she hid it in a pretentious cough, and then she sank in an intimate self-discourse:

How can I bid farewell to what is left of you, my dear, and what is left in me springs from all of you? How can my mind be brought to nursery of absence to train it to forget you and how can my body that you called 'the last playground of your childhood' and you dreamed you would play freely in it? How can this fragile jar with a complexion that can easily be decomposed by a breeze tackle hurricane of remorse and oppression for an entire life without its gametes racing to explode.

Oh my God ... I will not let the crime bleed all its blood tonight, I must save a lot of blood for the coming days. The wound is extensive, and I must also knock the heads of demons with more effective verses of the Holy Quran in order to avoid running over values and principles. The marriage contract paper is a barrier to the flow of my feelings in the direction of love. May this black marriage contract paper rot in hell. Oh, how long I wished that my marriage contract would be written on a white paper like my mother's breast milk. Oh, how I often wished that.

Huda sank deeper and deeper into her whispers while she was still on the wedding sofa:

Divorce ... divorce is the solution that can save me from the monster of these devilish insinuations. No ... I do not want to run away from a monster to be swallowed up by a more ferocious beast, for divorce is another beast, and it will not save me from the devilish insinuations which will devour me bit by bit. Cut-off love is not my tragedy alone, for my friend, Warda, told me about her sweeping love for a neighbor boy, and when the wind of marriage blew on her, it was a poisonous breeze that pushed her into the arms of a person she did not know. Likewise, my friend, Wafa, who stayed longer than her life dreaming of the boy of their neighbor, and ended up to a cross-by man. I must admit that I will not be a heresy in society, nor will I cross over our traditions and weird practices. It is only my feminine side running in its natural course:

The women of the neighborhood are waiting to see my belly, after several months, hanging like a sacrifice-goat hung to be skinned!

The walls of the house are waiting to be redecorated to the most beautiful shape whenever they bang against my children's screams!

And the street is waiting to be washed in a river of children flowing from behind me whenever I cross it!

I will be patient then and leave my heart cut-off in one corner of my body like a garage far-flung in a corner of the house. For the sake of the street-looking eyes, the walls of the house, and the neighborhood women, I will be patient. I will be patient, split like this: my seen-half is married, and the unseen-half is single.

It is a crime without a doubt, but it is not a crime of my family. It is a floating crime that can only be prosecuted to the extent that an entire community can be indicted.

## A White Clock and a Mirror

By: Hareb Aldhawaheri

Translated By: Naima Alghamdi

I didn't have my coffee with her late night, but I absolutely did it after attempting to postpone the idea as I preferred to drink my coffee in the early evening; it had something like evening rituals, those moments passed away, and came back in a hollow fusion, an inevitable stop of time, some scattering of seconds, noises of night's tales. I do not feel the time that disturbs sleepers, crowds in the dominant blackness, blurs the minutes of enjoying the eternal view of life, kindles its blaze with a white clock on the wall, without hands.

I decided not to lift the curtains up using the remote control so as not to feel the noise that they could make in the solemn of silence, a state of madness behind which time is hidden, lest I see the girl with the bright forehead sitting on the night porch, conversing with the sky with a foolish smile; my neighbor whom I don't know very well has an extraordinary glimpse, I knew her name and probably forgot it.

First, I would like to gently put the blame on my memory, as if I had lost meaningless moments of time, moments of distress about time losing. I gave up objection to anything, and realized that it was pure excitement, and the dysfunctional moment began from the white transparent memory, the present moments become of an imaginary dimension with a beautiful, dazzling splendor, not sluggish or noisy.

An alienation in thought, a sweet evening moment or say moments, no one answers me, amidst silence and contemplation of the present things that seem beautiful. Reading the expressions of their illusion, because for a long time I know nothing of the old things -- colour and shape have rebelled against my memory. I do not want to block my memory, in order to perpetuate my last silence, the bleak silence of the street.

Were it not for the noise of the cats that increased, I would not have opened the curtains, for the cats only get bored at night as they are homeless, and without rhythm of time and free. They pay the price of their freedom by having no home to shelter them. After a few moments of roaming thoughts, my neighbor with the bright forehead surprised me, waving her hand to me, in an invitation. As usual to stay up with her, she has already prepared the night coffee, and she looks more beautiful while she is waiting for me. She veils her shiny forehead with a few tufts of her hair, thus looking prettier to my hidden desires and conviction. She insisted, while pointing at me with her palm and her urging attitude, to have coffee with her, as if

she were waiting moment after moment. Since I knew her, she has been having an issue with time.

I would like to get out of my miserable thoughts and coffee is the pulse of time and meetings away from staying in my room, which has become a chronic chamber. As soon as I nodded to her, I felt that there was no separation from time, I came out of the mantle of time wounded and sad, and here I agree on the consequences of time, gray, perhaps black, full of my doubts about time.

The calm music was made silent, and I started to wear my new suit, I bet I don't know when I bought it and it will remain new for years to come. In a moment like this, going to meet a beautiful girl, who seems to be waiting for me eagerly, I descended from the third floor, with my shoes having their rhythmic sound, which I have not heard for ages. For a long time, I have not seen them shining as bright as they look now. I did not think of the road, and the sky seemed dark.

I didn't knock on the door, I convinced myself with a hidden feeling that she is watching my presence from the watch machine, and she makes her presence saturated with brilliance, waiting by the elegant door wings.

I walked with her quietly, no welcoming language seemed to come between us, nor a whisper fueling silence. We were in a state that seemed to touch our feelings in splendor, as if in an eternal space, taking us towards her private suite. The houses around us are luxury of sorrow, no pulse of joy that suggests life in them. They have elegance of painful tales; Oh, how sad they seem.

I felt that the coffee began to lose its bitter taste, I did not know that it had letters that shoot in the head, and it had a smell that diminishes pain, it does not release its aroma from the memory of thoughts, it does not allow moments to leap away, a sequence of an event that disturbs the body, realizing that it has white bubbles that cannot be seen when mixed with night and dreams, and time swept it away from our intimate evening. Our looks suggest that we have met repeatedly in her house, on the sofa, and we talked on the banks of the day, and in silence we enjoyed "ice cream", when the soul was frightened of the raging sounds. We met once in a garden of flowers, and we had tea together with flower water, and we met once, stealthily, by the gate of the old market. Everyone was pretending that they did not see us, or that they turned a blind eye, and we claim that we are bodies of innocence, and minds of childhood and alienation.

I rubbed my body with the scent of her feminine perfume, I wondered: "Where am I now?" Sometimes I feel my body is flying in the sky, and sometimes I don't see her smiling as before. I get tempted by an idea; it attempts to convince me to surrender to time, or stop tampering with time and days, live without time, without minutes that prey on your pleasures. The coffee of love has not begun yet and staying up late strikes us with its silence; the more the night pain and fatigue increase, the more I think of folding the carpet of time and surrender.

Birds pecked my window which eventually made me feel thirsty and realize that birds are wholeheartedly aware of time. Their thirst is their directing compass. A glimmer of light opens my eyelids a little, I feel the clock of time touching its hands, it is no longer white, and there are no longer palaces nor luxurious homes around me. My virtuous coffee with its bitterness is now splitting my two times. My pretty neighbor may get up and sit a little before she quietly goes to work. I will not dress up in front of my mirror as she does, I would like to curb temptations of warm and misleading elegance; since my twenties, I have no longer been directly attached to elegance.

I got up from the bed of my other world, and sent to my neighbor a word of good morning, and to all those who are in the midst of temporal questions, I picked a red rose for them while I sipped my coffee in the morning haven, and the birds were clicking the grains of time, and winging away as if they were flying with time towards the unknown, as if time did not understand our existence or count the pain that we experience every now and then.

## The Cockroach and the Sparrow

Written by: Riad Naassan Agha

Translated by: Mousa Al-Halool

At first, it looked like an amusing game: hovering in the skies, a plane was descending lower and lower towards the rooftops in our neighbourhood. Hearing its buzzing, the kids were overjoyed; they were about to see the pilot waving to them with one hand while steering the plane with another. Their mother hurried to the balcony and screamed frenziedly, “What are you doing here?”

“Watching the plane. Look, mother, isn’t this pilot our neighbour's son who became an officer?”

Shocked, the mother screams, “No! This is not our neighbour's son. This will drop a bomb that will destroy the entire quarter. Come, get in the bathroom and hide yourselves. Hurry up!”

Terrified, Fatima gets in, shaking. A shudder of fear creeps all over her skinny body, while the smart ten-year old boy asks his foolish mother sarcastically, “Wouldn’t the bomb get to the bathroom?”

The mother slaps her face in panic, while her twelve-year old son says, laughing, “Mother, the best place to hide from bombs is the balcony. Here we can fly, or become sparrows; in the bathroom we might turn into cockroaches.”

The plane is still hovering overhead, as if looking for a specific target. The mother senses that the pilot has seen her children and that they would be his target. She looks into his eyes; she sees him and feels that she knows him; he is indeed the neighbour's son. She imagines he is waving to her with his hand and laughing; no, she almost hears him saying to her, “Hello, Om Ahmad. It’s me, Sulaiman, the son of your neighbour, Om Sulaiman. I used to play with your son Ahmad in the neighbourhood. I am now a lieutenant. Is it true that Ahmad ran away two years ago and became a terrorist?”

Om Ahmad trembles, for she doesn’t know the whereabouts of her son who, when called to active duty, dragged his feet too long, then disappeared from sight, leaving a little note saying, “Forgive me, mother; I can’t go to war. I’m afraid they would ask me to kill someone. I am running, but I promise to return.” But return he did not. The plane circles around the row of compact buildings and buzzes through lines of laundry on rooftops which are already jam-packed with water tanks, diesel tanks, and satellite dishes. Seeing his mother shaking, the smart boy yells, “Mom, this plane won’t bomb us. The captain is a son of the neighbourhood; no way he is going to bomb his neighbours and neighbourhood. He is only looking for terrorists.”

His younger brother was gripped by sudden joy that made him as frisky as a cat playing with a butterfly. He screamed, “Mom, look at the barrel!”

Om Ahmad freezes as she sees the shimmering barrel cascading and dancing triumphantly on its way down to the neighbourhood. WI 'am screams joyfully and sarcastically, “Our neighbour knows we’ve been living without water; surely this is a barrel of water; he only came to bring us water.”

The little one laughs and comments wryly, “No, it’s a barrel of diesel. Close your eyes or the diesel will burn them.”

Mesmerized by watching the barrel’s earthbound journey, Om Ahmad forgot her panic. Where would it fall? Who would die after a minute? Who would lose his hands or legs? Who would be buried alive under the rubble of his own house? The barrel is approaching. Her absent-mindedness is interrupted by a sharp round of applause: her younger son announces that the neighbour has rained down another barrel to the neighbourhood.

Om Ahmad screams, “Oh my God, get inside quickly. This is an explosive barrel.”

As the barrel approaches very fast, she clutches her two boys with her hands.

Wi’am screams, “Mom, don’t be afraid. Believe me, the balcony is the safest place.”

Om Ahmad gnashes her teeth. With trembling hands she drags the two boys inside to the bathroom. She has no idea where little Fatima has hidden herself, while Wi’am insists on staying on in the balcony. He tries to release himself from his mom’s grip and screams, “I don’t want to die like a cockroach.” The younger one laughs maliciously, “I would be the sparrow, you the cockroach.” Om Ahmad looks at her boys; it was as if the tears in her eyes extinguished the question burning in her heart, “Why does Sulaiman want to bring the neighbourhood down on our heads and kill us? My children never took part in demonstrations, and Ahmad ran away. His sole crime is that he was afraid to kill one of the residents of our neighborhood.” Om Ahmad forgot that the barrel was about to land; before she heard the explosion, her two boys had wrenched themselves out of her hands. An explosion boomed—it was too fast for her to hear its echo. But her two boys quickly changed: one into a sparrow, one into a cockroach. No one knows what became of Fatima.

## The Elixir...Perhaps!

Written by: Shaker Nori

Translated by: Amal Alahmadi

Suddenly, I felt deeply sad as though an eagle had spread its wings over my nose and choked my breath! It was evening, and the colour of the sky was slightly tinged and mixed with plumes of exotic fumes springing from the heart of Baghdad. Meanwhile, I felt the bitterness of nausea sticking to the mouth.

I was helpless surrounded by the walls of my room. Trying to block that nausea and get rid of it, I decided to go out and roam the street overlooking the Tigris River full of gold, silver, and jewelry shops.

I was delighted by the designs of bracelets, earrings, and rings but at the same time they hide secrets among the folds of their engravings and talismans just like the mystery of words causing anxiety.

“What’s the benefit of replacing nausea with anxiety?” I wondered.

Then I answered:

"But I should be here or there ... in my room or on the street!"

I crossed part of the road amused by the luster of jewellery engravings.

I was always fond of gold luster. Since my childhood, my grandfather used to accompany me to his shop on the same street.

The high-rise modern buildings were prevailing over Baghdad’s ancient houses with oriel windows made of wood whose shades dwindled and became like boxes of matches.

I do not know how I stopped at an isolated little shop. I was attracted by the displayed jewellery there. In fact, the jewellery did not attract me as much as the face of the aged jeweller bending his tiny body on a thin ring to polish it using a blower from which burning flames emerged. It seemed that he was about to burn the ends of his thick beard reaching the floor.

I do not recall how I pushed the flimsy wooden door, and I entered that shop to find myself facing the Jeweller crouched on his fiery blower. Surely, he was anxiously looking for an elixir that would convert cheap metals into precious ones, but his shabby dress, isolated miserable shop, and simple tools never showed that he was dare enough to undertake that dangerous alchemy adventure!

The aged Jeweller did not raise his head, nor did he feel my presence until he placed the ring on his trembling bony fingers in a small tub filled with a semi-milk white liquid. Then a crackle blew out from his fiery blower. As soon as the flame went out, and his voice disappeared, he raised his head.

He stared at me suspiciously, squinting his facial wrinkles and strictly saying:

- “What do you want?”

I felt like intruding on his solitude, so I said:

- "From which metal are you making your jewellery?"

He frowned and stared at me wondering:

- "And what do you think?"

"Is your jewellery made of pure gold?! I asked.

- "pure gold!"

He put his tool aside, pulled a box out of his pocket, picked up a little tobacco, strewed it in a thin cigarette paper, and licked it with his withered lips to wet its closing end with his saliva. He started smoking as though he cheered up again. Then he said:

- "My son, minerals are bodies and souls."

I was distracted for a while trying to find an appropriate answer. It was like talking to my grandfather!

- "How do minerals have souls?" I asked.

"Of the bodies: gold, silver, iron, copper, lead and zinc," he said firmly like an expert chemist:

"Of souls?" I interrupted him keeping his strong cigarette smoke away from my nose:

"Of souls: sulphur and arsenic, mercury." He replied.

Then he added, releasing my mind in the labyrinth of chemistry:

"And we can mention some of the compounds such as salt, ammonia, borax, vitriolites and stones as well."

Then silence prevailed, during which I was trying to recall words to respond to that aged jeweller.

He realized that I was lost. Trying to reassure me he said:

"Every metal has its own properties, some of which are visible, and some are not."

And he recounted the properties of minerals, saying:

"Lead appears cold and solid but it's soft, malleable and hot. Iron looks solid, hot but it's cold, malleable and ductile. Gold appears hot and soft, but it's cold and hard. Mercury looks cold, malleable and soft but it's hot, hard and solid. Silver appears cold and solid, but it's hot and ductile."

"So why don't you convert all cheap minerals into gold and become rich?" I shouted at him.

He shook his head regrettably and said sadly:

"I never expected such a nonsense from a curious person like you."

I bowed my head embarrassed!

Silence prevailed then he took his rusty tools, and started pressing his foot against a rubber bag, bringing flames out of the nozzle of the blower, then he said:

"How can one metal be converted to another by showing its substance and hiding its appearance? How can we convert a weight scale of a metal to that of another?"

He stopped for a while smoking his cigarette in the narrow courtyard of the shop. Then he added:

“An element can’t be converted to a higher phase without passing through an intermediate phase, if any. Copper must be turned silver before it becomes fine gold.”

He got up with his skinny, weak body, climbed onto a thrown wooden box, stretched out his hand to a shelf in the shop’s ceiling, took up a bundle of letters in precious jewels, swords, and perfumes, with their carvings on a delicate leather.

He spread them out in front of me, saying:

“Look! A dirham of mercury covers twenty dirhams of copper until they become white in colour. And a dirham of sulphur burns two dirhams of copper, and colours twenty of them blue to convert from their natural colour.”

Then he asked me:

“Do you think that mixed and blended elements are the same?”

I did not understand his question, because I was still thinking about what he told me upon entering the shop. I apologised and asked:

“Can you tell me what you mean by saying minerals are bodies and souls?”

He roared with laughter that penetrated the glass shop window overlooking the street arousing the attention of the passers-by who did not care about the souls of his jewellery.

“In fact, minerals are just souls, bodies, stones, vitriols, thunderclouds and salts. Souls are materials that do not stick to fire such as mercury, ammonia and sulphur. As for the bodies, they are the types of minerals that stick to fire, and they are malleable, such as gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, lead and zinc.”

He kept silent for a while, then he added:

“The stones may be lapis lazuli or kohl (eyeliner) and vitriols are crystals, including black and green vitriol and alum. Borates are the salts which contain borax. Salts are a group of compounds such as sweet salt, bitter salt, food salt and urine substance.”

No longer could I endure listening to him, and he felt that I didn’t understand his words.

As he was removing the accumulated dust from the pans of a double-pan balance, he said smiling:

“Look.”

He took out a large metal ball and put it in one of the pans while placing a grain of rice in the other, but the two pans were equal in balance. Then he added:

“A single weight is not a single weight.”

“How?” I said surprisingly

“One weight is equivalent to 1/6 of dirham (fils) which is equivalent to 8 fils.” He said.

I turned my head off the balance looking at the wooden drawers attached to the walls filled with rubies, emeralds, lapis lazuli, agate, crystals, turquoise, pharaonic glass, iron, zinc, sulphur cans, arsenic, mercury, ammonia, borax, marbles, stones, swords, perfumes, carved painting, leather, and eyeliner.

“Why don’t you display gold as you do with those materials?” I asked.

He didn’t answer.

Then I added, challengingly:

- “There is no gold sheen in your displayed jewellery on the glass shop window”

“Isn’t it made of tin coated with gold water?”

He giggled loudly so that some of his curdled saliva sprayed over my face, and ironically said:

“Here you answer your question.”

Then he added cunningly:

“Sir, I do not want to sell gold for fake money!”

Fake money!

- Yes, all money is fake!

I felt severe dizziness.

I asked myself:

- “Am I in front of a madman or a genius alchemist?”

I don't know how I imagined that it's the aged jeweller's passion in gold that made him focus on creating a coffin of gold for himself keeping it underground to be protected from heat and humidity, a hole in the form of a fake window.

He may die anytime... Perhaps there will be someone to bury him!

The time with the aged jeweller passed unnoticed that only the clock announced the shop's closing time. I said goodbye tactfully.

As soon as I got out to the street, I felt as though I had been taken out of the ground from the Secret Gold Coffin, without ever being able to leave it.

I stood in front of his shop, waiting to thank him for his information. I recalled my grandfather's dream of finding an elixir with which to convert cheap metals into precious ones.

Did this damned jeweller seize my grandfather's elixir and impoverish us? I murmured.

Later, the aged jeweller came out in an elegant suit that I could barely recognize him. I don't know how he replaced his shabby clothes, dirty in lead, copper, gold and silver, with an elegant silk suit. I approached him in order to talk to him. He was surprised, pretending that he did not know me, or even meet me before.

My anger was about to flare up. He went straight ahead indifferent to my presence.

- “Damn the elixir thief.” I said to myself.

Then I realized that the very aged jeweller undoubtedly seized the elixir of my grandfather when he bought the shop from him before his death - the treasure of gold that my grandfather had hidden in the cellar with a secret book.

After all, my sadness and gloom were relieved by the glimmer of hope raised by the very aged jeweler.

That made me envision the sheen of gold that I had forgotten for years... And reminisce the elixir of my grandfather - Myth of the times!

## The Salary

Written by: Shehab Ghanem

Translated by: Effat Jamil Khogair

Farah came home that day late after work in an utmost state of depression. Her father saw her when she entered the family's living room where the TV was and she greeted him briefly. He noticed how different her face was compared to the day before. He said sympathetically: "I do not see joy in the face of my daughter Joy today." Her eyes were filled with tears and did not respond but entered her room.

Her father thought to follow her, but hesitated, and thought: "I will leave her for a little while, then I'll try to find out what went wrong."

Farah had graduated three months earlier from the College of Education with flying colours. Then she started working for the Ministry of Education in the neighborhood's elementary school a month ago. Today was the date of receiving the first salary in her life. She had decided in herself to present that salary as a gift to her mother as a sign of gratitude for the long years of love, care and education, and to win the blessing of her prayers, after buying her father a bottle of expensive perfume, and buying some teaching aids for her pupils, and some of her needs such as makeup and the like. Even before taking the job, she had considered giving her mother the first salary she earned by the sweat of her brow.

She went that day after work to the bank, received the salary, and put it in a bank envelope in the bag on her shoulder joyfully. She then went to the mall near the bank and chose a large bottle of perfume for her father from the perfume shop, and when she wanted to pay for it, she could not find the envelope in which the salary was. She searched well, but it had vanished.

She was devastated and felt a little dizzy. Her hands were sweating and her legs weak. She sat in the nearest long wooden bench of the mall visitors' seats as she sought refuge in Allah from the cursed Satan, reading verses from the Holy Koran. She tried to remember or imagine who might have snatched the envelope.

She tried to remember if someone in the bank watched her when she received her salary or approached her without realizing it, but she could not remember. She blamed herself for placing the bag on her shoulder, behind her back. She thought but could only remember that a month's effort had evaporated at the hands of a thief, and that her plan for the joys of her mother and father had evaporated as well, at least that month.

The mother was in the kitchen preparing lunch and did not see Farah enter the house and go upstairs to her room, but her father did. After a while, her father knocked at her door. She opened; still gloom covered her face. Her father asked her anxiously, "What's the matter? Has something gone wrong?"

She told him the story of her being robbed. Her father was annoyed, and almost blamed her for not being guarded against thieves, but instead he told her: "During the period when employees are paid their salaries, in some banks there are some thieves who watch people and notice where they put the money packets they receive and pick the easy victims. They follow them outside the bank to a place where it is easy to snatch the envelope. Therefore, we should put the money in a place that is difficult to get hold of, and we should also pay attention to those watching us.

At that moment, the father remembered two stories. The first incident happened to his younger brother in London, where he went to pursue a master's degree, and lived with his wife at the beginning of their marriage. One day at the start of his college days, he went on the first Sunday of the month to collect the amount of his monthly student allowance from a bank branch at Paddington Station. As soon as he received the money, he put it in his coat pocket, and stepped out of the bank. An Arab person came to him, and addressed him with affection in a dialect that belongs to one of the Arab countries, asking: "Is the brother an Arab?" The brother answered in the affirmative. Then the man approached him, saying: "Allow me to hug you, because I long for the Arab nation." Before his brother said anything, the man was hugging him tightly for a moment, then smiled, saying: "May God grant success to you, to the Arab nation, and to Arab Unity." Then he walked away with some speed.

A few minutes later, the brother entered a store at Paddington station to buy some household needs. When he searched for the money envelope, it had evaporated. The father also remembered that when he told his family that sad story, his daughter commented, saying that her uncle should have been more careful.

As for the second story that the father remembered, it was about how when he received his first pension after he had finished the first month in his first job in a telecommunication company, he took his first salary in full in the same envelope in which he received the money, and presented it to his mother telling her that it was his first salary and it was a gift to her, to win her blessing in his job. His mother thanked him a lot and prayed for him, but she refused to take the salary, not even a part of it. She said to him: "God bless you, increase your earnings, and raise your position. If I need, I will tell you."

The father went to his office pondering, then he took an envelope, put exactly half his daughter's salary in it, closed it, went back to his daughter's room, knocked the door again, and when she opened the door, still there was a touch of sadness shadowing her face. He presented her with the envelope and said: "This is half the compensation, and the second half is the lesson that you may have learned."

## Everything will be Fine

Written by: Shaima Al-Murzooqi

Translated by: Abdul Hakeem Alzubaidi

He came with all signs of fatigue and exhaustion covering his face; exhaustion had taken him to its extent.

He approached my bed, wiped my face, and said:

Tomorrow you have school. Have you done all your homework?

I answered him, getting up to sit on the bed:

- Yeah.

He smiled, and said:

- You are smart, you will excel.

He smiled again, trying to cover the features of misery that filled his being, his existence, and his life.

After silence, he got up to leave, I asked:

- Dad, are you all right?

He looked towards me, increasing the size of the smile, for a sure attempt to hide the greatest amount of sadness in his eyes, but with the expansion of the artificial joy, clear gaps appeared from the autumn of life that touched him, and from the loss of time, when time passes by without realizing or knowing.

Leaning against the wall, he said:

I have never been better off as I am today.

He looked towards me and between my eyes, shaking his head:

- "Everything is fine."

The morning sun rose, I went to my school, and upon my return everything was feeling cold, dry and cruel. I was astonished when I saw my mother depressed, sadness on her face, and my father sitting reading a newspaper. When he saw me standing at the door, he welcomed me, and he sat me next to him, and asked me about my day at school. After finishing recounting what happened at school and telling him about my teachers' admiration of my academic work, I asked him:

- Dad, are you on vacation?

He looked at me and smiled. I cut off his smile when I said:

- You don't like vacations.

He kept silent for some time, and with his silence I felt it was appropriate for me to leave to my room, but he stopped me and said:

- I have submitted my resignation; Certainly, they will regret it, and will come back to ask me to return to work.

I just shook my head since the pain was bursting from his eyes, it was severe and harmful. It was clear that they are the ones who laid him off, because he talks about their regret, and coming back to ask for his return.

Some time had passed, while my father's psychological condition was getting worse. He goes out every morning to search for a job at the same time my siblings and I go to school, and he returns after our return, but he has not found any place to work at. He returns tired and exhausted, while the drainage of money continues without any source of compensation, which means bankruptcy within a few days, which means that he will not find food for his children. With this pressure, I began to hear my father's crying while suffering from a constant cough. His pain increases and grows every day and exits or solutions are completely non-existent. What concerned him most is that the rent of our house is approaching its date while my father is completely penniless, so we might be thrown to the street.

I had to think of a solution to help my father, who seems to have fallen into a swamp; the more he moves, the more he sinks. I have to give him a hand, and try to pull him to safety, but how?

What is the best way? I did not find anyone present in my mind except my friend Khaled, because he always tells me that his father was a manager in a company. I decided to talk to him, so he may ask his father to help my father find a suitable job. The next morning, when "Khaled" came to school, I saw his father, for the first time, getting out of his car, entering the school, and heading towards the principal's office. I asked my friend Khaled:

Why did your father come to school? He went to the administration, is there any problem, Khaled?

- No; he used to pass by my school every month, to meet my teachers to ask about my progress at school and if they have any remarks about me.

- I see, I want to greet your father.

- Well, before he leaves, I will introduce you to him.

I looked at my friend, feeling happy, and said:

- Thank you, Khaled. It is really a good opportunity.

- Opportunity for what? If I knew you were excited to know my father, I would have invited you to visit us at home.

I looked at him and said:

-This is also a good idea, remember (to invite me).

While I was talking with "Khaled," his father went out, he ran to him, then pointed towards me, and I ran, and as soon as I arrived, "Abu Khaled" received me with a welcome attitude, greeted me enthusiastically, while he was holding my hand, and said:

- Khaled always talks well about you. You are distinguished in your studies and hardworking.

I was very pleased with his praise, and I did not miss the opportunity, so I said to him:

- Thank you, Sir. "Khaled" is like a brother to me, and I cherish him very much. I want to talk to you about something, please.

Although it was clear that he was shocked by this serious tone, he laughed, and said:

- Go ahead, son, nothing bad, God willing.

- Nothing bad, uncle, it is my father, Sir.

He interrupted me, saying anxiously:

- What happened to your father? Has anything bad happened to him?

- He was dismissed from his job about twenty days ago, he goes every day to search for a new job, but to no avail, to the extent that his health began to deteriorate.

"Abu Khaled" was shocked, so he remained amazed. I cut this situation off when I said:

So, I thought that if you could help us find a new job for my father, I would be grateful to you.

He shook his head, looking at his watch, and said:

God willing, I will try and report the result to Khaled.

Then he left the school.

The first class began, but in fact I was thinking all the time of "Abu Khaled" because it did not seem to me that he took the matter seriously. He did not promise me confidently, nor did he look enthusiastic. During the lessons I was completely immersed in thinking about finding a way out for my father. When my classmates went out for breakfast break, I was sitting in class thinking of a solution.

At this moment, the school principal entered the classroom, accompanied by some teachers, explaining to them some changes in the class. He was surprised to see me, and asked me:

Why didn't you go out for breakfast with your buddies?

I got up, went towards him, and directly said to him:

-I am busy thinking about a problem in our house, Sir.

He turned his gaze to the social worker, and said:

- A problem? Do not worry, we will help you solve it. This is Mr. "Ahmed" - pointing to the social worker - his job is to solve problems that you encounter. Now go to breakfast, then go to his office.

I took this opportunity to say:

-No, if someone is able to solve my problem, then it is only you alone, even though Mr. "Ahmed" has never fallen short with us on any day.

The principal and teachers laughed, then he said:

- God bless you, your rhetoric does not match your age and stage of study, what is your name?

- My name is "Tariq", Sir.

- Okay, Tariq, go to breakfast, then come to my office.

Joy blew from my eyes, while I thanked him, and said:

- OK. OK.

I don't reveal a secret to say that I went directly to his office. After some time, he saw me as he reached his office, he pointed his hand towards me, and I ran towards him. As I entered his office, he asked me to sit, he smiled and said:

-Well, what's your problem?

- It's my father, Sir.

He interrupted me:

- I hope nothing bad had happened to him?

- He was fired from his job, he has become without work, and he has been searching daily but could not find a job. His psychological condition has begun to worsen, I am afraid that something bad would happen to him. Could you help us find a job for him?

The principal was surprised, he said with a smile:

-Has any of the teachers told you that we have a vacancy?

-No, Sir, and I do not mean to find him a job at the school, but if you know any place my father could find a job at.

He laughed, saying:

-I asked you, Tariq, because we actually have a vacancy that might suit your father.

-Is that true, Sir?

- Yes true; would you like to inform him about it, or should I call him?

- I think it is better that you call him.

- You are right, this is better. Haven't I told you that your wisdom and eloquence are above your age? A father who raises a son like you, Tariq, is worthy of respect.

I don't know why at this point I burst into tears. He got up and patted my shoulders, then I left his office.

When I went home, my father was sitting with my mother and my siblings. He received me warmly, and as soon as I sat down, he said:

- There is a surprise, you wouldn't expect it, Tariq?

I asked him:

- what is it?

-I got a call today from someone asking me if I know someone to recommend working for them, would you believe it? Do you know who called me?

- Who is it, Dad who called?

- He is the principal of your school, he asked me if I know someone who is looking for a job because they have a vacancy, the salary is suitable, and the working time is short.

- Wonderful, what was your answer?

-What do you think? I immediately nominated myself for this job.

- Excellent, we'll walk to school together.
- Wait, Tariq, the surprise is not over.
- What? Please tell me.
- For this job there is a residence next to the school, can you believe it?
- Is that possible, Dad?
- Yes, I will be the watchman of the school, and there is a free spacious accommodation, which means that we are not going to pay rent anymore.

I couldn't control myself, so I cried, but my mother and my siblings laughed with joy and happiness. My father rose, hugged me, and said:

- I also cried for a long time out of joy, everything will be fine, Tariq, everything will be fine.

I looked at my father, and said:

-You know, Dad, I started to worry about you when this sentence disappeared from your tongue - everything will be fine - and I no longer heard it.

My father laughed, as for me, my laughter mixed with my tears, it was a new page in my happy life.

## A Generous Man

Written by: Abdul Hakeem Alzubaidi

Translated by: Abdul Hakeem Alzubaidi

Rashed was lying on the sofa watching TV when his cell phone rang. The name of his best friend Salem appears on the screen. He let the phone ring for a little while to suggest to Salem that he was busy as he usually does to tease him every time he calls because he likes to hear him saying: “Where have you been man? The phone has been ringing for an hour without a reply”. Rashed used to smile and say: “How could that be possible if my phone cuts calls if no one replies after 20 seconds”? And he goes on giggling. Rashed likes Salem for his sense of humour and he likes to sit with him and chat from time to time. He has been his fellow since their early childhood and his neighbour at Al-Kuwaitat neighbourhood in Al-Ain city, UAE.

After Salem and Rashed finished their usual greeting statements, Salem rushed to say: “Listen: have you heard the latest news”? Rashed replied smiling as he was expecting to hear a new joke: “No”. Salem said: “Jasem”. He meant their once classmate at UAE university which is located in Al-Ain city and who lives in Abu Dhabi city. “What is the matter with him”? Rashed asked worriedly. “He invites us tonight for dinner”. Salem responded with a loud laugh. After releasing a long sigh, Rashed replied, saying: “Man! You scared me, I thought something bad had happened to him. What's wrong with it”?

“How could you say: what’s wrong with it? I am saying: he invites us for dinner tonight and you say: what’s wrong with it”? Salem exclaimed.

“I don’t see any problem with that. That is very kind of him” replied Rashed. “Do you remember the last time he invited us for a meal”? Salem asked. “No, I don’t remember.” “Five years ago, when he graduated from the university”, Salem explained.

“What is the occasion tonight? Asked Rashed in a smiling tone: “Did he get a master’s degree without informing us”? “Jasem studying Master’s”? Salem replied in a giggling voice: “what is the occasion then”? Asked Rashed. “I don’t know”?

“What astonishes me more is the place where he is inviting us at”, continued Salem. “It must be a cheap Indian restaurant”, said Rashed with a laughter. “You didn’t guess it. It is Al-Ain Hilton”, Salem explained. “I couldn’t believe it? What happened to the world”? Rashed exclaimed. “Haven’t I told you something weird is going on”? Said Salem.

“When did he arrive to Al-Ain”?, asked Rashid. “I don’t know -- we will find out tonight when we meet him. I will pass by your house after 10 minutes and will go together”, said Salem.

“OK, “I will be waiting for you.”

Ten minutes later Salem arrived at Rashed's house, they walked together towards Al-Ain Hilton which is located at Al-kuwaitat neighbourhood close to where they reside. On their way they were kidding at Jasem's stinginess and how that every time he came to Al-Ain to meet with them they used to invite him for a meal at a restaurant and how Rashed and Salem used to argue with each other because everyone wanted to pay while Jasem would remain silent and would never offer to pay for the meals. Rashed used to defend Jasem indicating that he was a guest coming from outside of Al-Ain and consequently he shouldn't have to pay. Yet, Salem would argue that Jasem should have at least pretended that he was willing to pay. When they arrived at the hotel, they asked the receptionist about Jasem's room number and walked to his room. When they entered his room, they found him waiting for them with a young man whom he introduced to them as Engineer Hamad. After greeting each other, Jasem told them that he had arrived at Al-Ain the day before on duty travel with his colleague Hamad. A few minutes later, the door was knocked on, and two waiters entered with food dishes which they put on the dining table. Salem was gazing at the food in astonishment. He was embarrassed to ask Jasem about the occasion of this invitation because of the presence of his colleague Hamad. However, he tried to joke with him by asking: "Why did you order this much of food? Half of it would have been more than enough".

"Don't worry, all of this is on the expense of the government host", Jasem replied while smiling. Salem was surprised and asked: "The government host is paying for your guests as well"? Jasem laughed and said: "Of course not; however, the quantity of food they are serving for the two of us could satisfy four people". Then the four of them sat at the dining table and started eating while chatting and joking with each other. Jasem was putting more food into his two friend's plates while they kept saying "that's enough". Jasem kept telling them: "Eat young boys, what is left from this food is going to be thrown away in garbage cans". Salem got annoyed and asked: "how did you know that"? "I saw that last night with my own eyes when the waiters came to collect the dishes, they put the remainder of food in garbage bags", answered Jasem. "I felt guilty, and I decided to invite you tonight so you could eat that food instead of sending it to the garbage", Jasem explained. At that moment Salem choked up with the food in his throat. He was not able to swallow the food. His eyes were protruded. Rashed punched him on his back. That punch allowed the food to pass peacefully. Salem was relieved and drank a sip of water thanking God he was safe. He looked at Jasem and said in a blaming accent: "Do you mean that our stomachs are better places for this food than the garbage cans"? Rashed went on laughing while Jasem got embarrassed and started to apologize to Salem saying: "I didn't mean that. I was going to call both of you tonight anyway and eat dinner with you, but I thought it might be better to call you here to share this luxury food with you instead of going to a restaurant that might cost you a lot of money". Rashed and

Salem exchanged meaningful gazes. Salem said to Rashed while smiling: “Haven’t I told you, Rashed, on our way to the hotel, that Jasem is a generous man”?

## **The Man with White Beard**

Written by: A.Hameed Al Qaed

translated by: A.Hameed Al Qaed

Fadhel passed over the graves and scattered papers in air. In each paper he wrote: "O dead souls ... who will save my lost soul from this great agony?". He spent all night writing this phrase on more than one thousand pieces of paper. He felt miserable from the people who add up to his sense of burning. Even his fellow friends feel his whinny soul, but ask him to stand still and firm. The clergy urge him to comply with God's fate and destiny. No one threw a lifeline or extended their happiness to him, so he could rest and calm down. The culture came to him with the wind, no one provoked or seduced him. Culture planted inside him freedom and taught him how to keep his dignity, freedom taught him the meaning of justice, fairness, and humanity, his excessive human sense turned his way into daggers, knives, thorns and bitter plants, the way seems foggy, the night is a living nightmare that never sleeps, friends know only one thing: indifference that traps blood from flowing in the soul.

He repeatedly visited the cemetery every night. Amid the darkness, he used to sit on a black chair. Many days passed since he fed the sky of the cemetery with those paper pieces which flew in the cemetery's sky and even some of them were trapped behind the rocks and tombstones. The night in the cemetery is lonelier than the silence of dead. He used to sit for many hours waiting for someone to respond to his letter which he distributed as a gift to the air. While sitting, he felt that the tombstones moved at times and sometimes he felt the passage of transparent spectra in white robes that walked far and jumped in a variety of heights. One night a phantom approached him and handed him a paper and pointed out to a remote place, a huge mass of blood rolling into the space without settling in a place, then the white phantom disappeared like smoke. He opened the paper, it was completely white, he looked further and further, and suddenly the face of his mother emerged on the face of the paper, staring at him deeply, she smiled, waved her hands, and disappeared. The white paper remained in his hand. A strong wind blew and the paper in his hand flew to the same area where he saw the mass of blood. The paper suddenly blistered in the air, enlightened the cemetery, and turned the night into day light. In seconds, a huge number of dogs gathered around him, barking non-stop. Suddenly, the dogs entirely stopped barking and began to walk around him in a circle motion. All the dogs stared at him while their tongues were trembling, and severe darkness set off. He tried to escape the cemetery, but he was surprised to see the dogs laying down on all the empty spaces and walkways. He was frightened and started to run to leave as soon as he could, but he was forced to step on the bodies of the dogs.

He was in a terrible condition when he managed to leave the cemetery. When he was outside, he saw an old man smiling at him. The man held his hand while he was staring at him deeply.

“Where are you taking me old man?”

“There where you might be one day. There where you deserve to be and wished if you have arrived earlier.

When you depart there – son- where the light is dazzling for you and for others, they say that the light will take you in a small boat, sailing in a long river, the banks of river house most beautiful trees and roses. Colourful bobbins fly over you to form a warm shade. You will feel light, and soft raindrops will refresh your face and make you alive. This is the great wetness! You will reach to a place where you will fall asleep for long. You will wake up to find yourself a child again to live your life again. You will see your mother back, your father back and your loved ones back, like no one has departed ever, no pain has been suffered and no bereavement ever settled upon your soul. You might pass through the same paths that you have passed through in the past, or you will be given the opportunity to avoid the previous ways that filled you with wounds, pains or tossed your soul into the depth of hell. You will see all the women that you loved, looking more affectionate, more accessible, and more attractive and beautiful. There are no marriage commitments there nor restrictions upon freedom.

You will be like a feather in the breeze. The wind will carry you towards the best lusts, tastiest and most charming women. The women there are with no malice, cunning or slyness. There, you will see oceans that never drown anyone, storms that never kill and a sun that never burns. You will feel that you are in a lovely dream, a dream that never ends.” Perhaps, perhaps, this is what I was voiced in one of my dreams which often turned to be true.

The old man with the white beard finished his words and went away with the dust.

## **The Last Night Tale**

Written by: Abdullah Mohammed Al-Sabab .

Translated by: Nadia Khawandanah

### **The First Night...**

Once upon a time (1955), somewhere (Sedrouh) in the northern Emirati geographical space, Ras Al Khaimah Jumma Mousa Al Fairouz Ibrahim was born.<sup>1</sup> He had some daydreams; about himself, his breaths, and about some original visions which nobody had ever thought of or would.

And so it was; a dark-skinned child grew and developed. His mind was filled up with knowledge and fine thinking. On the other side, his name gradually and slowly shrank away. It became eventually as Jumma Al Fairouz. An Arab, prolific intellectual from the United Arab Emirates. A poet, a short story writer, a novelist, a linguist, a painter, and a skillful calligrapher. Above all, he had a noble heart. Absolutely as if he were the Emirati version of Tagore. His published works included, *Faraway in a Thought*, poems 2000, *At a Distance*, *My First Love* and *Alia and Burdens of Salem, the Sailor*, short stories 2001, *The Circle*, a novel 2008. Besides, he had numerous creative manuscripts: short stories, narrative poems, meditative readings, philosophical papers, critical analysis, musical pieces, and paintings. A torrent of creative contributions in diverse arts through places, times and walks of life.

That was Jumma in all his times. His humorous spirit was a graceful bird struggling against the winds and various diseases. Too intractable to be tamed by the self, the memory, reflection, or freedom.

### **One Evening....**

November 1998

That afternoon, I was getting out of my little, white Honda, to go to Al Me'ered local market in Ras Al Khaimah, when I had a glimpse of the brown, Fairuzi stature. He was near three shops: the supermarket, the mill shop, and the poultry shop.

"Mr. Jumma, Mr. Jumma!", was my unleashed response to the golden surprise of coming across this graceful personage, whom I had never met in person. Mr. Jumma Al Fairuz, the distinguished intellectual, whose name is of a great prominence in the Emirati, the Gulf and Arab literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Al Fairuz is the Arabic equivalent of the gemstone, turquoise.

“Yes, yes. Who is it, please?” He answered me, humbly and straightforward.  
“Abdullah Mohammed Al-Sabab , your brother.”  
“Nice to meet you.”  
“The honor is all mine. I’ve wished to meet you for ages!”  
“Where do you work?”  
“In *Alittihad* newspaper in Ras Al Khaimah.”  
“See you there tomorrow.”  
“Perfect. Good -bye and be safe.”

Hence was the encounter and the long-awaited meeting...and so and so and so...  
The following day the sun rose brightly and so was the glowing of the arrival of the celebrated writer, Jumma Al Fairuz to my little office in the grand newspaper, *Alittihad*<sup>1</sup>. His visit radiated the light of compassion, friendship, and commitment.

That was the gracious visit and the Fairuzi *souha*<sup>2</sup>, three presents of his manuscripts, full of tasty cultural vitamins and goodies, adorned with creative, richly, lively connotations, dedications so beautifully hand-written in an exquisite calligraphy:

- 1- *Friends of Modernity: Gold of the Earth*, Ras Al Khaimah, August 1997:  
“Dear Poet, As-Sabab Abdullah: Some of yourself and some of myself, with my regards. Al-Fairuz.”
- 2- *Talks of Memories*: “Dear Poet, As-Sabab Abdullah: We’ve become acquainted after those talks, ... and now ... you’re now... they’re my gift for you. Al-Fairuz.”
- 3- *Pure Gold: A Notebook*, Ras Al Khaimah, 1994: “So far... and the future is unpredictable...For Abdullah As-Sabab, my dedication and regards, Jumma Al-Fairuz.”

So were his gifts, scripted with rosy amiability. On the other hand, my poetic bouquets for him were: *Now*, 1996 and *Time*, 1997.

The visit came to its end, but we were looking forward to another one, soon.

### **Another Evening....**

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<sup>1</sup> The newspaper was founded in 1969 in the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi.

<sup>2</sup> The gifts and souvenirs a traveler will bring for his children when he returns home, especially a seafarer.

Another time brought us together, on 23 April 2000 at Emirates Writers Union branch in Ras Al Khaimah. There, in our authentic cultural mansion, in a lilac evening, lit with friends' kindness and care, and the festive candles in a celebration full of poetry, lights and emotions.

It was the genuinely talented, whose letters orbit the space, Jumma Al Fairuz's poetic debut, *Faraway in a Thought*. My copy had a legacy-like, though poetical dedication, relevant to our relationship, its connection with life, expectations and inevitable sorrows and pains:

*"My friend As-Sabab Abdullah, Awe is for me, but the thought is for you, Jumma Al Fairuz."*

Hence was poetry, were the feelings and the gleams. So...so ....so...Life perused its course, rhythms, temptations, and whims.

### **The Last Night....**

Al Rams, my birthplace (1965), home of my dreams, visions, conceptions, the stage of my memory and championship of my childhood. Moreover, Al Rams cuddled our nest, to which I moved shortly before our marriage on 14 July 1994. Our silver Jubilee was on 14 July 2019. We celebrated our daughter, Mozoon's third birthday on 19 February 2001. We cheered her marvelous dawning in our life:

Your birth, your existence,  
Is so pleasant and full of joy,  
You are blissful,  
You came with full, rainy hands,  
Of vitality, of belonging,  
And night whispers,  
And noble Ladies' grace...  
Your birth, your existence,  
Is so pleasant and full of joy,  
And so is all your being.

I am all light,  
You are its candle of delight,  
You are a celestial cypress...  
Yes, you are,  
Yes, you are,

On that festive, lilac night, glowing with family warmth, and without any prior planning, nor a conscious impulse, I felt as if my head was being pulled by something indefinite, inducing me to go to my study room. I hurried to it, and a quick glance landed on the shelf that hosted the three Fairuzi manuscripts: *Friends of Modernity*, *Talks of Memories*, and *Pure Gold*.

“Tomorrow we’ll meet, Jumma Al Fairuz. I’ll read them consecutively, and my readings will be published.” I whispered to my magnificent, creative giant as my vague and sudden stares were focusing on his works.

After murmuring, my inner silence came to a halt, freeing me to return to my little family. My sudden withdrawal had baffled them. I cherished them by chanting to my child, Mozoon:

A cloud, full of green rain,  
Is your lucky share,  
From heavens,  
Of a crescent moon,  
I’ve never thought,  
Of a burning coal,  
I’ve never thought,  
Irises vary,  
In shapes and colours.

Some, are all content and gratitude,  
As their relying shoulder,  
Is their offspring,  
And they give thee,  
A splendid, golden friendship.  
But some others,  
Have the vulture eye,  
Burning with envy.

Some,  
Are restless and confused,  
Picky and captious.  
Some eyes,  
Shed tears of joy and ecstasy,  
Some eyes,  
Pain and hurt are all their best.

Some, and some,  
And some, you cannot but gratify.

Mozoon,  
A divine blessing,  
An evening rose garden,  
My heart welled,  
My walkways, and orchards filled,  
God bless thee,  
Amen.

### **All at Once ...**

The following morning, 20 February 2001, the daylight met me uncommonly quite early to break the sad news to me. In short, the last night that I spent with the three manuscripts was simultaneously the last night for my friend, the writer and poet, Jumma Fairuz- may God rest his soul in peace. He passed away calmly in his bed in the *Dhait South*<sup>1</sup> in Ras Al Khaimah.

Simply so....  
While he was asleep,  
And the room was sick.

Al-Fairuz,  
Flawless, as he is.

Seen, like no one else before,  
Adored, like no one else before,  
Lost, like no one else before,  
Extraordinary, like no one else before,  
Gone, like no one else before.

As if his duty were,  
His soul to breathe out,  
All at once.

Simply so....

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<sup>1</sup> A modern neighborhood in Ras Al Khaimah.

One moment after another,  
One laugh after another,  
One whisper after another,  
One smile after another,  
One touch after another,  
One beat after another.

Simply so,  
Simply so,  
Simply so....  
Until he stumbled,  
In his sleep and,  
Died,  
Monday night,  
19 February 2001.

## **We Will Go Shopping Tonight**

Written by: Aziz Thabit Saeed

Translated by: Aziz Thabit Saeed

Saeed was unusually late that day. Ali, after waiting for him for a long time near the usual cheap restaurant that they had been going to lately, decided to go to his brother's school to find out why he was late. While heading toward the school, he suddenly saw Saeed running on the opposite direction:

“Saeed!” he shouted. His voice was coarse. The seven-year-old boy's pale face was marked with many mosquito and bug bites. The place where they lived – a clay room attached to an old large mosque, unchanged since it was built several centuries ago – was full of bugs that would suck the life out of their thrifty bodies weakened already by hunger. The walls were full of holes, small and large. Nobody would live there unless they had no family.

They had a decent family. Their father took good care of Saeed until he completed his elementary education. However, conditions changed. His father lost his non-permanent job and became unable to continue supporting his schooling. Consequently, Saeed had to transfer to one of a few state-sponsored schools, which offered students a little stipend. His choice was the Teacher Training Institute in Dhamar, a city in the middle of Yemen. In addition, realizing that his father had become unable to support any family member for education, Saeed volunteered to take Ali, his youngest brother, with him. His parents blessed this initiative and promised to provide help when possible.

They commenced the new school year, sharing a room with more than five people who came from their own village and who worked as construction laborers. The Institute paid Saeed's stipend for the first two months, but then because other students petitioned for a raise in allowance, they were not paid for nearly five months. This constituted a huge problem for Saeed; he seriously had to consider other means of earning a living. One of these ways was writing petitions and appeals for the people he knew, and who were in the city going to courts for cases pertinent to property problems and other personal disputes. Most of these people were illiterate and, luckily, liked both Saeed's handwriting and style. Hence, they were a source of little intermittent income. They would come to him, explaining the problem or case, and he would draft the petition in an eloquent style. For such a service, he would usually get something like five riyals (nearly three quarters of a dollar according to the exchange rate at the time), an amount of money which was not much but would be enough for the basic ingredients of a modest homemade meal for two. Some of the clients offered less than five riyals, but he never said no to any amount, for he thought that insisting on a fixed amount might eventually discourage people from seeking his services, something that he never wanted to happen as such

little money kept him and his brother living. He used to take this money and buy some *kudam*, cheap bread prepared in military bakeries mainly for the army. Nevertheless, some soldiers sold their daily ration of kudam to grocery stores and thus such cheap bread was made available for the public, particularly those unable to buy better quality bread. One riyal would usually be spent on bread, one or two on milk and half a riyal on ghee to cook *fatta*, a Yemeni dish whose ingredients were mainly bread, milk and, if possible, ghee. On many occasions, the quantity of the food was not enough, so Saeed would eat slowly, giving his little brother a chance to eat. In some cases, when the food was so scarce, he would just pretend that he was eating.

The situation went from bad to worse. Not so many clients came for petition writing and the last few riyals in Saeed's pocket had vanished. He had to take a tough decision; he asked some of his country laborers to find him a day's work once in a while. They attempted to dissuade him of this thought, explaining that their work involved construction building, where a worker was expected to carry very heavy stones, prepare sand and cement mixture for a number of stone builders, etc. However, he begged them to consider him for just a day once every two weeks. They did not know what to say. They had great respect for him for his extremely disciplined manners and for being the only child from their village who had finished elementary school. They thought it was not fair for this schoolchild to carry out the kind of rough work. However, there was no alternative. His parents' confidence in his ability to cope with hard situations was too much.

He worked some days on different occasions, mostly on Fridays, his end of week holidays. However, after one day of work of that kind, every bit of his fragile body would keep aching for at least a week. It was too much for a fourteen-year-old kid to endure the severity of that kind of labor. Yet, he felt that the physical pain was less austere than the emotional trauma caused by the rejection of a loan request from an acquaintance or a friend. His friends and kind acquaintances who used to lend him some money realized that it might be too long before he could pay them back. At some point, he was not able to pay even his share of the rent, a sticky issue that made things even thornier. This state continued for three consecutive months before he was indirectly asked to either pay or find himself and his brother another place to live. That was the hardest. "Where could I stay? Where should I go? Should I leave school and go back to my village?" Saeed thought. Of course, his village had no schools otherwise they would not have taken the trouble to stay away of their family. He thought of sending Ali back home, but, while this possibility was a choice for his brother, it was not for him. He was determined not to, even if he starved to death. He talked about the acute state of affairs he had found himself in to one of his classmates who incidentally was enduring nearly similar conditions.

He told Saeed that he and his younger brother lived in a little room attached to a mosque, and if he wanted to join them, he was welcome.

“That is great,” Saeed gratefully yelled. That was where they had been living for the past two months, together with lice, bugs and mosquitos of different kinds and sizes. The room was probably three meters by three with a decaying door, and horribly deteriorating interior conditions. The room had no windows, nor did it have any means of civilized life: no electricity, no water, and no cooking appliances except for a tarnished pot, an old kerosene stove, called *dafoor* in Yemeni Arabic, and some worn-out plates and clay cups that his friend had. All this ugly looking ‘junk’ was at one corner of the little room. As for the bathroom, they had to use the mosque toilets, of course when they opened before prayer times. If one of them forgot to go to the toilet before closing time at night, he would have to wait until the Morning Prayer. In rare cases, when one of them would not be able to wait till the morning, the four of them would gather their courage and go together to the street to chaperone the one who badly needed to go to toilet. Usually, a little dark alley or a spot behind a parked car would do. Of course, prior to this adventure, they would arm themselves with some stones just in case wandering dogs, which were all over the place, or a drunk person decided to attack.

After moving to live with that friend, Saeed decided to have one meal and let Ali have two, or if possible, three. The biggest one was lunch, which was normally the main meal, and which also happens to be the main one in Yemeni culture. By chance, the two boys discovered a restaurant owned by an old man whose clients were those who could not afford decent restaurants. This discovery was a result of several endeavours to find a cheap restaurant. The appearance of it did not give any impression that it was a restaurant. The old man, the chef and only person there, cooked merely two things: beef offal, mainly tripe, tongues, and intestines and *salta*, a public Yemeni dish comprising helba ‘fenugreek’ mixed with meat soup, tomato sauce, cooked vegetables, and crushed meat. The *salta* the old man served was no more than helba mixed with offal soup together with little pieces of tripe and intestines. The quantity given to the two kids would generally depend on the mood of the old man. He also offered those who did not have bread kudam that were at least three days old. Of course, Saeed and Ali were among those who appreciated the old man’s generosity. The price for the whole meal was just a riyal or two, an insignificant amount that would not be enough for two cups of tea in normal restaurants. Because of the state of hunger they would be at after school and in some cases after spending 24 hours with no nibble going into their little bellies, that food was a five-star cuisine for the two boys.

“Come here,” shouted Saeed. His voice reflected delight, which Ali had not felt much of during the last five agonizing months. “Let’s go to a restaurant,” Saeed suggested. Ali looked puzzled.

“A restaurant!” he wondered. He was trying to think why Saeed had said a instead of the, since they had known only one restaurant for a long time.

Yes, let’s take a taxi because it is getting late for lunch.”

“A restaurant? A taxi? What happened?,” the puzzled little kid asked.

“Oh, never mind, I will tell you later on,” Saeed replied.

He stopped a taxi, opened the door, let Ali get in, and then got in himself.

“Where to kids?” the driver inquired.

“To the Green Valley Restaurant,” Saeed swiftly answered. This restaurant was virtually the best one in the city at that time.

“To the Green Valley Restaurant, huh?”

“Yes, and please make haste, we want to catch some lunch.”

“Well, you have to pay in advance,” the driver wickedly replied, wearing an awful smile.

Besides the fact that taxi drivers in that city were known for their rudeness, the man did not believe that these two kids with pale faces and such worn-out clothes could have the fare of a taxi.

“Well, how much?” Saeed asked.

“Ten riyals”

“OK, here you are”, handing him a one hundred bill with a look of pride.

“Oh, let me see if I have change for that.”

Once he gave him the change, he repeated: “please hurry up!”

“All right, son,” the driver responded, with a nasty tone.

The cashier, who was also perhaps the owner of the restaurant, was standing at the counter near the main door of the restaurant when they arrived. He gave the two boys a warm smile and invited them to get into the restaurant. The kids were surprised that he did not show exotic behavior similar to that of the taxi driver’s. But then Saeed realized that he had not yet put the change of the hundred in his pocket.

While eating, Ali asked:

“What? ‘Have you been exposed to lailatul Qadr’?” [In Islam, the night of power, night of destiny is a miraculous night that is supposed to bring good fortune to the one revealed to].

“Well, you might say that,” Saeed replied.

“The Institute had finally paid me for the last gloomy months. They also rased the stipend from 100 to 400 riyals a month, starting from the date of the complaint.”

“Are you going to buy me a shirt, bro?” Ali asked shyly with his eyes looking at the ground.

“Oh dear, I will buy you three shirts, not just one. Write down everything you need; we will go shopping tonight.”

## Another Cup of Coffee

Written by: Ali Obaid Al-Hamli

Translated by: Ahmad Y. Al-Ghamdi

On the borderline between embracing life and facing the unknown, she was bidding him farewell, or rather, he was bidding her farewell. At dawn just before the muezzin called "Prayer is better than sleeping," he was already carrying his fishing gear, some old tools never touched by modernity yet. He examined his worn wooden boat, gazing into the face of water, looking far through the dusk of the night, trying to explore the fathoms of the sea to forecast the weather. He was tempted by the calmness of the sea to raise his hands in prayers to God for a good catch of the day to spare him two or three days of cumbersome fishing. As he put his veined hands to the waters, he was all thoughtful of the lines and crags shaped on them by the oars, and the marks and spurs stamped on his hands by the lines and ropes. Feeling the palms of his hands, he felt as if they were like a wall of a mountain stone cave. The colour of his hands, to his surprise, became blackish due to the over handling of the oars and the metal lines of fish traps.

He lighted the old lantern making sure that it had some kerosene enough to keep the light until coming back. He would fix the lantern on the bow of the boat for the big ships and tugboats to avoid him as they enter or leave the bay at this late time of the night, when ships captains usually are asleep, and their assistants feel so drowsy that they might not see such a small boat like his. The beholder aboard a large vessel would see this tiny boat as a feather fallen from a bird to be driven around by waves to where destiny had willed.

He pulled his boat to the sea gradually pushing it over shallow waters; as the water level became knee deep, he threw himself on board in a jump that can hardly be performed by a lad in his blooming youth. As for him, he had been used to doing it so airily, performing it over and over through the sixty years of his age.

Knowing how old he is, his age was not of concern for him. In a small coastal town in the sixties of the twentieth Century, it was not important for a person to know his/her age as there was no pension law by which a person would go for retirement at a certain age. Neither was there a ministry of social welfare that would pay him some allowance to help him cope with life difficulties. The only age concern was if he would propose to a young girl for marriage and asked about his age. Oh! Why would you reopen a wound that was occasionally oozing, Rashid? Why would you open doors that you would avoid touching their handles? He looked around, there was nothing save the night whose darkness was partially eased by the moonlight reflected on the face of the waters. Then he looked towards the sky, trying to decide his location relative to the positions of the stars and trying to measure how much time elapsed, and remaining time to reach the spot where had laid the nets last

night. There was no guide in the midst of the sea except the stars, there was no tree, house or a landmark for directions. He had no compass or a device on his boat to help him like those guiding the large vessels sailors. Anyway, this was no longer a problem for him: his boat herself had become so familiar with its route thanks to the numerous times she had sailed in all its different directions. The age concern popped again as an obstacle in fulfilling the recurring thought for a long time. He would not deny that he was not a young man to tempt the girl he would propose to, and make her family accept him. He also wouldn't deny that he was not wealthy for her family to overlook his age for his accumulated riches. Oh! How his life would have changed had Hissah bore him a child to carry his name and thus his name be remembered, and his posterity would continue after his death.

He would vow to himself that he would not have objected had she born him albeit a girl. He would have convinced himself then that the next baby would be a boy, two girls, three girls ...never mind. But (for his wife) to abstain from giving birth was beyond his acceptance. She herself did not object to the idea when he first related to her the idea of getting married, though with a touch of some banter. But where is the girl who would accept him in such condition? He thought of marrying a woman close to his age, but he was afraid lest such a woman was incapable of bearing him a baby. Now the calamity would be twice, not to mention being looked teasingly upon by Hissah. Nevertheless, what would matter was that Hissah would spread a word that he was to blame, and thus be considered by people as barren man.

No, no. Hissah was so mindful and noble to do this. But how could he be sure that she wouldn't do it? Wasn't she after all a woman just like any other woman? Didn't Sheikh Abdulrahman say in the Friday sermon that women were of narrow mind and incomplete religion? He didn't comprehend what Sheikh Abulrahman meant, but he remembered it well. Hessa was short of children, too. She was a barren woman who could not bear him the posterity he wished.

A long time had passed before Rashid realized that he reached the spot where he had laid his nets. He now had to pull them and empty whatever fish in them and come back where fish traders and fish peddlers await fishermen in the (Freej Al-Dhaghayah<sup>1</sup>) fish market to buy their catch of the day and resell the fish or move them to other areas where fish was scarce and expensive.

He pulled his first fish trap .. not bad, it had a good amount of fish .. likewise the second and the third. Thank God. The sea had abundance not withholding its riches as some men would withhold the goosies they had. On his way back to the land, those thoughts would pose themselves again. There was a pressing thought for long; why wouldn't he do just like his friend Matar did though he didn't have to do it like

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<sup>1</sup> An old local living area in Dubai, the name is driven from "Fishing pathway"

him, for Matar had nine children. He would cherish the thought many times. It would solve the problem that had been for him a pain in the neck.

On the evening of that day, after Asr prayer, he spent about an hour chatting with Matar. He came back to his house; his wife was waiting for him holding a coffee pot in the front yard as she used to.

"Hissah, prepare for me my clothe-tin box for I am leaving with Matar for India in the ship sailing next week." Hissah didn't say a word. She poured him a cup of coffee and another one for her; she started sipping her coffee silently looking at the gate. The cup froze in Rashid's hand; he had a face of surprise for this had been the first time Hissah drank bitter coffee ever since he married her and lived in the same house for thirty-five years.

## Norbert Lie

Written by: Muhammed Abu Alfadel Badran

Translated by: Effat Khogair

It was morning when I first came out of my house in the old district of Bonn, Germany, where I had come to prepare for my Ph.D. dissertation.

I arrived last night, so I did not have the chance to see how the house looked from the outside, as it was about nine o'clock Sunday evening. The streets were almost empty as tomorrow is a workday. I was surprised to find out that Koeln Airport, which is twenty kilometers from Bonn, closes every day from eight in the evening until seven in the morning because the neighboring residents complained about the noise of planes. The municipality, therefore, decided to close the airport at night so that people can revel in some tranquility

I did not want to go out at night in search of a restaurant, so I opened my bag and took out some dates that my mother had put in for me.

I ate and, ached with nostalgia, felt a longing for the family and the palm trees, and I kept repeating the words of a poet:

*I yearn for you when you moved away for a single day ,  
What perhaps be any harder than when you go away for ten days.*

I had a deep sleep. In the morning, I went out and saw that the house was composed of two adjoining sections, with a common garden. While going out, I caught a glimpse of a fifty-year-old man, sitting on a sofa in the garden, taken away by the roses as his black dog spread its arms under his feet. The gray hairs had crept into that man's head as his chubby body looked like a pillar of white stone. He did not notice my coming, but I greeted him, and he answered coldly. I went on toward the University of Bonn, where I met my teacher, Professor Stephan Field, Dean of the University. We talked together, then he invited me to lunch. After that I went back home. The man was still sitting, as if he had not stood since I left him in the morning, but I saw a woman next to him. I greeted them, and he stopped me and stretched out his hand saying: "I am Norbert Leigh, your neighbor, and this is Roswitha my wife, and this is my quiet dog Sidni."

I introduced myself, too, and they welcomed me and offered me a seat with them. They talked to me about the house and its pluses and invited me to dine with them in the garden, for it was summer. Norbert Leigh began to speak while sipping a glass of Coke and his wife made me a cup of tea:

"I'm Norbert Leigh; I came to like Arabs though I did not use to." This is how he started his conversation with me. "In my youth I worked several jobs after I ran away from home because of the death of my father who was killed in World War II and

the marriage of my mother to another man whom I did not bear. I started as a monk in a church near Munich, which did not suit me at all, but I found refuge there. Life was hard after the war; we used to stand in queues to get a piece of bread. One day I went to watch a football match between my favorite team and some other team. When the other team won, I got angry, one of the other team's fans cursed me so I took off the cross that was hanging on my chest, and I smashed that man's head with it. I threw the monks' sackcloth, and went away from the church forever.

I traveled to France where I joined as a volunteer in the French army. After a short period of training, they sent me to work in Algeria; I did not realize that it was an Arab country. My task was to hunt down the rebellious Algerians, I had to prove my ingenuity in work, and how a skilled sniper I was. I cannot forget those that I killed!" Norbert Leigh pauses, and, in a moment of silence and remorse, drinks what remains in his glass, and Roswitha fills him another, as she is sitting facing him, staring at him in astonishment as if she is seeing and hearing him for the first time. Meanwhile, Sidni was walking around us.

"Yes, I killed 149 Algerian men." "What?" I stared at him. He was not joking, but his face was covered with dejection and tears, and he started sobbing! Roswitha intervened, trying to get him out of this mood:

- "Norbert! Why did the number not reach 150?"

- "This is what I intended to do in order to get the gold medal, but the problem was when I wanted to kill the '150th man', I ran out of bullets. I asked a French soldier who was with me to give me a bullet, but he hated me, so he refused so that I wouldn't get the gold medal. The Algerian stood praying in reverence, not caring about his fate. I marveled at the strength of his faith. The French tried to kill this Algerian who had also run out of his ammunition. I prevented him and kicked him away because I caught the eye of the Algerian begging and reproaching. Even though he had killed five of us, I pitied him. He prostrated to God in gratitude, and for the first time I tasted the sweetness of faith.

The Algerian asked me, "Why were you so keen to kill me and then to save me?"

I tried to explain things to him, but he was an interlocutor; I could not answer all his questions. In his eyes, I was merely a murderer, and thus I was!

He explained his case to me, and thus I got convinced. Therefore, we exchanged empty rifles. On his rifle, he engraved his name "Umair Al-Yousifi." I wrote to him on my rifle: "Norbert Leigh." The man could not believe that I was right in front of him, because my fame as a killer frightened the Algerians!

I bade him farewell, and having decided not to kill again, I was determined to return to Germany.

The French commanders tried to dissuade me against my decision, but in vain.

Al-Youssoufi's words revived a feeling in me that I had never felt before. I went back to Germany, but I couldn't find a job. I got an early pension from the French

army, and years after, I got unemployment benefit from Germany. I've been living here for years with Roswitha, my second wife. My first wife has divorced me after having two daughters. They visit me on New Year's Day only, although they live in Bonn. I live alone with Roswitha and Sidni. Roswitha used to work at Radio Cologne, but she got an early pension!

All that troubles me now is how I killed 149 Algerian men. And why? How can I get rid of the shame that haunts me and which was a source of pride for me at the time?!

These faces visit me threatening every evening. I read the meanings of the Noble Qur'an and admired it. I converted to Islam, hoping that Allah would forgive me."

- "I still have the pictures." Roswitha goes on panting, and brings the photo album, "Here's Norbert Leigh in uniform, a picture with his two daughters and his first wife."

We have passed midnight while he was talking, sobbing, and staying silent.

Roswitha continues: "When he had a heart attack last year, I took him to the hospital near us, and when he woke up from his coma, another man was sleeping on the next bed in his room. They stared at each other; they straightened:

- Are you Norbert Leigh?

- And you are Omair Al-Yousifi?

They hugged each other, and they wept deeply."

Norbert Leigh picks up the conversation: "I misjudged the Arabs; they were revolutionary fighters while I was a hired killer."

I said good-bye and went on. My feelings for him were both hate and pity.

Almost every Sunday evening I would sit with them, and he would tell me a chapter of his endless life chapters.

Years later, I returned to my homeland. I used to go to Germany every year, but I did not visit Bonn. Last year I visited Bonn, and I sought him. Roswitha said to me: "He deserted me ten years ago, I looked for him everywhere, but did not find him, and finally I knew that he was living in a nursing home. He greeted me, and kept silent."

I used to see him in the market with his hair and beard hanging down, dragging his dog, Sidni, who used to get excited on seeing me, but he would remain silent.

A feeling of regret was overwhelming his face. I returned to Egypt, and the last time I went to Germany I headed towards him. I asked the receptionist about him. She stared into my eyes and asked: "Do you know him?"

- Yes, we were neighbors.

- When?

- Ten years ago?

Norbert Leigh died five days ago!

## Halimah

Written by: Muhammad Megdadi

Translated by: Nadia Khawandanah

Despite its location at the seaside, Al Harawah<sup>1</sup> decidedly gave the sea a cold shoulder. Its indigo was meaningless whether the sea was high and rough, or played quietly a silent tune, or whispered an invitation to spend the night in its company.

The villagers were not attracted to its azure, though it usually fascinated the tourists. Besides, they did not serve their guests any sea fruits as they could not be slaughtered, no blood was shed. Actually, the villagers did not consume any sea food themselves, regardless how starving they were. Even they would mock the skillful people of Misrata who went fishing in hopes of a delicious meal. What would such lunatic do with all that fish in their nets? Would they eat fish, and feed it to their children and guests? How could they eat that meat when its blood was not spilled? Did they sell their hunt in the market? How could they fool the buyers, selling them mere disgusting carcasses?

The villagers of Al Harawah were ignorant of one truth. The Misratans<sup>2</sup> became rich from fishing, while the sea neighbours remained loyal to one legend. The sea was only full of beasts that had torn apart Halimah's flesh before they devoured it. They would do the same with the others for their daily meals.

As Halimah became a young woman, her fear of sea water to touch her body, grew too. Her feet were never washed by its waves. Her hands never played with its sand and pebbles. Like all Al Harawah inhabitants, Halimah remained merely a neighbor of the coast, watching it from a distance. Superior stallions ascending the rough waves, which brought mysterious things to the near shore. That was the mental image which all the villagers including Halimah, perceived of the sea. They simply turned their backs, and she did, too.

However, Halimah adored that mysterious neighbor, who vainly tried to get closer to the houses' walls and back yards. The village took refuge in the high dunes to escape the sea's reach of its fringes strewn on July burning sands.

It was a rainy night when Halimah and some friends decided to go to seaside. As it became dark, each one sneaked out stealthily and they gathered at the brink of a near hill. Clutching to thin bushes and remnant semidry grass, they climbed on.

The sea became delirious as they approached it. It became tremendously rough. The waves went so high, that they reached the edge, up and down, stretching and retreating. Sea water splashed playfully and mildly over Halimah's face and her soft

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<sup>1</sup> Al Harawah: A village in Libya.

<sup>2</sup> Misrata: A city in northwestern Libya.

cheeks. She got closer and closer. She was not afraid. She did not believe all that whiteness was a demon, as the myth went. It was the sea's longing to the land and to the people who did come for pilgrimage. She got closer and closer, as she saw the sea water approaching her passionately, inviting her to his splashing bosom. She felt its eagerness to cuddle her.

She drew nearer more and more as if a mythical mortal was summoning her. She stretched her tender body on the water surface, while the waves tickled her limbs, desirous for water. The waves hugged Halimah with wide arms. She did not heed her friends' appeal to resist the waves and withdraw. On the contrary, she waved to them with both hands.

Fear the sea no more. The sea was the master of all desperate creatures and their haven. It was a shoulder to rely on for the villages and the weary souls, a source of wisdom and a guide for the lost in the heart of shadows.

Her friends could not respond to her appeals. The fruitless entreaties were taken adrift, far, faraway where the artist of fatal tunes in the deserted shores, the kill joy of childish, mysterious happiness, the legendary sea jinni dwelt!

## In Memory of Yousef

Written by: Musa Al-Halool

Translated by: Musa Al-Halool

The publication of *The Cry of a Pen* by poet Jihad Samawi created a big furor among anti-regime literati and media pundits. As I gathered from the media reports, the volume contained fiery poems that attacked repression, despotism, and corruption in the country. What boosted the popularity of Samawi's book was that he was also the founder of Fairness Forum, one of civil society's many bodies that had once mushroomed in the country when dreamers were under the illusion that the heir apparent would not follow the example of his autocratic father. But, like many disillusioned others, Samawi fled into exile which afforded him a freedom of expression he could not dream of had he stayed confined within his country.

A few years ago, I had met Samawi at his maternal uncle's house in our self-imposed exile. His uncle Yousef was an old friend and former colleague of mine. But despite the furor created by Samawi's *The Cry of a Pen*, I didn't get to read it.

During my last trip to Istanbul, I was once having lunch at an Arabic restaurant. When I went to pay the bill, someone grabbed my shoulders from behind with such heavy hands as if he were in a wrestling match trying to bring his opponent into a submission hold. *I am no wrestler, so what does this bully want from a weak man like me?* I turned around in panic only to find myself face to face with the media celeb Jihad Samawi. Before I greeted him, it occurred to me: *How could a poet have such big hands? I haven't noticed their size when I first met him at his uncle's.*

He said with evident surprise and joy, "So, you are one of our restaurant's clientele! A thousand welcome to you!"

In reply, I asked him naively, "Your restaurant?"

I had forgotten that before his uncle died he had told me this nephew of his opened a fancy restaurant in Istanbul. In fact, what lured me to this restaurant, which I found by accident, was neither its elegant décor nor the menu displayed at its entrance in Arabic, Turkish, and English. No, it was its curious name: Tip of the Pen. What a name for a restaurant!

Samawi prevented me from paying the one-hundred lira bill, saying, "What a shame, man! This is an insult to me. You are my guest at Tip of the Pen as long as you are in Istanbul."

He force-led me to the VIP lounge in the restaurant and ordered a cup of coffee – extra sugar – for me.

He said, "My uncle, God bless his soul, used to tell me a lot about you since you were both in college."

"He too told me about you," said I, "but shortly before he died. God bless his soul."

A dark cloud suddenly formed itself over Samawi's bright forehead, and he began rubbing his neck nervously.

When the coffee he had ordered for me came, I pushed the cup towards him. He asked me, "Don't you drink coffee? This cup is for *you!*"

"You ordered the coffee the way *you*, not *I*, like it," said I. "That's why I think you are more entitled to it than I am."

He was slightly embarrassed by this diplomatic faux pas on his part and also because of my incisive candor. This time he ordered the coffee the way *I* like it. Just black coffee.

He said with a contrived guffaw, "I like your candor – perhaps that was why my uncle had befriended you. And speaking of candor, I want to tell you about an idea that has been occupying my mind for quite some time, but my uncle's sudden death has severed the only link of communication with you, thus leaving my idea unrealized."

"Go ahead," I said. "I'm all ears."

"What do you think of my collection of poetry, *The Cry of a Pen*, published three years ago?"

"I didn't read it, though I read bits and pieces about it."

"Oh, how *come on?*" he whined, feigning hurt.

"Blame it on circumstances."

"That's alright. I have a proposal for you: How about translating the collection into English?"

I showed no response.

"Do you have the will to do that?"

"That depends on our reaching a satisfactory agreement to all parties concerned."

"Excellent. How much do you normally charge per page?"

"I charge 30 dollars per page regardless of how many lines are in it."

He made quick calculations in his head, then said, "And won't you give the nephew of your dearest friend a break?"

"Of course! Why not? How many pages are there in *The Cry of a Pen?*"

"One hundred fifty-five pages."

In this five-word reply, he made two silly grammatical mistakes, which I candidly pointed out to him. At first, he tried to stand on his wounded dignity and also to capitalize on his fame as a media personality to discredit my corrections. But I ignored all of that humbug and went on to explain to him the simple points of grammar that are usually taught in elementary school. He was rendered speechless for an awkward moment.

"Now I realize, more than ever before, why my uncle admired you."

"Bless his soul. He has been finally relieved of life and its people."

"You still didn't tell me how much you would charge me per page."

“In honor of the memory of Yousef, I am going to charge you only for 150 pages instead of 155.”

He made quick calculations in his head again and said, “So you are going to charge me 4500 dollars?”

“No, that would be the fare I normally charge to a client I don’t know *really* well. Now, because I know you, I can’t help honoring the memory of my friend and your uncle.”

“God bless you. I can’t thank you enough.”

“I don’t think you will need to.”

Mystified, he looked up at me quizzically.

“Poet Laureate Samawi,” I said in sugar-coated sarcasm, “I won’t charge you more than 150,000 dollars!”

“Well, my uncle never mentioned you are also a joker.”

“That’s right. I’m not joking with you. By God, I am not.”

He was tongue-tied by shock for a moment before he became chatty again.

“How could a translator charge 150,000 dollars for the translation of a worthless collection of poetry?”

He made the same silly grammatical mistakes again but corrected himself in mid-sentence.

“I didn’t say this was the fare I would charge you for my own sweat.”

“I don’t understand you. You are speaking in riddles. Please talk to me plainly, candidly!”

“Honestly, I’m willing to translate *The Cry of a Pen*, your *worthless* collection by your own admission, at no charge at all, but I will accept nothing short of 150,000 dollars.”

“My God, you’re still speaking in riddles!”

“Listen, I don’t want the 150,000 dollars for me. No, I want to take this money from you and give it back to your uncle’s orphaned children—the very uncle from whom you had borrowed this sum to open your fancy Tip of the Pen, the very uncle you heartlessly ignored when he had repeatedly begged you to pay him back just enough to undergo a simple surgery to unblock his urethra, the very uncle who suffered for several months until his kidneys failed, the very uncle whose long distance calls to you were so unbearable that you changed your number, the very uncle who, seeing you on TV screens passionately defending the rights of the oppressed, *les misérables*, died of a stroke, of too much oppression at your own hands, *Monseigneur* Hugo! Or should I call you Fanon because Hugo is too white for your subaltern taste?”

“Apparently, I mistook you for someone else.”

“Apparently? No, Sir, *certainly*.”

I stood up and left him, mouth agape. At the entrance to Tip of the Pen, I found a scrawny little girl – the age of Yousef’s daughter – begging. I fished out of my pocket the one-hundred lira banknote I had intended to pay for the lunch I had at Samawi’s royal hideout. Handing it to the overjoyed poor thing, I whispered, “In memory of Yousef.”

## The Stone of Desire

Written By: Naser Al-Dahiri

Translated by: Reem Ghanem

There is nothing in the place . . . apart from heat, cold, dryness and moisture.

The fire is so warm and dry, the water is so cold and wet, the air is so hot, and the sand is so cold and wet.

Out of these properties, Elixir or Red Mercury, a liquid which flows from the stone of philosophers, may grant a bit of immortality and a lot of desire.

This is an attempt to understand Jābir ibn Hayyān, and the reasons behind stone worship.

Inside the sculptress's house, her name has been absent from the minds of the distant neighbours, because of her profession. Her real name was mentioned only by the journalists who rejoiced in festival opening days, or suggested art exhibitions, as if it were a professional duty, or as if they were critics capable of entering the game of sculpting.

The silo, as she liked to call it in her very few joyous moments, was that stone building lying on the edge of the city. He had witnessed long years of hard work serving as a diplomatic agent abroad, a man torn between his government position, his readings, the lack of pleasure, the incomplete family, and the torments of a cousin wife, who did not live long.

That house was encircled by a wild garden, which was designed to look like that, to correspond to the impetuosity of the stone, and to the remote alienated place, while her sculptures were scattered in every small corner. Once in a while, you might come across them . . . here and there . . . near the house, beneath a lighted stained glass window, and in a garden that was like a Catholic cemetery in a small village.

"Stone . . . stone . . . how wonderful stone is . . . who says it is unmalleable? Who says it is a flintstone . . . a stone block?! My stone is perfectly shaped and takes possession of my blood veins . . . confessing my feelings for him, whispering to him, silently conversing with him, yearning for him, looking for him. Only selected stones enter my house, since the words of the chisel and the hammer, and the dance of the fingers together with the brush, form a meaningful whisper, almost exploring the remote labyrinth soul.

"Now . . . the sculpture is readymade; a perfect creature completed that bears both the stone's mightiness and my fanciful dream. The details of its shape are perfectly carved; it stands opposite me like a legendary hero worrying about his triumphs, while I stand in front of him like a temple woman, infected with concealed

passion. Only then does the stone speak out while I split into his warmth: my stone has no parallel!”

Thus spoke the sculptress in a moment of revelation when the sculpture has been completed. Rapturously, she felt a great joy while covering her new manly sculpture with a white coverlet, embalmed in her confidential scent.

The sculptress spent her entire day trying to interrogate the stone's emotions, while occupied in itemising the trees of the garden. Nothing shatters the serenity of an artist's morning like an awkward work schedule. That was her decision, despite the insistent pleading of her father's acquaintances, who wished to offer free services to "Youssif Bey" and his respected position.

She was in love with the morning shadow, the scent of lemon blossom, and the leisurely picking up of decaying dry leaves. She added her own flavour to things and worked them out in accordance with her own aesthetic philosophy.

During pauses, she moved from corner to corner with her coffee mug, standing either beneath a fig tree, or an almond tree, leaning her back against the stone wall and enjoying its coolness. No one shared their solitude with her and her coffee mug, except the cigarettes that she pulled out of the few packets in that box on the table.

When she started her day in the early light of dawn – after a carefree night – she would carry on working until mid-day. Then she took a shower, had a light snack and slept for an hour. When she woke up, she dressed well, perfumed herself and started work anew, or rather resumed her work on a sculpture that she had been unable to finish in the morning.

She continued until late afternoon, when she would feel a sudden urge to doze. Her eyelids were hidden behind thick corrective lenses, with frames of gold and ivory – at one time very valuable.

She used to turn to her garden at twilight, when the orange sunlight was fragmented in the atmosphere, creating a burning tranquillity with the stone of the house.

When she felt satisfied with her day's work, she would laugh aloud. A special smile played on her lips when things moved leisurely. She smiled when she was about to enter through the door in the house. This was hand carved in her own way, with remnants of a scene that she loved captured through her eyes: a scene for which there was no substitute, in any other city.

At night . . . she had a different ritual . . . a different routine. After preparing her vegetarian dinner, she would put a carefully chosen bottle of wine on the table, selected from some intimate corners of some airports. The bottle would be by her own glass. She then took another shower, and dressed in a mischievously bright light evening dress.

She spent her nights reading, enjoying green vegetables soaked in lemon and vinegar, her wine glass filled with the red blood of saints. When the body shivered

in rapture, she turned the music up to amuse herself, her lonely house, plunged in the darkness of the night. She went on with her pleasures, until she felt her body was anaesthetized. Her mind was stimulated, and she was overjoyed. It was like when she was a little girl, thrilled with her maturing body, the first symptoms of femininity, with small adventures toward her innocent coming of age.

Today, she is stirred, as if things had never gone away all these years. Only the blazing light could dispel them. They have been invoked by the cold gale of the night, and the glitter-filled wine glass. When the glass is emptied, her body is already exuding sweat. She is utterly exhausted, weary of rapture, paying the tax on her life, with her incomplete fading beauty heading towards decay.

Like some primitive piece of stone, she threw herself over the old sofa. Nothing could wake her from the dreams that attacked her mercilessly, though her cough occasionally disturbed her on midwinter nights. When the bones moaned of the stone's coolness and the silence granted by the night with blackness of evil, she dragged her legs and went and lay down on the large bed. She plunged into its soft warmth, as her hand searched for a man's ghost. She wished he was there that moment.

Morning light revealed the features of a woman in her fifties. She had been tall and thin, but age had brought on obesity and a flabbiness that girded her waist and rump and caused her breasts to sag.

The receding henna-dyed hair made her twice her age. There were more freckles all over her face and breasts, but few on her hands. These hands had long fingers, like those of a trained pianist and were adorned with silver and majestic gemstone rings.

In two things you would find no gleam; her fragile and damaged hair, and the teeth accustomed to daily doses of coffee and nicotine. Only her skin maintained its freshness.

She had always searched for her crude stone, looking for complicated things in people, creating that complication between woman and existing things. Man's body was her real pleasure. She dealt with every single muscle in that body with a woman's body strength, a woman haunted by thirst for passion. The dance of the fingers seemed as if she had soaked them with attar or bay leaves. As she sculpted, all her senses connected her to communication, though she was never satisfied until the mouth had granted her the feeling of an absent kiss.

When the sculpture was completed, she made passionate love to her new idol, with a nocturnal pagan wedding ceremony. She dignified its presence by uttering old ritual prayers. Like a temple priestess, she writhed around to the hymn of the god of fertility and growth, confronting his rain, and waiting for his herbs to grow and go green around her. In those nights, she would light a fire with the remnants of a Zoroastrian fire, and recall talismans from the earliest hymns of guidance. She

continued pacing round the fire, giving birth and spontaneity to her body before it sunk into filth!

After performing this pagan prayer ceremony, she would wake up, purified from the spirit's wounds, as if she were a new bride of fertility, rejoicing at the moment of possession, wishing that this moment would only last in a different form . . . any different form in life . . . even if it was that atheist workman who, when she was still a child, came to install the gate of the big house. She was fascinated by his sweating hands, and the blue suit that concealed the details of his tall body. She had watched the ductility of the steel and the process of heating that melted everything. It had been a moment of a child watching things that she would love in the future. But the blacksmith's look had hurt her and affected her eager wish to watch the hand at work.

If only he would come now, with all his satanic desire!

Let that guy who stole her youth, and the pink school-day letters live with his wife, subdued under the responsibility of providing for his children, and pursued by the curse of diabetes that has turned him into a haunted greenish ghost. It was he who had run away from her that day, dumping her and all her gifts, using his unemployment as a pretext for not marrying. The truth was that all he cared about was trying to find at any price an opportunity to travel to the Gulf. At that moment, she took money from the box which she had inherited from her mother and gave it to him. He took the money and went to Kuwait and came back to marry a divorced woman who had already worked there as a teacher, with a girl and a five-year old boy. He made her his wife, urged by both a steady internal avarice and a masculinity from days in the merciless coast cities!

On that day, she sculpted the bust of an effeminate man, one half a face, the second half fragmented, carved as if beasts were eating it, living on it for days on end.

She placed it outside the house and kept glancing at him whenever she had a chance. After the affair she had with this fugitive semi-man, she spent all her life advancing towards success, gaining celebrity through newspapers, magazines, exhibitions, critical acclaims, non-stop travel, and participating in activities. She also hosted occasional guest intellectuals who attended conferences, and lovers of her art. These visits would usually end up with helpless drunken kisses, with the guests claiming they had to go back to their impatiently waiting wives.

Indeed, those nights started joyfully, yet the house was soon free of visitors, and the dinner plates remained upon the dinner tables. Like a lioness fed up with satiety and mating, she wished they did not belong to her that moment. These nights rapidly faded away, filching that unconsummated feminine happiness she had always longed for. Nothing remained after those intimate gatherings but painful memories of a mother who had been unable to raise her, and a father who was lost

in the cities of politics – and his second wife. Long years of absence were enough to gratify his wish for lukewarm meetings with his only child, meetings that soon ended up shortly with complaint and counsel from his second wife.

Thus, she passed a life that imposed new measures of love, and the kind of affair she should have. Day after day, her condition deteriorated, and she was unable to give her transformed body to anyone anymore. Then one day, a blind beggar led by an eleven-year-old boy knocked on her door. She gave him what was left over from breakfast and wanted to give him a lot more.

At first, she felt he was her new art project . . . that he could rudely heal her old virginity. She watched him as he ate, drank, rubbed his moustache, and groped at things; she looked at the body's details, his wakeful ears, his leaping nose, his unkempt beard that looked like wild night plants.

She looked at him stealthily, as he entertained himself inside his void, engaging in a dialogue with her; and conversed with him just by asking questions.

The boy noticed her glances, and she became almost confused. She threw him an orange, to appease and distract him, seeking to silence him.

The blind beggar burped and prayed for her, as he usually did when he was happy with the food he had been served. He prayed that God may grant her a long life, good health, a livelihood, children, and a blessed house.

She felt he was sincere, or imagined him so. She asked him to stop over and tried to explain to him that he was her next art project, that she wanted to make a sculpture of him.

As a professional beggar, with street begging skills, he did not really understand her words, nor was convinced of what she said. He replied:

"Ma'am . . .", he replied. "I'm only a poor dervish . . . pray for our generous all-giving God"

"I'll pay you 100 dinars for a month of work," she said like an apprentice prostitute. "In addition, two meals a day, and a quarter bottle of arrack are guaranteed . . ."

"Fine," the blind beggar replied, "just throw in a daily packet of cigarettes."

"I wouldn't have agreed if you'd asked for a quarter hash joint," she laughed.

The blind's eyes shone in the dark. His front teeth stuck out as he laughed, "Ma'am . . . you're a woman of inherent generosity . . . I swear to God . . .and I deserve your compassion".

At that moment, she wished she could explore his body. The blind beggar pretended to be plunged in dark blindness and made a suggestive movement that he had learned early in his blindness. Did that cunning beggar make this gesture intentionally, in order to get her, or was it spontaneous? She was not convinced of the latter; however, she was assured of her next art project. He accepted her kind

offer and was thus guaranteed a month of pleasures: food, wages, no walking, and no more scuffles with his wife that usually ended up in violence.

Only one question worried him: was her offer worth it? What was so special about him?

There was a brief conversation between the beggar and his son. The boy, who used to answer his father's vague questions, asked many questions himself. He was his father's two eyes, but this time, he wished he were the black stains under the eyes!

It seemed that there was something relating to masculinity. The blind man hoped that the boy did not understand it and reveal it to his mother who was forever cross during her customary uneventful evening.

The blind man said to the boy, "Son, let's eat two meals a day, cash the one hundred dinars, and tell your mother that we have earned only fifty dinars. We can get a whole packet of cigarettes and you can smoke one cigarette alone after each meal. What do you say? Let's enjoy this month without telling your witch of a mother. Don't tell her anything if you really want to eat good food, and oranges, and try a cigarette, and not walk so much".

The boy murmured his agreement, wishing he had known everything sooner.

Like all blind people afraid of their livelihood being snatched away, he came with his son regularly to her house even before the appointed time. This began to annoy the sculptress, upsetting the rhythm of her day, which she liked to flow like a stream.

The boy had in mind the daily fresh orange, the breakfast at half past eleven, and the shadow of the large fig tree that brought on a noontime drowsiness, and the woman's glances that his adolescent mind tried to understand, and also her sweet words. He even tried to visualize her female form which he could drag into his wet mattress. Late at night in his miserable camp, the image of her nakedness came to him.

After these days of anxiety, the father and his son spent the evenings at their home sitting together. The father wanted to know something he had forgotten or maybe he wanted to reveal something. When there was no response from his son, he slipped out feeling his way with his fingers and groped through the dark. He was content with the silence, and flirting with a woman he knew only by touching her, in search of ecstasy with the effortless union of their hands. Desire was roused, dispelling the pain of daily weariness of hassle, chatter about details of the children, the harassment of the overcrowded neighbourhood, whose poverty-stricken inhabitants had to make their own days and worlds. Even small things in life added a liveliness that was otherwise absent.

At night, he could not forget the sculptress's voice, and tried to create a sculptured image of her in his blindness, as he made love to his wife. The new image

worked, like the night itself, and his wife's laugh and form turned into soft hands caressing his back and stiff limbs, and he briefly fell asleep.

Of course, his daily visit to the sculptress's house with his son disrupted her plans, and her pleasant idle way of life. However, she adjusted her life to him as much as she could, very conscious of him and his son.

She finally managed to fit them into her daily routine, determined by her work.

The son kept close to his father until she devised some games that were appropriate to his passage toward early adulthood. This way, she ensured his silence with an amazing television set which she usually switched on to watch documentary programs or disagreeable reports or news items that reminded her of the old homeland and the villages scattered along the other forgotten bank. The television was a sedative for the boy. The black and white films it showed gave him pleasure and made him laugh, and even stirred him.

At first, the blind man thought that the attention given to the boy was an excuse to get to him personally, and that the boy's presence was insignificant to her. He tried to explain this to her, saying that he was a man who wanted answers.

"This wasn't our agreement, Ma'am," he said. "The boy is still young, he hasn't grown a moustache yet. What are your demands? If you still want something from me, I'm ready".

He was overwhelmed by doubt like any blind man. The sculptress understood his intentions and tried hard to prove to him that he was only an art project, and that was what he had to stick to and not disturb her work with his private affairs. As regards his basic needs, she was ready to meet them all.

He cried out, "But, Ma'am, the boy is still young. He hasn't grown a moustache yet. I'm ready to meet all your needs. May God have mercy on your parents' souls".

"Try to understand, man! Let the boy be diverted, and let's get on with our work".

"Ma'am, I am under your orders. Whenever you want. You have showered us with kindness."

"Listen, try to understand me. I just want to make a cast of your shape."

"Whatever is your command, Ma'am. Though I don't really get the point. Whatever, just stay away from the boy."

"Listen to me now. You're driving me crazy with talk of your boy. I don't need him. You are my chief concern. Do you understand?"

"As you wish, Ma'am. I am at your disposal."

"There's no need to call me Ma'am."

"As you like."

"Come with me. I want to make a cast. But don't say a word."

"Yes, Ma'am. May God bless you with all success."

"God! Grant me patience. Follow me and hold your tongue."

"And the boy, Ma'am?"

"Let him watch TV. Do you want him to be blind like you?"

"Have mercy on us, Ma'am . . . we are wretched people. Begging dervishes."

"Enough chatter! Let's focus on our work."

He submitted to her like a boy rebuked for making a mistake. However, everything inside him made him cross about life's cruelty in creating mankind. He also felt he was receiving a new light that would make his days much happier. Then he felt as if his bladder was about to burst.

She treated the beggar's body as raw material that differed from stone. It was more like a dead skin – and she was a vegetarian – and lacked the solidity of marble, and the plasticity of stone. It was a shape that did not relate to her – she never paid attention to its creation process. She waited for the moment of readiness, as if she had to do something she did not like doing, but did it nonetheless. That wearisome night, she had to defeat the fugitive man, the fugitive life, and just be content with her handiwork.

She became exhausted with the beggar and his son, and their incessant demand for food. She wished she could be alone with the rituals that granted her a sense of nostalgia.

Words of thanks could have been enough, but not for a blind beggar and a son on the outset of a begging career. She had better open up the fridge, and empty it of food, which was soon due to expire.

She stood still, not knowing why she thought about the idea of expiry. This thought caused the muscle in her face to twitch unceasingly. Soon she surrendered to her solitude again, realizing that the heart cannot always have a place for many people.

Only the son stayed attached to that door. He had felt happy ever since coming to the house. He also felt attached to the sculptress who was like a feminine sculpture that was fixed in his mind. She did not look like his mother; and he did not know how to hold fast to her. He remained attached to her many sculptures, and to details that he got to know outside the rotten camp. He spent his night feeling lost. How could he get all these things back again? Most of all he recalled the orange that he had had, now almost a month ago!

Twenty-one years, seven months and seventeen days later, at the corner of the street with a new name, Ahlam al-Majeedi Street, in the little yard of the square a sculpture was set up and was unveiled by the governor of the capital earlier that day. I had before taken the path, barefoot, to the house for the first time in my life. Today I left some lemon blossoms that would brighten up this new empty place, and remind her of a flower she always loved. I lit a pipe and wrapped my Kashmiri shawl round my neck. I did not wait for the rain to stop. I was there, and her soul was there too, and the city needed that rain on that exceptional day – exceptional at least for me, a man

who had changed as soon as he entered the sculptress's house, leading a blind beggar, amazed and full of questions.

I passed my hands over the sculpture's freckled face, and touched the thick glasses, realizing then the value of ivory. I looked for a long time at the slightly bare forehead, and then planted a kiss of consent on the lips of the sculptor, a kiss that meant nothing but celebration of her anniversary, and love for a woman in every detail of whose daily life I had been familiar. She was a woman who had taught me much during her last years. There was satisfaction at what his hands had worked at on this stone.

## Bilal Mountain

Written by: Najat Al-Fares

Translated by: Abdul Hakeem Alzubaidi

Northeast of the Palestinian city of Nablus, this divine edifice is located. Since our childhood, we have known it as “Bilal Mountain.” When I embraced the map of Palestine for the first time in my life, I searched for it and found its name “The Great Mountain”. In its shadows, our small village “Wadi Al-Badhan” fell asleep. My view every morning was the foot of that mountain, groups of scattered cypress trees, united by secrets and tales, punctuated by gray rocky spaces, sometimes black, and silver, gray at other times. The nature eyelashes cover all the scene. Yellow and green thorns caressed the forehead of the mountain, increasing its splendor and loftiness.

All land babies are inhabited there, ripe plains crops, rocky thorns, orchards of citrus and fruits, vineyards of figs and olives, surrounded by almonds. All this is decorated with bright ribbons embellished with exotic flowers, red and violet, yellow and then orange simulated by blue, yes blue.

When I asked my grandmother about the secret behind giving the mountain the name of Bilal, she said, like other grandmothers, Bilal ibn Rabah, - may God be pleased with him - one of the companions of prophet Muhammed –Peace be upon him- who is claimed to have passed over the mountain, and there is a cave called Bilal’s shrine located on the top of the mountain.

Since those days, my love and fondness for this spacious tower has increased, and it has become a dream in my mind that one day I will climb to its summit through cypress trees amid thorns over rocks, between caves, not a problem, the important thing is that it will be a wonderful and enjoyable trip.

I grew up, and my desire was to make the dream come true grew, but no way, who would agree to take me to fight an uphill battle that may last days.

Whenever I told my father about the idea, he laughed, saying: “Rocks and hills surround us from all sides, go wherever you like.” But I do not like simple hills, Bilal mountain alone is my thorny, bloody dream, among the snakes and their hissing, the wolves and their howling, even scorpions and their ugliness, hyenas, and terrifying reptiles -- what does that mean? The important point is the final, wonderful, sedate top, scented with the sweet smell of history.

Years passed and my dream had become known to everyone, and some people shared that wish with me. On a bright spring day, my uncle, who was an employee at the Department of Agriculture, visited us. “I have good news for you. Today I will accompany you to the top of Bilal Mountain.” I felt things around me, touched them, moved them to make sure that it was not a dream, and that this is the world of

reality and not the sea of dreams. I could not believe my hearing, I screamed: “We will climb over the rocks, under the shades of the trees, just like little turtles!”

"Wait, wait, we will go by car," said my uncle.

“Oh my God, which car? There is no paved road,” I explained.

“Yes - my dear - there is a paved road that passes behind the mountain, and by virtue of my work I obtained a permit to pass through this road, to inspect the forest trees on the mountain.”

Some of my dreams dissolved, but something is better than nothing, I will go with my uncle and others.

The car drove us towards the mountain, but oh my God... what is this?

“This is an Israeli settlement that occupies the largest part of the mountain's back,” replied my uncle.

“Now I understand, why they paved this way,” I commented.

My joy withered -- I no longer wanted to complete the journey, even my tall giant friend, the most difficult and the strongest, has another dark face. My dreams fell apart, my tears scattered, I buried my soul on top of it. I screamed with the maximum of my voice: “Does this satisfy you, Bilal shrine?! Does this satisfy you, Bilal shrine?!”

## Surgery

Written by: Najeeb Said Bawazeer

Translated by: Nadia Khawandanah

A delightful, homely atmosphere wrapped everything in the hospital. Perhaps it impressed him more in the Surgery ward, where he had been admitted for an operation. The corridors were shiny, and the floors and walls were glowing of utmost hygiene. The AC and the stillness were so relaxing, they almost lessened the patients' suffering, even before the treatment hardly started. Like romantic breezes, the angelic nurses in their white uniforms were gently passing. Furthermore, the distinct smell of the place was sensuously attractive.

He was fascinated by that impressive ambiance, which succeeded greatly in minimizing his childish fears. In his young age, a little over eleven, he could not emotionally detach himself completely from his beloved family. In the present moment, he had to spend the night away from them, for the first time in his life. Above all, he was tremendously nostalgic about his serene town, so dear to him, and its golden days and nights, full of warmth and happiness. He had never imagined that he could leave his precious dwelling, or it could be substituted in his heart by any other place in the world.

It was his first travelling experience. He came from his distant town, nestled in a remote location on the coastal line, to this graceful, elegant, and populous city. His innocent, wild fancy exaggerated its beauty. The streets, the shops, the houses, and the faces, everything seemed to him a painting full of vivid colours and hues. Moreover, he was sure that the awesome hospital was Paradise of Eden.

“Just like Sultan Awad!<sup>1</sup>” One of his father's friends teased him jokingly when he saw him cuddled in his cozy bed. No doubt the man meant to support him and comfort his feelings of loneliness and ailment. He was desperate for that kindness.

As he started to improve, he liked to walk in the corridor till its end. There was a balcony overlooking a nice greenery. In such lovely mornings, enjoying the scenery, he felt well and fully active. He felt like hugging the whole world!

Here he was moving around and chatting with his fellow patients in the ward. He was roaming freely, carried away by the wing of imagination. Memories of his town, his mother and neighbours gushed out. A nice song popped up, and he wished to vocal it again. Patriotic feelings were already known to him. President Gamal Abdel

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<sup>1</sup>Sultan Awad Bin Saleh Al Qu'aiti. He became the Sultan of Al Mukalla and Shihr in 1955.

Nasser's voice and speeches were then touching, overwhelming melodies, for all, young and old.

“Imperialism must leave, its staff on shoulder!”

He liked President Nasser's famous quote. He could visualize a decent, old man holding his thick staff over his shoulders, commencing his walking journey. However, he never wondered then how that cane function in colonialism. Was it for torturing the oppressed peoples? Or was it for herding the game and cattle stolen from the fields and meadows of the colonized lands? Perhaps it had other uses. Nevertheless, imperialism had to leave. That was President Nasser's imperative, which sparked nationalistic enthusiasm even among people who were not touched or hurt by that staff.

One morning, the boy woke up feeling usual physical heaviness. The change made him anxious, as he had lately started improving, waking up feeling light and active. He was astonished when he looked at his hands. They became larger and fuzzy. His bewilderment increased and turned to panic when he looked around to find out that he was not in his private room anymore, rather he was in a spacious ward, full of beds. He saw various patients, from tender faces to withering old.

What was that? A dream? A trance?

He was swimming in a cascade of bright light, glowing from a torch in the ceiling, or in the sky, he could not tell. Memories of childhood were ghosts, dancing in the foggy background around the light spot. He tried to stretch himself to catch them, but he failed. He felt a nightmarish suffocation!

He dared not ask any of the patients near him, nor any of the brunette nurses passing around, lightly in deer-like swiftness. The ward was in chaos. Many mixed voices were pitching high. Meowing softly, a pale cat was wandering among the beds. He tried so hard until he finally managed to open his mouth. He felt much pain where he had the operation, though it seemed changed in place. He asked the nurse to help him adjust his position in bed. It was really so hard for him to move his body. He leaned back, supported by a pillow. He felt as if a thin ray of light was slowly sneaking into the corners of his brain, just like waking up from anesthesia.

Oh Lord! He became a fully grown man. His body had clearly showed it. He had a mysterious feeling that something weird was going on around him. He saw skeptical, anxious looks on all faces; the patients, the male and female nurses who changed his bed sheets and brought his meals and medicine.

He could not sleep at night. Some people were still up, chatting. Their voices were mixed with a radio broadcast. He eventually comprehended that some injured fighters of Palestinian Resistance had been admitted to the ward. They were among the evacuated from Beirut the capital of an Arab country, Lebanon, he recalled. Beirut was the muse for poets, and the embodiment of freedom, modernism, and cultural thriving.

Some thoughts and illusions surfaced his consciousness about events that he had not experienced or even heard about as a child. Those images were passing his mental screen, accompanied, and influenced by a voice from radio: The June War, South Yemen Independence, Gamal Abdel Nasser's death, October War, the Lebanese Civil War, the visit of President Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem, the launch of Yemen Communist Party, the Gulf War, the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon and the departure of Palestinian Resistance from Beirut, ... etc! Thus, President Nasser had passed away. He went faraway. Alas, the Palestinians were displaced once again. What about him, ridden to his bed? Could not anybody tell him what his destination was? He did not know its nature, though. All he knew was that he had been hospitalized and he had undergone an operation. He was positive about it. The place of the surgery had changed, but that was irrelevant for him. He did not want to exert himself, searching for the secret behind it. It was enough to find two paradoxical states under his skin.

Thus, he finally persuaded himself as he became trapped between the two poles of childhood and manhood. As an adult, he felt he was still a boy. On the other hand, he felt he became a man, though he was still a boy. However, in both cases he was sure he was a patient who had a surgery, whatever it was!

When persuasion brought him this far, he started touching a spot in his body. It ought to be the location of the new cut. What kind of a liquid that was oozing from it? He had the creeps. No doubt it was blood. He covered the spot with his palm, trying to stop its flow. He pressed hard and smudged his hand. The blood gushed more and more thick and warm. He piled the bed sheets and cover over the bloody flood. White was slowly getting stained until it turned fully red. Moreover, blood spread and ran over the floor. There was so much blood as if the hole in his body was a spring bursting from a huge lake full of that repugnant, red liquid, buried inside him. Now it was ascending, climbing the walls. Darkness almost filled the place. Blood reached the torch in the ceiling, or the sky, wrapped it, then crawled slowly though persistently gnawing the circle of light, which gradually shrank until it vanished. Total darkness and quiet reigned, as if it were the end of this world!

The following day our hero found himself completely soaked by the flood of the previous night, which did not spare anything at all. Despite all his profuse bleeding, he survived. That was miraculous! Touching his body, he did not see the terrible colour nor the sticky touch of blood. It was another fluid. Sweat was trickling from all his pores, and not only from that cursed hole! Drenched in cool sweat, he felt some comfort, relaxed and mentally at peace.

His father beamed at him with a very meaningful smile. Did he know it all? His father was in the heart of all matters, he always thought so. Therefore, he did not have to tell his father what he saw and had been through. Anyway, he felt intimidated to relate it.

Back to his serene town, he crumbled himself in his father's room, muffling his bitter sobs. His father tapped his shoulder kindly and was concerned about his weeping. "I am not leaving! I will not go away!", He repeated, bursting the words, still wailing.

## Heart Attack

Written By: Nasr Badwan

Translated by: Hameed Al Qaed

He didn't feel how he closed his eyes, nor how much time has passed. He only woke up on a nightmare, a nightmare that he previously experienced ten years ago or so. It was the same pain, extending from chest to the left arm. The chest that started giving him signals that he never gave them a damn. A week ago, he started suffering pain on his left side, comes and subsides. Not a severe pain, but was disturbing him. He had to beat the pain spot slightly with hand grip, or massage it with palm rest. This way he used to feel the blood flows in the artery located under the top of the rib cage protrusion.

He was telling himself: "It appears that this artery has become slightly narrow, I have to resort to walking exercises so this symptom would disappear. I also need to return to swimming to deal with this shoulder that bothers me with pricks from time to time". He is great in making things look simple without thinking to visit a doctor. It's a matter of confidence between him and the doctors, especially in what relates to the heart and its condition. This is not because he is unaware of the importance of medicine but has something to do with the past events that he had passed through or heard about. Clear evidence about this is his wife who sometimes suffered difficulty breathing, accompanied by a severe pain stretching from shoulder to her fingertips. Doctors said that there are a lot of problems in her heart but after six months of sufferings, it was found that all those symptoms had nothing to do with heart at all but were only sort of allergy that caused her difficulties in breathing and fatigue while climbing the stairs irrespective of number of steps. This also caused her psychological anxiety which turned into pain in the right hand, extended from the shoulder to the fingertips. All that pain went away when she took appropriate treatment for her allergies, and for twenty years she seems to be fine, no longer experiencing the past symptoms.

After experiencing all such sufferings, he believes that it is one of his rights not to trust doctors. What if he went through medical examinations and the doctors present to him a list of current and future health problems? What would happen to his optimistic psychological aspect? Didn't he live more than fifty years with steady body, calm face free from wrinkles and eyes shining with vitality and good health and a calm persona that is not shaken except in major incidents, a persona that believes that life is not easy in its nature and full of problems? If we face life with weakness like we are allowing it to control our bodies, it will weaken as well. He realizes this fact well, and as such he tries to look at things simply and goes back to

tempering with the time factor. He believes that time is the problem solver. It is the river in which souls are washed up to get rid of their suffering.

Indeed, he did not think about all this with his present suffering. It occurred to him that what he was suffering from must be a stroke, or what they call angina pectoris. That fire that engulfed his chest and darted into the hands across the shoulders, accompanied by short breath, forcing him to take a deep breath after another. He rubs his chest with his right hand, feeling dizzy and the things inside him rise to his throat, and push up his torso, making his head slightly higher. He said to himself: It is definitely a stroke, it's death. So, what if death has come, no one can stop it. He thought of awakening his son who was sleeping beside him, but he changed his mind in the same speed of emergence of the thought. So, he didn't waken him up and didn't think to proceed to the hospital as well but decided to accept the matter simply. If death is close, then he must welcome it. Here he started to utter the two testimonies: "I testify that there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Mohammed is the Messenger of Allah" he repeated it more than once, taking a deep breath. The pain was getting more and more intense, and he started to recite the "Tashahud". His body began to sweat, oozing from the chest, abdomen, neck, head, hands, and even dripping from the tips of the fingers. Here is an electric wave that shakes his being, travelling throughout his body, so he feels as if it is leaving the body from its extreme ends.

Yes, he expects death as he predicted it last time, but it is a miracle this time as well, the pain has subsided, as if he had left the body with electric tremor that he felt. He thought that his soul slipped away from his limbs, but it was the pain that had gone away, and only a small trace of it remained in the chest with a slight numbness in the left hand.

He did not feel what happened later, but it seemed that he had fallen into a deep, calm sleep, until he woke up to the sound of the alarm clock for "Suhoor". He got up from his bed actively and lightly. However, traces of sweat were still on his clothes. The wetness was clear, rather stark, which prompted his son to ask him surprisingly about what he saw. His answer was plain, cold and succinct: It's sweat, just sweat, and didn't tell him anything else.

On his way to work, he started thinking, he saw behind him an episode of good deeds and other of bad ones. He wondered: What if he died tonight? What if he died tomorrow or the day after? He said to himself, as for the past, it was full of good and bad deeds, and this was his destiny, and there is no way to change anything that had passed. No turning back for the past, for the pens have dried up, and the fate papers have been folded.

The next, perhaps, twenty more years. This is how he always thought, as long as he resembled his father to a great extent, in appearance, voice, and tongue, even numbness in the outer part of the right thigh. Like his father, he was known by his

excessive kindness, this kindness that disturbed him sometimes, all of this confirms that he resembles his father to the point of conformity. His father is now over eighty-two, and he hopes to live another twenty to twenty-five years. But who can guarantee this? Who can guarantee that he may live for another minute, even another second even for a twinkling of an eye?! Such being the case, what could be done when the alarm bells have sounded twice?

Staring into the distance, another twenty-five years jumped to his mind. He smiled leaving the door open for all possibilities.

## The Bee

Written by: Nawal Halawa

Translated by: Abdul Hakeem Alzubaidi

Helena was enjoying complete relaxation after the scorching heat had passed. Her body began to wake up slowly after a long sleep since she returned from work at dawn today. She quietly slid into the pool that was bidding farewell to a family with their children. The pool now is hers, she has no one to share it with. She relishes the splash, softness, and warmth of the water at the start of a refreshing winter, and the destructive storms of nature subside in Florida. But her fear increases every day for her city, which will one day drown in the ocean!

She swam in complete relaxation, preparing for her night work. She relaxed with calm, the friendly breeze caressing her face while the sun beginning to wane gradually, and the clouds being penetrated by showers of golden rays that enveloped her body, so she relaxed completely, and swam like a butterfly to regain her energy and awaken her mind.

She was swimming harmoniously, cheered by the chirping of birds before they fled to their dens on the trees surrounding the pool. She closed her eyes and relaxed her muscles with the warmth of the water. Suddenly she heard the roar of a dying bee, she looked around, and saw a small bee upside down on her back, breathing with difficulty and flapping its thin wings desperately. She approached it despite her fear of bees and despite doctors' warning that she has hypersensitivity to bee stings. They prescribed an injection that she used to buy every month from pharmacy to inject herself if a bee stung her. She used to be careful about that for months, then she no longer cared after years had passed. She rushed to save the bee, making sure not to touch it. She curled her hands, forcefully pushing the water toward a thin canal surrounding the oval pool. After an effort, the bee infiltrated peacefully, she sighs breathed, and returned to relaxation again.

She moved her limbs, calming down again. And after she saw the bee leaving the canal, she rejoiced for its rescue, but the damned bee turned, then returned, and landed on her.

She kicked the bee in panic as she spewed her body with water to keep it away from her, the bee disappeared, and Helena decided to escape. She put her foot on the first step, but the damned bee turned again, raided her and stung her in the neck at a lightning speed, and disappeared after finishing its mission. Helena's body began to swell very quickly. Its resistance weakened after the bee's venom penetrated her blood and caused severe sensitivity. When she got to the hospital where she worked, they rushed to rescue her. She had lost the ability to resist after her body became swollen, her breathing became heavy, and she succumbed to her fate after the poison

had spread in her body. The emergency doctors made terrible attempts to save her ...  
but ...

She opened her eyes forcefully after being slapped by a fierce rainstorm, awaking  
her from her blissful nap.

**Florida - April 2014**

## Half an Hour of boredom

Written by: Hamdan Zaid Dammag

Translated by: Naimah Al-ghamdi

When I sat slouching on the cold cement steps, the rays of the sun were finally able to penetrate the speeding cotton clouds that had attacked London sky since morning, and I was feeling bored.

I was so bored that I felt the urge to smoke, and automatically felt my coat pocket even though I didn't smoke. I was nonetheless in tune to see a scattered swarm of red ants that drew a crooked line between two holes in the sidewalk walls. The ants were moving frantically left and right, sometimes bumping into each other, and the little artificial "Paddington Basin" lake in front of me was more beautiful than I had expected.

There were ducks swimming quietly on the water that reflected the pictures of the luxurious residential buildings surrounding the place, and I was still bored.

I had remembered a philosophical quote that I read the day before in one of the commercials for a global insurance company, but I no longer remember who said it nor do I remember the quote at this point. All I remember is that it is relevant to my current condition and that it has to do with my train that will depart from Paddington Station in half an hour, taking me "alone and heartbroken" to my small town in the North. Half an hour is not long, and I have to go to the station now, so I refreshed myself; nevertheless, I decided to sit sluggishly on these concrete steps which are infused with enchanting symmetry of hidden lamps. I really don't know why? What I know is that something inside me said to me: 'Wait.' I was enjoying hearing the sound of flute music emanating from a nearby cafe, maybe it was by Georgi Zamfir or another musician, it really did not matter by whom; I was in harmony with the beautiful and familiar melody, and that was enough. But I was, as you would expect, still bored.

Does a person know why he feels bored, or do you see him just feel it? I don't know, but I was really bored, which is why I took out my smartphone from the pocket of the winter coat, wiped its dirty smooth screen with my hand and my saliva, and rubbed it on my knee until it was completely clean, and before I ran my forefinger on it, her "lovely image that I love" appeared on the background of the digital keyboard. I started pressing the virtual buttons: 5, 2, 5 ... but I did not continue dialing; I remembered that I was not ready to do anything, and that my thoughts were distracted. She has left me, and there is nothing I can do, she left me suddenly. I do not know how I should feel. What I had feared happened, and I really feel nothing but boredom.

Suddenly time stopped; I knew this from the ducks that stopped reflecting on the surface of the lake water that froze, from the silence that wrapped the cafe from

which the soft flute music was emitting, from the tinnitus that stopped, and from the swarm of ants that froze motionlessly. I was unable to know how long time had stopped like this, because, of course, time had also stopped.

Everything stopped except for my boredom.

How bored I was! I don't remember ever feeling so bored, yet it was almost fun. Time slowed down; so, the ant colony started moving again, and the buzzing in the ears started invading back caves in my skull. Then I felt a piercing pain in my stomach when I thought that I might be late for the train, which was scheduled for half an hour later. This was of course about half an hour ago, the time I spent sitting bored on these beautiful concrete steps.

For a while I hesitated to see the time, my left hand refused to rise to show me the time from my watch, which I noticed at the time that part of its leather belt had been torn, but my feet were terrified, they started running towards the station.

**London Fall 2015**

## The Consignment

Written by: Walid Al-Zayadi

Translated by: Shihab Ghanem

An international call from an unknown number, but he didn't answer.

This was the second time he ignored the same number, for fear that one of his relatives or someone he knows would ask for financial aid, given the difficult circumstances his country was going through. The war destroyed everything beautiful in his so called “happy” country, and the earth swallowed the youthfulness of its people, widowed women, and orphaned children. Epidemics and diseases spread, and many people could not find money even for medicine.

He was not happy to ignore this call, but he felt he had no choice, especially after he had transferred the last amount he had for the burial ceremony of his old neighbour, who preferred to die in her bed rather than die in the intensive care unit of the hospital, and burden her children with great financial costs that they could not afford. When he left his office for his home, the road was jammed, and the cars were going very slowly. He searched for the USB that contained beautiful Yemeni songs, whose string melodies managed to make him forget the traffic jam, the heat and humidity of the air. While he was enjoying the music, the phone rang again --from the same number. He did not ignore the call this time, thinking that there might be an emergency or a calamity that had befallen one of his relatives.

- Hello

- Good evening.

Her voice was soft and clouded...

How are you Munir

-Hi, I am well, thanks to God

-I am the journalist, Ibtisam.

- What a surprise! Dear Ibtisam, I have not heard your voice for a long time, but I follow your bold articles with great interest, and I am constantly worried about you. Are you okay? I tried to call you more than once but found your phone switched off.

- Yes, I changed my number for reasons beyond my control, but do not worry. Had I not been from a large and well-known family, and with the protection of my tribe, I would have been finished off.

However, I will not hide from you the fact that I have caused a lot of harm to my family, especially after I suffered some time ago a traffic accident - by a deliberate act - and was admitted to hospital. But when I came out, I became more and more insistent that I continue my efforts to expose the system and reveal the rot, and not keep silent about the misery of the bitter reality that we live in.

That is why my articles were banned from publication in all local newspapers, and now I am publishing them in newspapers in other Arab countries. My articles have

been published in a book abroad, and it will be displayed in the book fair where you live, and I would like you to buy me some copies and send them with a friend of mine who will come to Sanaa the day after tomorrow.

I wanted to take your permission before asking her to call you tomorrow, to take the books from you, if that is ok with you.

-Thank God for your safety first. Secondly, I congratulate you on the publication of your book, and I will make sure to buy copies and send them to you. We will keep in touch, God willing.

He went in his car to the book fair, and bought some copies of her book “Peace Begins from Within”, and also bought her the novel “The Plague”, which he had read more than once, especially after the war broke out and devoured everything in his country, and ruin, corruption and injustice spread like the plague in Albert Camus's novel. He also bought her a book of verse by Nizar Qabbani “Tufulat Nahd”, (i.e. The Childhood of a Breast). He had given her a copy of this book at the beginning of their romantic relationship. She was his first love, and they became engaged to each other, and when he had the opportunity to travel abroad, she completely opposed the idea, as she believed that the country needed the competent minds of its youth, and that emigration is an escape from responsibility towards his wounded country.

Munir was an important employee in one of the ministries, and he did not belong to any political party or religious group. He was about to take the position of deputy director, but he had first to join the ruling party to reach that position, and he had also been offered to become a member of a permanent committee in the party. For such appointment, he knew he would have to give up many of his principles, and values which he was brought up to cherish, such as refusing hypocrisy, bribery, illegal transactions and so on. Emigration was the only option left.

The engagement between him and Ibtisam was called off, and their relationship turned from love to intimate friendship.

No one from Ibtisam’s side called him, neither on the first day, nor the second, nor the third, and he thought that her friend must have postponed her trip, and that she would travel at a later time.

Days passed and the books went with him wherever he went, but no one contacted him, which gave him the opportunity to read her book deeply. A kind of jealousy struck him of her boldness and courage, which he had missed since he lost her to leave for the unknown.

Ibtisam called and he asked her about her friend, and she explained in a sad voice that her friend said that there was no space in her bag to carry even one copy.

He promised her that he would look for the first available traveller, to send the books with him, especially after all kinds of mail had been cut off. She thanked him very much, and was also pleased with the other books he had bought for her.

Another week passed and Munir was looking for a traveler, as he thought that the task was easy, but it was very difficult, especially since there was no flight except to Aden and then going by land to Sana'a.

The only items having writing that a traveller would carry were his passport or medical papers. Moreover, holding a passport or identity card showing one to belong to a particular family or tribe, may cause him to perish, or get into a lot of trouble from one of the conflicting parties, for crimes in which he had no hand, other than that he belonged to that country, and has a family, or rather families to support, especially after the outbreak of violence and the collapse of the economy all around. Let alone what happens to someone who carries an intellectual or a political book? If he was able to pass these books from the airport despite intense scrutiny, how would he bypass the countless land checkpoints into Sana'a, not to mention the robbery gangs and bandits? Is it not better for the traveller to consider his survival in the first place?

In his last attempts to deliver books to Ibtisam, he called a friend of his, a merchant who ships goods by land to Yemen, and begged him to put the books in one of the boxes he was shipping. The merchant promised him that he would smuggle the books in a truck that would go to Sana'a the following week, so Munir thanked him for this favour which he would never forget.

When Ibtisam learned of this news she was very happy. She started waiting anxiously.

After about ten days, the merchant called Munir to inform him that the shipment passed across the border safely, and crossed many checkpoints, but at one of these points near Sanaa the books were discovered by one of its men. His eyes flashed and he salivated when he discovered this wonderful find, and quickly went to the general supervisor who was an illiterate man, so he looked through all the books upside down, and became very angry without knowing a single word.

He ordered the vehicle to be searched again very carefully to search for more books as if they were drugs or dangerous illegal materials. They almost seized the entire merchandise on the truck. The driver had to pay a large amount of money in bribe to get the merchandise released and allow the truck to go on its way, provided that the driver burned the books with his own hands.

**Michigan February 15, 2020**

## Roots

Written by: Yousif Al Hassan

Translated by: Hameed Al Qaed

Years passed and Khamis did not visit the old city market. He got off his car and started walking and looking at the changes that the place had witnessed. He was shocked by the crowd, watched surprisingly the huge numbers of people and races that were hooping between the flood of cars. Oh, how the faces of people have changed. He stopped in front of an Iranian bakery and remembered how he was carrying fresh bread between his hands with hot vapor emanating from his open mouth. He was enjoying eating bread before reaching to his father's house, crossing piles of sands.

He remembered his father with his soft black face while sitting on a clay edge, in a cottage made for selling fish, lemon and dates in the market of Indian traders who came from Sindh. He remembered how this small shop, made of palm fronds, turned out after the sunset to a place where he and his brother Fairouz loved to visit. He remembered when he was defecating in the sunset or before dawn on the seashore, where he was washing his only pant and dress once a month. His daily food was only dates and fish.

He learned from his father and his neighbor (Mutawa) how to read Quran. With the passage of time, he learnt Arabic language and forgot those strange words that he used to hear from his father. He remembered that there were some Arabic words in that language associated with some African Swahili words. He tried to recall the features of his mother, but it remained a blurred image. Sometimes he used to see her like an Indian slender woman and other times like an African woman carrying her child in a hub on her back.

He sat on a wooden chair in a local café and asked for a tea with milk. Indian songs and music filled the place and reached to all the shops in the market. High-rise buildings, bright lights and impressive billboards with pretty women faces were seen over the eyesight. There were also trademarks of televisions, mobile phones, movies, fridges and washing machines.

He remembered his father, who passed away forty years ago and how he lived later in the house of Salim bin Hameed as a servant, where he mastered preparing coffee for the guests. He was then thirteen years old and grew up among the children of Salim like one of them. He accompanied Salim when he traveled to India for treatment to serve him. Salim obtained a passport for him, so his name became Khmis bin Salim.

Khamis got married and ended up with ten boys and girls who studied in regular schools. They are now working hard and managed to have good life.

Before his father died, he asked him about his origin and his family. He explained that his grandfather was found drowned in a river after he was accused that he had stolen a cow. The children scattered in the land of Zinj; some reached to Zanzibar, some others to Maboti Islands. He also narrated and spoke about how he reached to Khorfakan using fishing boats.

Many stories he heard from his father, but the memory tries to hide and drive them into oblivion like all the hidden secrets of this city that were carved on the clay walls and the sand of the beach.

.....

Children of Khamis realize only that their grandfather's name is Salem and think that it's not necessary to seek their roots. When Khamis leaves this world, the history will start once again.

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المشاركون في كتب المنتدى  
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