

Translation of *Stories from Fadolallah Uthman* by Ibrahim Aslan

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Matthew William Reynolds

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Translator's Note

I. Theme

Introduction

In her analysis of Ibrahim Aslan's *Nile Sparrows*, Mona El-Ghobashy comments on the significance of Fadlallah Uthman in the lives of the characters. She points out that the street is a source of continuity through the progression of time and links the perspectives of various characters across multiple generations as they live and die in Cairo. El-Ghobashy notes that "the street is also a metaphorical anchor, standing silent witness to the passage of time and the aging and death of its kindhearted, sociable denizens." The street serves a similar purpose in *Stories from Fadlallah Uthman*. In this collection of short stories, Aslan relates the quotidian experiences of different people living in the Warraq neighborhood of Cairo. Against the unchanging background of Fadlallah Uthman, signs of aging, death, and the passage of time evoke feelings of alienation from many of Aslan's characters.

The Passage of Time

I noticed symbols of the passage of time in "The Man and the Things," in which an old man sits in the street surrounded by a collection of objects from his past. To a passerby, they appear to be ordinary things, but a closer look reveals the old man's personal story. A faded photograph in a pearl-studded frame depicts him as a small boy with his deceased family members. It is accompanied by an old fez he used to wear when he was younger, and a knife with a handle of carved ivory that he claims belonged to his father. Although the old man sits unmoving on the side of the street, seemingly a part of the unchanging Fadlallah Uthman, the things around him remind him of the passage of time and the inevitable loss of his loved ones.

Although the things represent his only remaining physical connection to his family members, his ownership of them is threatened by present realities. The old man is forced to sell these "inherited" items on the street in order to avert poverty. In one case, the man sells his father's knife to a stranger who offers him a few pounds, and to the surprise of an onlooker, he silently accepts the transaction. The loss of his father's knife represents his separation from his family and

deepens his sense of isolation. Like sand swept off a rock by the wind, the old man's possessions slowly vanish, leaving only the bare surface of Fadlallah Uthman.

In other stories, memories link individuals to the past rather than the physical surroundings. In "Travel," an old man he embarks on a journey to the village he used to visit with his family as a child. Seeing the village quickly brings to mind memories of childhood experiences in that place. During the trip, he remembers the whistling sound of the mill that comforted him when he was young, and breathes in the familiar smells of the village. As he progresses in his path, he finds a familiar place where his grandfather used to plant date palms. In spite of his vivid memories of the village, the old man is distressed to find that the mill and wheat barn he was familiar with as a child are gone. As he speaks with the local townspeople, it becomes clear that they have been absent for many years.

As his journey comes to an end, the old man is disturbed by the evident changes in the village. After failing to find the barn and mill, he continues silently in his path and does not speak with any of the townspeople. Finally, he arrives at the deserted train station, where he lays down and rests. His silence and the loneliness in the village and train station intensify his separateness from the wider community. Ultimately, the passage of time and the trauma of witnessing the changes in the village drove the old man to seek isolation.

Sickness, Aging, and Decay

Like the passage of time, sickness and aging drive the people of Fadlallah Uthman away from other members of the community. In "A Bit of Family News," the narrator's experience with his diabetic younger brother causes tension between him and other family members. Initially, the narrator is reluctant to visit his brother in the hospital, where he is preparing to have part of his leg amputated due to diabetic infection. While he is there, he observes several people who have undergone similar procedures and are coping with the effects of having an amputated limb. Later, he is informed by the nurse that he must take his brother's amputated limb from the hospital after the surgery, which evokes memories of carrying the bodies of family members who died in the past.

Ultimately, the narrator's role in the operation and his exposure to the traumatic effects of the surgery lead him to reject the situation and distance himself from his family members. At one point, he expresses resentment toward his brothers and sisters for forcing him to accept the responsibility of collecting and burying the leg as well as signing the agreement to allow the doctors to perform the surgery. Later on, he expresses his frustration to his brother and refuses to speak

with him about the matter. Evidently, the operation heightened underlying tensions between the narrator and his siblings.

Likewise, the narrator's experience visiting the house of a sick man in "Drops of Lemon" leads him to seek isolation from the people surrounding him. In the story, he accompanies an unnamed companion to the house of 'Abd al-Khaliq, where he witnesses the effects of the illness firsthand. In particular, the narrator notices how the illness prevents the man from speaking and severely hinders his movement. This becomes especially clear when his wife feeds the helpless 'Abd al-Khaleq drops of lemon juice from a spoon.

After seeing the gravity of the illness with his own eyes, the narrator seeks to separate himself from his companion and the home of 'Abd al-Khaleq. At one point, he expresses how he does not wish to see 'Abd al-Khaleq or anyone else, and he only wants to sit alone in a café. Later, after he and his companion have left 'Abd al-Khaleq's house and are walking in an alley by Fadlallah Uthman, they hear a cry from the house. Although his companion returns, the narrator follows him for only a brief time and then starts walking away. His decision to leave reveals his inability to confront the illness. Instead, he seeks to become an anonymous figure moving among the people of Fadlallah Uthman.

In addition to these narratives, "Escape" tells the story of a nameless man who flees from his family shortly after being reunited with them. After entering the apartment, he is welcomed by an old man who appears to be his father or close friend. Later, he meets a younger man who regards him ambivalently from across the room. During this time, the narrator expressed how he felt as if he was meeting these people after a long separation, and noticed how they appeared to be older after so many years apart.

As he interacted with the two men in the apartment, the narrator's behavior suggests his emotional detachment from the people around him. Instead of talking with them, he remains silent and looks at the floor, perhaps in response to the other man's reproachful glances in his direction. Finally, he wanders through the apartment and leaves through the back door before anyone notices that he has left. In this way, he refuses to engage with the people who welcomed him into their home, and fled to the open air of Fadlallah Uthman where he could be alone.

Experiences with Death

Furthermore, Rizq's exposure to his father's corpse in "Thread" leads him to seek isolation from his family and members of the community who gathered to mourn for his deceased parent.

After his father's passing, Umm Rizq urges her son to go into her husband's bedroom and retrieve his wallet from the body. To his dismay, the wallet is attached to his father's clothes by a single thread, and he must cut it to remove the wallet and give it to his mother. Although Rizq repeatedly attempts to ignore his mother's request and leave the house, she insists that he retrieve the wallet, and in doing so he must confront the lifeless body of his father lying on the bed.

During the ordeal, Rizq clearly displays signs of anxiety and guilt from entering his father's room and violating the sanctity of the body. As he cuts the wallet free, he whispers to his father to ask for his forgiveness and express his remorse for taking his possession after his passing. After reluctantly completing the task, Rizq could not look at the faces of his family members and friends who gathered in his house to mourn. Instead of remaining with them, he leaves the house and wanders alone in the alley leading off of Fadlallah Uthman. The image of Rizq walking alone in the alley, surrounded by empty rows of chairs set up for the ceremony, emphasizes his isolation. His attempt to disassociate from the community undoubtedly comes from his feeling of loss and guilt intensified by his close interaction with his father's corpse.

In another example, the narrator in "A Path for the Young" is haunted by memories of a deceased child who lived in a neighboring apartment. Despite encountering the boy on a regular basis, the narrator cannot clearly remember his face. This stands in sharp contrast to his vivid memories of Umm Ahmad calling out the boy's name when she was angry with him, or his ability to recall the boy's voice as he walked in the street with his friends and called them names from the balcony next door. Ultimately, the narrator is frustrated and guilt-ridden because he cannot remember the features of the dead child who lived on his street.

As time passes, the child's passing leads him to question his connection to the people of Fadlallah Uthman. He is disturbed by his wife's reaction to the death, since she harshly judges the family and appears to care little for the boy. Her words cause the narrator to become upset and go away from her to sleep. Later, he is surprised to find no one outside the boy's home to mourn as he looks out from his balcony. This experience reveals the apathy of the community and the weakness of social connections among the inhabitants of Fadlallah Uthman. Finally, his inability to recall the child's face makes him become aware of his own indifference toward the people who live around him.

Likewise, the narrator of "Silence" expresses his feelings of isolation while describing various images of death unfolding before him on Fadlallah Uthman. For example, he relates seeing his own reflection in a store window being stabbed and then dying in broad daylight. Later, as he sits on a

balcony overlooking the street, he sees a group of people gathered around a body wrapped in the shroud of death.

In the midst of this vivid imagery, the narrator repeatedly expresses feeling detached from the surrounding environment. For example, he states his willingness to leave, although what is he leaving and where he intends to go remains ambiguous. Later, he characterizes himself as feeling lonely, suggesting his sadness at having no one whom he can relate to. Finally, as he watches the group of people gather over the shrouded body, he says that he cannot hear their voices. This suggests physical separation from the action and his emotional detachment from the events taking place on Fadlallah Uthman. It is clear that he cannot relate to the people he sees before him, and wishes to leave Fadlallah Uthman far behind.

Conclusion

Ultimately, images of aging, death, and the passage of time lead the people of Fadlallah Uthman to feel alienated from their surroundings. While these elements play a significant role in the lives of the characters, Fadlallah Uthman remains constant and unchanged. The street, in this way, unites the various experiences of its inhabitants and links their unique perspectives as they cope with change and the emotional trauma that comes with it.

II. Method

Introduction

I encountered numerous challenges and puzzles that tested my ability to comprehend the subtle meanings and nuances of the language. In this section, I will explain my approach to translating these short stories and discuss some of the major challenges that I faced, especially in regard to Aslan's writing style and the importance of understanding Egyptian and Islamic culture.

Style

While translating Aslan's words, I tried to pay close attention to his writing style. It quickly became clear that he takes a minimalist approach to his writing, with his careful and sparing use of words and focus on surface description. In most cases, Aslan tells us what things are and what they do, but does not explain why they do it. These silences allow the reader to take an active role in the storytelling and draw their own conclusions from the text. I did my best to recreate this style in English, with a carefully measured word economy and neutral narrative voice that does not reveal the characters' motivations and intentions in an obvious way. In this way, I hope to present a clear image of Aslan's settings and characters, complete with the subtly and intricacy of his prose. At the same time, I hoped to strike a careful balance between clarity and vagueness in order to allow the reader to develop their own view of each scene according to his or her interpretation of the story.

Significance of Culture

The book has a distinct Egyptian character, and it was necessary to have a deep understanding of Egyptian and Muslim culture to produce a successful translation. Cultural phenomena are especially important in this collection of short stories because Aslan chooses to focus on quotidian experiences. For example, Arabic food is featured in many scenes. Popular dishes such as *mahshi* and *ful* appear throughout the book, and contribute to the Egyptian flavor of the stories. It is necessary to have knowledge of these foods in order to relate to the experiences of the characters.

In addition, knowledge of Egyptian funeral customs was necessary to understand the sequence of events in some stories. After the person has passed away, the body remains in the house until the family arranges for it to be taken to the graveyard. The house is also the place where friends

and family members gather for communal grief and mourning. Understanding this dynamic was particularly important for translating stories such as “Thread” and “A Path for the Young,” both of which deal with the issue of death and grief. The burial process also comes into play, since in one instance the characters discuss washing and performing the funeral prayer over the body of the deceased. Being aware of this process was vital for accurately reproducing Aslan’s text.

Moreover, I needed to be conscious of differences between Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial Egyptian in order to translate each story. Like many Arabic writers, Ibrahim Aslan incorporates both types of Arabic into his prose. While using Modern Standard Arabic to give a voice to the narrator, he uses colloquial language when writing dialogue. This combination creates a dynamic contrast between the language of the narrator and the voices of the individual characters. I quickly realized this would be a challenging aspect of translating the stories, largely due to my limited experience with colloquial Egyptian. Nonetheless, I was able to overcome this challenge, and I believe the use of colloquial religious expressions and profanity adds significantly to the Egyptian identity of the stories.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank Ibrahim Aslan for writing this wonderful piece of literature and opening my mind in so many different ways. In addition, I would like to thank Kamran Rastegar for agreeing to help me on this project and offering helpful suggestions for translation. Finally, I would like to thank Rebab El-Nady for her assistance throughout the duration of this project, especially with translating colloquial Egyptian and helping me understand numerous aspects of Egyptian culture. I dedicate this thesis to these professors for all their help and hard work.

Entrance

Two men sat in a patch of winter sun at the end of Fadlallah Uthman. One was on the edge of a damp bench, wearing a jacket of manufactured cloth and facing a locked store. The other was wearing a wool sweater with buttons and sitting on a metal chair facing the empty side of the bench. He smoked and looked at the muddy ground, scattered with small pools of water.

“And after I brought her a stove with five burners, and she said no, I want six,” the one in the jacket said quietly.

He said he did what he had to and made the down payment. If it happened to be six it was her luck, and if not, “It is what it is.”

“Is there any stove with six burners?” the other asked, just as quietly.

“What did you say? She’s spoiled senseless, she refused five and wanted six.”

“Five? Six? What nonsense is this? A gas stove has one burner.”

The one in the jacket sat up a little.

The other continued, “You might say five lights, or six lights, that’s possible. But six burners? What nonsense is this?”

The one in the jacket was lost in thought. “Could it be a mistake?” he said.

Then he added, “Then what happened?”

“From the moment we sat here, you’ve been saying strange things”.

He stood up.

“And if one is saying crazy things, the one listening must be reasonable”.

He pulled the wool sweater down all the way.

“It’s disgusting”.

He stepped carefully on the slippery ground.

He disappeared into Fadlallah Uthman.

Errand

In the darkness of a closed first-story room, a boy rested his body on the edge of the couch and patted the chest of a sleeping woman.

“Mama. Mama. Mama,” he said.

The young woman opened her eyes and looked at the face looming overhead. She reached out and groped about his rear thoroughly. It was dry. Then she stroked his thin messy hair. She smiled at him and closed her eyes.

She slept.

He put his finger in the opening of her nose.

“Mama. Mama.”

The woman wiped her face and bent down, picking him up from under his armpits. She rested.

He tried to stop her by bending his knees.

“No Mama. No. *Ful*.”

“*Ful*?”

“Yes. *Ful*.”

“The *ful* seller is still asleep. Go play with the can until he opens up.”

The boy laid on his back. He rolled until he reached the bare space at the entrance of the closed room.

He struck his head on the floor and cried out, wailing, without tears.

“Be quiet Khalis,” she shouted.

The child lived only for movement.

His body was longer than three tiles on the floor.

He cried out, suddenly, in tears.

She sat on the sofa and spread her bare legs.

She stretched, flexing her arms upward, and pushed out her chest.

She brushed her hair from the sides of her face and stood up.

She faced the metal table in the corner of the room. He turned on his stomach, watching her, and he stopped crying.

She examined the surface of the television and picked up a bottle. She returned it to its place.

She faced the windowsill and picked up a folded newspaper. She took the paper with fifty piasters.

She picked up a man's pajama jacket.

She put it on.

He hastened to stand using his hands and feet, clasping her legs, "I carry you, Mama. I carry you."

She looked at his face, wet with tears. She carried him, wiping his face with her palm, and he took it in his mouth.

She went out to Fadlallah Uthman.

He leaned on her shoulder and turned his face forward. He saw a man spraying red bricks with a hose.

"Uncle? Mama. Uncle?"

She said, "Yes. Uncle."

"Water?"

She didn't respond.

"Hose?"

"Yes. A hose."

"Drink, Mama. Drink."

"When we get back."

She went to the end of the street. There was a sunny area with taxis and dust from the unpaved road.

She crossed a field of cultivated alfalfa between a group of new houses.

The boy saw a field hand and pulled on her cheek:

"Lion, Mama? Lion?"

The mother saw.

"No, not a lion. It's a cow."

"Cow, Mama?"

"Yes, *zift*."

He turned to a pile of burning trash in front of the open restaurant.

"Fire, this fire?"

"Yes, fire."

"Oh."

She extended her hand with half a pound and asked for a portion of the *ful*.

“No peppers, please.”

The boy saw the seller at the pot.

“Uncle?”

“Be quiet.”

“Is this uncle?”

She slapped him on his naked thigh.

She took half the loaf of bread wrapped in paper.

She returned to the house.

She put him down and closed the door.

She opened the paper and broke the loaf into quarters.

He sat quickly, crossing his short legs.

He took a piece of bread. He took it and looked at the other piece in her hand.

“Give, Mama. Give.”

She looked at him, smiling.

She bent down and put it near him.

He pulled it under his folded knee.

He hid it away.

“Cut all of it. Cut all of it, Mama,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, licking her fingers.

“The hose now.”

“Go ahead, help yourself.”

“Can. This can”.

“Here’s the can.”

“Cover.”

She pushed the engraved metal cover with her bare foot.

He drew near the can, lifting his folded knee.

He saw the piece of bread that he hid. He took a piece of *ful* that fell on the open paper and put his knee back.

She took off the pajama jacket, and her breasts slipped out of her t-shirt.

He exclaimed, raising his hand clenching the morsel, “Nipple?”

“Yes, nipple,” she said.

“TV now. TV,” he said.

The young woman faced the television sitting on the metal table.

She pressed the switch and laid down on the couch.

The boy lifted his head, staring.

The screen lit up.

A picture of a big face appeared in color. And a mouth, speaking.

The boy said, “Uncle.”

He returned to chewing. He watched.

He smiled.

Sideshow

‘Abd al-‘Adhim ‘Amara was disgusted when he got home from work. He skirted a pile of trash, grumbling the entire time, and went through the courtyard to the front door.

‘Abd al-‘Adhim ‘Amara flung the newspaper away as he stood at the end of the hallway. It appeared dark. He took off his shoes, kicking them away, and took off his pants and shirt. He sat on the couch in nothing but a short-sleeve shirt and underwear. He leaned back on the sofa and pursed his lips, like he was sniffing his short gray mustache. Then he looked at Young ‘Amara, standing between his legs with his dirty, cheerful face.

Safiyya came through the curtain from the kitchen.

“When did you get here?” she asked.

Abd al-Azim didn’t respond.

She saw the clothes strewn about.

“You knocked the chamber pot over on the carpet.”

She passed the little girl to him and gathered the clothes, hanging them on the door knob inside the bedroom.

Safiyya picked up the chamber pot and took it to the bathroom. She returned with a plate.

‘Abd al-‘Adhim looked at the dish of *mahshiyy* and gave the girl back to her mother.

He ate with the right side of his mouth to keep the rice away from his bad molars on the left. By the time he ate five pieces of *mahshiyy*, he was sick of the smell of cabbage. He rose to go the bathroom.

He stood in the doorway with a cigarette and asked Safiyya not to disturb his sleep because he wasn’t going to work.

She took a handful of rice from one of the rolls of *mahshiyy* and blew on it. She brought it, cold, to Young ‘Amara’s mouth.

“You need a break,” she said.

“No.”

“What, why?”

“Enough. I’m not going to work ever again.”

She turned to him. Her fingers, covered in rice, dangled in front of the boy’s open mouth.

“So don’t wake me up in the morning,” said ‘Abd al-‘Adhim.

“You want to sleep all through the morning?”

“I’ll sleep, I’ll wake up. I’m free.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I mean it.”

He threw the cigarette butt to the entrance of the apartment.

‘Abd al-‘Adhim went to his room. He wanted to close the door, but the pant leg sticking out into the doorway stopped him. He picked up the pants and shirt, threw them on the floor, and closed it.

After a little while he looked out at Safiyya.

“The cigarette butt is still burning, and if the boy steps on it and burns himself I’ll say I told you so,” he said.

He closed the door again, and picked up the shirt and pants off the floor to hang them on the aluminum doorknob. He climbed into the high bed on tall posts. He slept on his back, legs crossed, and stared at the ceiling. He fiddled with the skin on his knee.

“That bitch.”

Safiyya, who didn’t hear him, went out the front door and with the girl on her shoulder. When she saw ‘Abd al-Fatah outside of the al-Suniyya mosque, she hurried toward him with the girl in her arms. Young ‘Amara tried grab the hem of her garment, but she reached out and pushed his hand away.

The venerable ‘Abd al-Fatah listened to her silently, his gaze on the ground. Then he led her to the house and went through the courtyard.

“Abu ‘Amara, you’re asleep aren’t you?”

‘Abd al-‘Azim turned to the door and saw the old Abu Sami standing there with his red face and short white *gillbab*.

He wanted to get up and put on pants, but the old man approached. His frame was so small that the mattress touched his narrow chest.

“No, don’t get up.”

He placed his hand on ‘Abd al-‘Adhim’s shoulder, clutching his prayer beads, and made him lie down like he was before.

‘Abd al-Adhim laid down, embarrassed.

The old man asked him if anything happened at the agency.

“Never,” ‘Abd al-‘Adhim said sadly.

“What is this talk I heard?”

“What talk?”

“That you don’t want to go to work.”

“Who said that to you?”

“My hears heard, and that’s all I’m going to say.”

‘Abd al-‘Azim thought.

“I hope so,” he said.

“A break?”

“No, I’m done for good.”

“Fine, but this is considered leaving work, without permission or providing notice.”

“I know.”

“And later?”

“They’ll fire me.”

“How can you say this?”

“Trust me, Abu Sami, I want to be fired.”

“God! What about the mortgage, and food, and the children?”

“It’s all a load of crap.”

Abu Sami smiled in what seemed to be piety.

“You have children, though.”

Then his smile disappeared.

“But whatever happened, you have to go to work.”

‘Abd al-‘Adhim swore he wouldn’t go. Whatever happened would happen. He wanted to get up but the old man stopped him.

“No, don’t get up,” he said.

So ‘Abd al-‘Adhim sat. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from under the pillow and gave him one. He lit it and leaned back toward the wall.

“Go. Please go.”

The old man let the prayer beads slide down his arm and hung his hands on the bedpost. He rested his chest on the mattress, nudging the box spring with his leg to find a foothold. It got caught in the bed, and the whole thing suddenly collapsed. He fell down with it, engulfed by the mattress, blankets, and pillows, and Abd al-Azim was on top of it all. The bedposts struck the walls and

shattered the windows. ‘Abd al-Fatah screamed from underneath, cursing because the cigarette burned his left cheek and he thought the whole house had collapsed.

Safiyya jumped into the doorway, holding the little girl, and saw the whole world turned upside down. Abd al-Fatah was still screaming. He was completely hidden except his clean legs, flailing underneath the mattress. ‘Abd al-‘Adhim was stuck in the corner in a t-shirt and underwear, holding the bedpost with eyes like blood. Safiyya screamed wildly as she went out of the house, pushing Young ‘Amara in front of her. People were rushing inside. One of them bumped into her, and she was thrown backwards into ‘Abd al-Baqi. He raised his finger in front of her face, and demanded that she stop screaming and tell him what happened. She stopped suddenly, and said it looked like ‘Abd al-‘Adhim struck ‘Abd al-Fatah with the bedpost. When the old man fell, everything fell on top of him. Safiyya, still speaking softly, could no longer contain herself, and began trembling in the man’s arms until she was almost crying. She added that ‘Abd al-‘Adhim broke the glass in the window, and he didn’t want to go to work.

World Cup

Mr. Said was happy about the date of the World Cup broadcast. He got up early, while his wife Old Ruqayya, who didn't sleep before dawn prayer, remained asleep. He didn't change his clothes because he was retired.

Mr. Said went to the kitchen, boiling an egg for himself in the big pot.

He finished boiling the egg and put the tea pot on the stove, then took the coffee pot to the sink and left the water running from the faucet to let it cool. He peeled the egg, still hot enough to hurt him, and put it in a small plate with a few black olive seeds.

He took an aged loaf from a hanging plastic bag and cut into it from the top with the tip of his finger, making a hole. He put some water through the hole into the loaf and shook it strongly until it was wet inside, then turned it over and emptied it. He noticed that the bread absorbed most of the water as usual, and only a little came out from the hole. He quickly turned it over under the faucet to wet it from the outside too. He put it in a small plate and carried both to the low table in front of the television.

He moved lightly, with his white stubbly beard, pajama pants, and a short-sleeved shirt. He felt as if his health was better than he could have hoped.

He went to the kitchen again and poured tea. He took the cup and returned, putting it next to the list that he prepared for recording the results of the each match, one by one.

He made sure his pen was there.

He crossed his legs and shook his foot in a plastic slipper, the remote is in his hand.

He watched the game and smoked with relish because the box of cigarettes was still full.

When Old Ruqayya went from the bedroom to the bathroom, he kept watching without turning in her direction. In that moment Umm Said finished sweeping four stories of the house from top to bottom. She went up again and gathered the dustbins and put them on the stair railing. She stood in front of the door of Mr. Said's apartment holding the bucket and firmly pressing the enameled doorbell like the wall of yellow limestone. Mr. Said shook up in his place. He quickly realized that today was Tuesday, which was the time of the loathsome Umm Said who always pressed the doorbell like that. She must have been standing in front of the door, wishing to enter so she could fill her bucket with water and mop the stairs. He opened the door, resentful. He found her in front him, with her slim figure and pale robe, and the plastic bucket in her hands.

“Good morning,” Umm Said said courteously.

“Hello”.

“Is the lady present?”.

“She’s asleep,” he said.

He closed the door.

He went back to watching, picturing her turning around with a something from her robe dangling behind her on her ridiculous backside. It must’ve happened when she bent over to sweep the stairs, but anyone, regardless of the circumstances, could reach back and adjust their clothes when they stood up.

“What a rotten man” Umm Said said to herself.

She headed to the apartment across the hall and rang the doorbell.

A young woman opened the door.

“Yes Umm Said?”

“I need water.”

“You know our pump is broken.”

Umm Said returned to Mr. Said’s apartment. She pushed the doorbell with just as much force. He opened the door, trying not to see her.

“Did the old woman wake up?” she said in the same courteous voice.

Inside, the announcer cried out.

“Gooooal! That’s the first goal, people!”

He had to restrain himself because he didn’t see the goal. His heart filled with hatred for Umm Said and her old headscarf that came down over her forehead, moist with sweat. The bathroom door opened and Old Ruqayya came out, her clothes trailing behind, and Mr. Said hated her too. He left everything as it was and hurried to the side room, where he slammed the door as if leaving the whole place behind. The old woman stood talking to Umm Said and took the bucket from her to fill it with water. Mr. Said hid himself completely and poked his head out through an opening in the door. With great difficulty he could see the television from the side, hoping to catch the replay of the goal scored in the first half of the match.

The Man and the Things

A young woman selling lemons was rummaging absentmindedly in her basket in the shadow of a tree by some water-storage urns. She was on the other side of the market, in between the local government building and a kiosk with cigarettes and drinks. An old man with a big cotton blanket in front of him was sitting nearby.

The blanket was embroidered with faded thread. Different things were around it: small fingernail clippers, a long lace ribbon, a fez without a button, suspenders, several silver spoons, an enema, an empty blue bottle, and others.

The things were arranged carefully along the edges. In the middle there was a short knife with a thick handle of carved ebony, and next to that was a wooden frame encrusted with tiny pearls around a faded picture of a family. Nearby there was a cigarette mouthpiece like a long dry branch with a metal lighter in a black velvet bag. There was a worn snakeskin wallet that was fraying, but the genuine leather still gleamed deeply. Some areas were disorganized, sparse, and bare, like palm lines on brown, burnt skin.

The old man looked out from under his thick eyebrows while leaning over with his small frame. He was speaking to himself in a voice loud enough to be heard, causing the young woman to approach him.

“Did you say something to me?” she said.

He noticed her, closing his toothless mouth and turning his face away.

She tilted her head to see his face better:

“Did I upset you?”

He didn't respond.

She reached out her hand, taking the lace ribbon.

“How much is it?”

She turned it over in her hand:

“How much is this ribbon?”

He said:

“Why?”

“I want it for my blue dress.”

“You can have it.”

He gave an estimate.

She gathered up the ribbon and tucked it in her robe.

She reached out to the basket to pick up some lemon seeds and dropped them in his lap.

The old man remained silent. He bent over to examine the seeds, and straightened up. Time passed.

The old man raised his eyebrows and motioned for her to come near. When she did, he signaled with his eyes to the wooden kiosk nearby.

“Give these to the man at the kiosk, and bring me a pack of cigarettes.”

“Why don’t you go?”

Anger flashed across his face, and he fell silent.

She thought a little. She took the lemon seeds and dropped them in the basket.

After a little while she returned with two cigarettes.

The old man reached to the things on display, taking the mouthpiece and the lighter in the bag.

He put the end of the cigarette in the opening of the mouthpiece to light it, and inhaled deeply.

He breathed out the smoke while packing up the lighter and putting it in the upper pocket of his robe. He looked at it.

She smiled at him, covering her mouth with the edge of her old black veil. He smiled too, his eyes narrowing to slits and revealing the fine lines in his old kind face. Then she reached to the things on the blanket. She took the picture frame from its place and stared at it.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“It’s me.”

She said:

“These people?”

“I’m there too.”

“Where?”

He pointed to the small boy.

She gasped, bringing the picture close to her face.

“Really?”

“Yes. That’s my mother, and that’s my older brother.”

He put his finger on the fez in the picture.

“See that fez?”

“Yes,” she said.

He pointed to the fez in front of him.

“It’s the same one.”

She glanced back and forth between the small faded fez in the picture, and the red one arranged with the other things.

“It is. But the button’s lost.”

“This one here?”

“Yes.”

He pointed to the knife.

“This is the owner of the statue.”

She saw it and said:

“It’s a knife.”

“No, it’s a statue and a knife.”

“Are any of them alive?”

“I am.”

“And the rest?”

“They died.”

“All of them?”

“A long time ago. But these things belong to them.”

She was silent for a while.

“You don’t buy the goods you sell?” she asked.

“They’re mine too, really.”

“Because you inherited them?”

He shook his head lightly and wet his fingers a few times to put out the cigarette while it was still in the mouthpiece, then took it out and threw it far away. He put the end of the mouthpiece in his toothless mouth and blew to clear it out. He put it in his pocket with the lighter instead of back on the blanket. The wind grew a little stronger, causing the leaves in the tree to shake and fly down to the sidewalk. A pickup truck stopped nearby, and the driver climbed out while someone else got in. The young woman left the picture and began calling out “lemon”. The man approached, carrying a folder stuffed with papers under his arm. He paused in front of the old man, staring at the things on display.

He bent down and took the small fingernail clippers to test them on the edge of his paper. He threw them away.

He took the enema and put his finger in one end while blowing forcefully on the other. He tilted it and placed it down. He took the knife, running his finger along the short blade and examining the thick carved handle.

“How much?”

The old man took it back while the other considered carefully. He put it back on the blanket.

The man picked it up again.

“How much is this knife?”

“Speak,” the old man muttered.

“Say what? You speak.”

The old man fell silent and didn’t respond.

“Do you take pounds?” the driver asked.

“Pounds? His father’s knife, for pounds?” said the young woman.

The man reached in his pocket, laughing.

“That’s enough, girl. I’ll give you an extra ten piasters, for your father’s sake.”

He threw the money in his lap and stood as he wrapped the knife in a piece of paper. Then he turned away. The old man crossed his legs and rested his elbows on his knees. The money disappeared in the folds of his robes, and the edge of his trousers showed the bone of his clean, bare leg.

Market

I left my sister's house after a few minutes.

She had fasting guests, so I couldn't smoke or drink tea.

I walked in the street, decorated with thousands of silver banners and colorful lanterns hanging from strings overhead. I knew it ended in the crowded area of cottages that separated it from the plaza where the market was held. Once there, I could smoke a cigarette behind the yellow low-income housing and drink from the water-storage urns under the lone tree by the abandoned government building.

I continued walking, thinking of the cafes that were usually open at that time of year. I searched a while in the narrow streets between houses of made of wood and tin sheets, ducking under lines of drying laundry until I came to a new street.

It was immersed in dark sewage water, with some tires and car parts and a number of empty plastic bottles floating in it. The market was nowhere to be found. Nothing was there except a few vendors scattered in the dry places on the sidewalk by the yellow low-income housing.

I stopped there and saw a man and a woman selling things. The man was smoking, so I headed over to him and took out a cigarette from my shirt pocket. It felt soft and wet in my hand because it was so close to my chest. I smoothed it in my fingers as I stood in front of him, watching, and held it against the light of the burning July sun. Nothing was there except a high-quality typewriter, one of the old black ones. The vendor was slumped on the ground, with short black toes poking out from under the hem of his dirty robe. He leaned his elbow on an old traveling chest with cut leather straps dangling from the edges and a group of worn out postcards clinging to the sides. From here, I could see the lone tree in front of the abandoned government facility.

I headed to the young woman in black behind a pile of used audio tapes, doorknobs, keys, broken pens, frames, glasses, shoes, and a group of books. I bent over. They were torn schoolbooks. My cigarette had dried up to the end where you light it, and its side took on the dirty yellow color of tobacco. I went back to the other vendor to light it, but he wasn't smoking anymore. He rested his head on folded arms, with his eyes completely closed. I looked for the cigarette butt in the surrounding area and put mine back in my pocket. I passed by the woman while she watched me without raising her head. I turned in the direction of the water jugs set up under the lone tree at the abandoned government facility. I saw the walls of dried clay and was certain they were empty. Then

I noticed the metal cup attached to the round wooden lid, and I knew I'd find a drink of water inside one of them.

A Path for the Young

When I returned home from work that afternoon and started coming down the street, I knew something had happened. The silence was noticeable. The children that were usually playing and shouting disappeared. The women who always sat in front of the houses were gone, making the road seem wider and lonelier.

I moved along, and noticed a strange movement in front of the house next to mine. When I passed it I saw strangers standing in the courtyard.

I went up the stairs to my apartment, thinking the old grandmother who was always sitting in the sun had died. I rang the doorbell, and no sooner had my wife opened it for me than I asked her what happened.

“It was the boy, Ahmad bin Nura,” she said.

I knew Nura because her house was next to ours, and a hollow light shaft connected our apartments. Her voice was loud, and she always argued with her husband or her children. The sound of her calling out “Ahmad!” rang in our ears day and night. I used to find her sitting in the doorway or buying something from the vendors that passed through the street, wearing her white robes with little blue flowers. She was always fat, like a little white mound with a round face and smiling eyes. As for the boy, I couldn’t remember what he looked like at all, despite my familiarity with his name. I heard it over and over again, on the lips of his mother or the children that called to him from the street. I heard his voice as he called back to them, or when he called them names from the balcony next to ours. Sometimes as he walked with them, carrying his kite that was as tall as he was. I could never remember his face, but somehow it appeared to me. I knew I should pay more attention to the faces of the people I lived with, if only to avoid the feeling that swept over me now. I asked about his age.

“About nine, couldn’t have been more than ten,” she said.

I was laying out my clothes when I asked her what he looked like again. She stopped in the hallway that went to the kitchen and asked what I meant.

“I’m talking about the boy,” I said.

“So? What about him?”

“His appearance.”

“Who cares? The boy was Ahmad bin Nora!” she snapped..

I told her I couldn't remember his face.

She said he was a child like any other.

"Did anyone see it?"

She replied bluntly that he fell from the roof:

"He was playing with the kite."

She left, cursing kites and whoever invented them. She put together a dish of mallow, pickled eggplant, and the bread from the refrigerator and heated it on the stove. She put it in a plastic bag to keep it warm and soft.

"I should pay respects to his father," I said.

She said the father's name was Haimut, and people carried him from his café because he couldn't walk on his own two feet. The street mourned for him, even though he was a marijuana addict and dishonest, like when he told the police officer that the boy fell from the balcony to avoid causing problems for Umm Muhsin.

I didn't understand what she was saying, and the way she spoke always made me upset. But I could discern something from her words. I understood the boy was playing with the kite on the roof of Umm Muhsin's house, overlooking the empty lot at the beginning of the street. He fell down to the courtyard when he leaned back too far.

"Okay, say it again from the beginning," I said.

She said the entire street ran there screaming, and at first no one recognized the boy because of the fall and the blood.

"Nura sat on the ground with him in her lap."

"Why?"

"Her family found out from the blood on her dress."

"The one she sat on?"

"She was asking us what to do."

Suddenly I saw Nura, sitting on the ground with the boy in her lap. She was looking around and asking people what she could do.

"I'm going to sleep," I said.

"And the food?"

"I'll eat when I get up."

"The bread got cold and dried out a while ago anyway," she said.

In the evening I looked out from the balcony, but I didn't see anyone sitting in front of the house to mourn.

I put on my clothes and headed to the café to console the boy's father and grandfather.

The café was small with only a few customers. The grandfather wasn't there, but I found the father setting up chairs. He took them quickly to one side of the café, and returned with more to put them on the other side. He was a young man, and when he noticed me standing there he thought I came as a customer. He tried to bring me a seat, but instead I took his hand, patted him on the shoulder, and left.

After that I saw children digging a deep hole on the ride side of the entrance to Ahmad's house. They planted a firm pipe in it with iron stakes that stretched out like branches ending in metal rings. Each boy put a jar of red clay in it, dripping with water. The whole iron tree was coated in orange anti-rust spray. At night I suddenly noticed Nura's voice screaming "Ahmad" with all her strength. She wasn't saying it sadly, or like she was calling to him. She shouted it as if answering someone who asked her his name. During the day I saw children coming here and there. One of them left his house with a jar to get a drink from the iron tree. He tilted his head back, looking at the balcony high above, and left.

Drops of Lemon

When I noticed him, he was walking ahead of me on Fadlallah Uthman, and I went slow so I wouldn't catch him. After a short time, I feared that if I walked slowly to the end of the street it would be noticeable because that's not how I walk. Naturally, his walking was slow because he was sick, and his illness didn't help him. So I resumed walking at a normal pace until I stood parallel to him and he saw me.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"For a while," I said.

After that we didn't talk until we reached the corner of a narrow alley.

"You should come see 'Abd al-Khaliq," he said.

"Who's that?"

"'Abd al-Khaliq the undertaker."

"'Abd al-Khaliq the undertaker?"

"Yes, brother."

"Why?"

"What, aren't you sick?"

"But I don't know him."

"What are you saying?"

I explained to him that I knew him like anyone, but I had never spoken to him or been to his house before.

He smiled.

"Has anyone told you not to enter?" he said.

I smiled and felt great anguish because didn't want to see 'Abd al-Khaliq the funeral director or anyone else. Instead I only wanted to buy a pack of cigarettes and sit in the café and then go home. Then he patted my shoulder with his soft hand and turned away.

"Come, come," he said.

I followed him to the alley that I passed every day but never entered.

It was quiet, and the earthen ground was swept and smooth. The end was blocked by a wall of red brick with a single low window framed in old stone. It was barred, and behind it was a piece of cardboard. I was surprised by the cut stump of a tree I knew in the days of my youth. I had

forgotten it, although I glimpsed it from afar from time to time. It was dried out and sawn at an angle. In its core, the brown center was pierced and cracked. I reached out with my hand and touched the bare wood. I descended the low doorstep to the side house, where the passageway was moist and the entrance of the apartment open.

“Hello,” he called out.

The sitting woman woke up.

“In the name of God the most Gracious and Merciful,” she said.

She watched us until she calmed down.

“Hello, sir. Give me the veil you have, girl,” she said.

“Hey! What are you doing ‘Abd al-Khaliq?” the man said in an audible voice.

‘Abd al-Khaliq didn’t respond.

He was lying down on the carpet spread out on the hallway floor, lit by a weak lamp hanging from the dark ceiling on a twisted wire. He leaned his back against the woman who sat behind him in black robes. She embraced him with her legs, and in her hand was a half-filled cup and a spoon. There was a pile of laundry gathered on the sofa, and next to her a handful of clothespins. Above the couch was the window, blocked off by the other side of the piece of cardboard that I had seen plugging it up outside. It was used as a wall calendar with notes attached to it, and its days had run out. Its presence left a misshapen patch on the glossy white surface. A young woman brought a light black veil and covered her mother’s bare head. She stood watching.

“No. You’re much better today,” he said.

“Praise, where were we?” said the woman.

‘Abd al-Khaliq’s head rolled back, and she filled the spoon from the cup.

“What is he drinking?” the man asked her.

“He’s drinking lemon juice”.

“Lemon tea, and sugar,” said the girl.

I looked at her and saw her beautiful eyes with traditional kohl, and her chest that was bigger than normal. He saw me, and his disapproval was clear. I turned to the woman and he asked her if ‘Abd al-Khaliq had the medication.

“He does,” she said.

She informed him that Dr. Hasan prescribed him medication.

When he asked her if he was taking it on time, she said he refused.

“We make him, sometimes me and sometimes the girl.”

She was speaking, and her hand raised above ‘Abd al-Khaliq’s head with the spoon filled with lemon juice. I saw that the spoon tipped in her hand as she spoke, and lemon drops fell on his nose and mustache. If she wasn’t speaking, but instead listening to the professor, the spoon didn’t tip, but instead trembled a little and the juice gathered at the bottom of the metal basin. It made a drop that fell away from the rest, on his cheek or eye instead of his nose or mustache. ‘Abd al-Khaliq was moving his lips up and down, following the movement of the spoon above to catch a drop in his open mouth, and never succeeded. After that I saw him stick out his tongue and lick the lemon juice on his wet mustache. He drooled from the corners of his mouth in obvious pleasure. While he did that she met our eyes. He realized that I was watching him, so he quickly pulled back his tongue and sealed his lips.

“But where’s the medication?” asked the man.

“For ‘Abd al-Khaliq?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see it.”

“We returned it to the pharmacy. The original melted from the heat.”

“And the pharmacy, did they accept it?”

“We took cough medicine as a replacement, for Mursi,” she said.

I turned to her again, and she smiled at me with her beautiful eyes as politely as possible. I saw that the size of her breasts was normal, and not as big as I had thought. The professor glanced at me and asked the girl to give the suppository to ‘Abd al-Khaliq at the designated time. I was about to mention that the suppository wasn’t there, but he looked at ‘Abd al-Khaliq directly.

“Enough of this nonsense. You’re young, of course.”

The woman put the cup on the rug beside her and pulled back ‘Abd al-Khaliq’s head because it had rolled away. She settled it firmly between her lap and her full breasts. Then she picked up the cup to fill the empty spoon.

“In any case, he’s trying to sleep a little. We’ll see you later.”

He said that and headed for the open door, in front of me.

“But the tea?” said the girl behind us.

“Forget about her,” he whispered to me with his face turned down.

In the alley he took out a handkerchief and dried his eyes.

When we got out to Fadlallah Uthman, we walked among the people.

“So, what do you think?” he asked me.

“About what?”

“About what? About the ‘Abd al-Khaliq, of course.”

“Well, it seems that he’s fine,” I said.

He stopped walking and turned to me.

“‘Abd al-Khaliq, fine?”

“It seems to me.”

“You’re so naïve, ‘Abd al-Khaliq the undertaker is dying.”

I said that I saw ‘Abd al-Khaliq sticking out his tongue and licking lemon juice from his mustache.

“I can’t believe someone who’s dying could do something like that.”

“What lemon?”

“The lemon juice in the spoon.”

“Juice? Spoon? What are you talking about?”

Before I responded, we heard a quick shout. He turned to it.

“There you go. He died.”

He put the handkerchief in his pocket and headed there.

I followed him a little and stopped.

I turned around and walked away, looking under my feet so that any neighbors watching me would think I didn’t hear the shout, and I didn’t go there because I was busy looking for something I lost on Fadlallah Uthman.

Thread

Early afternoon.

Seats were arranged on opposite sides of a swept alley. It was enclosed by a wall and a closed window.

Children played.

Rizq, tall and thin, stood in the doorway near the tree stump, waiting for his father's friends and family in the funeral procession. He yelled at the children playing by the chairs, and they ran off. He rearranged the seats.

Umm Said quickly entered the alley. She had just sold Umm Rizq's bracelets at the market.

"Be strong, Rizq," she said.

Rizq followed her inside. She sat on the carpet and took out the money out of her bosom to give to his mother. She was drying her tears with his younger sister, his wife, and the other women in black.

Umm Rizq motioned for him to come closer.

Rizq stepped between them and leaned on her.

"Go get your father's wallet from his pocket," she whispered in his ear.

Rizq headed to the closed room.

He pushed the door lightly and paused in the doorway.

The bed was far back the dark room. His father was resting on his back.

Soft light streamed through the edge of the small window, illuminating the bare face and pale, shaven head. His dark brow slanted back and his nose pointed up in the air. His mouth was open a little under his thick mustache, and his jaw hung down below.

Rizq stayed where he was. He closed the door and went out the way he came.

"Rizq," Umm Rizq called to him.

Rizq returned and lowered his ear to her mouth.

"Yes, mother?"

"I told you to get your father's wallet from his pocket," she said.

"You want it now?"

"Yes."

"The clothes aren't hanging on the door."

“What if he’s wearing it?”

“Maybe,” Rizq whispered.

He headed toward the front door.

“Rizq!” Umm Rizq called to him.

He turned around.

“Go and get your father’s wallet from his pocket. I want it,” she said in a voice so all could hear.

“The wallet?”

“Yes. Get it in his waistcoat pocket.”

Rizq opened the door and entered the room.

He approached the bed with his eyes on his father’s chest.

He pulled back the collar of his home-spun *jilbab* and saw the pocket of the tailored waistcoat. He could see the edge of the wallet sticking out.

The wallet was attached to a piece of thread, tied to one of the buttons on the waistcoat.

Rizq left the room and closed the door. Umm Rizq and the other women looked at his empty hands.

“The wallet’s tied,” he said.

“Go get your brother the scissors, girl” she said.

The girl crawled forward on her knees.

Her calves were white under the edge of her black robes.

She found the scissors under the cushion on the sofa and gave them to him.

Rizq took the scissors. Their handles were made of blue plastic.

“Should my brother go with you, Rizq?” his wife asked from the sofa.

Rizq turned to her angrily.

He opened the door quietly and headed to his father in the back of the room.

He moved his hand from the collar of the *jilbab* to the waistcoat pocket.

“I’m sorry Dad,” he whispered.

He took out the wallet.

He tried to cut the string but the thread was slack.

He put the wallet on his father’s chest and stretched out the string with his other hand.

The thread was tied to the button. It pulled up edge of the waistcoat a little.

As if he breathed.

Rizq cut the thread, trembling. He took the wallet and left.

He approached his mother with the wallet in his hand.

Umm Rizq put the wallet in her bosom and fell silent.

She saw the thread dangling on her left breast.

She gathered the string in her bosom with the wallet.

Rizq stood for a little, looking at no one.

He left.

He walked between the rows of chairs until he reached the end of the alley.

He looked here and there on Fadlallah Uthman.

He returned.

He sat on the tree stump.

Rizq put on his shirt and pants for work.

The scissors were in his hand.

Travel

The old man quickly finished arranging the couch he slept on and washed the cups. He gathered the newspapers and magazines he spent so much time reading, and put them on the edge of the table. He did it in an undershirt and cotton trousers and thin arms.

He sat on the couch and put on his socks, and then a dress shirt and full suit. Before leaving, he turned off the TV and drew the blinds on the window. He switched off the light and pulled the door shut.

He went down the stairs and out to the street, walking at a leisurely pace until he reached the shuttle stop. He took one bound for the train station.

The man found a train and boarded it.

His ticket was cut up to the end of the line. He sat watching the stations in cities where the train stopped or slowed down. Passengers and vendors roamed the platform, looking down on him through the window.

The train lingered a little at a deserted station.

He hurried to get off.

He stood alone on the platform between a small stone building and an old wooden bench. The train moved on, and he watched it become a blurry, black patch in the distance. It slowly faded and disappeared.

He went carefully down the platform and crossed the train tracks, where he could smell the scent of diesel oil coming from the gravel under the tracks. He continued to the entrance of the town, looking for the wheat barn and mill whose occasional whistling had calmed him when he was there on his yearly vacation. There was nothing. The clay houses disappeared, replaced by new ones of red brick. Some of them hadn't been built yet. He saw a shoe store and a shop for welding tires. The wind blew some colorful women's shirts on clothes racks, hanging from piping in front of a store with high stairs made of stone. There was a café with woven straw chairs in front of it. They were empty except for a man wearing a *jilbab* and skullcap.

He waved his hand in silent greeting.

The man stood up and disappeared.

He continued on the long dusty road that cut through the center of town, smelling the old smells, and encountered a boy pulling a cow. He searched for a beehive and its honey, for a hedge of

flowers on the left side of the road, for a long stone *mustaba* on the right. He looked for the pink stone of the mill, standing beside the path that led to a big house where his grandfather used to plant date palms.

The old man reached the end of the town. There was no trace of the big lake, or the green thicket where water birds lived. There was a hill with a large berry tree on top of it, surrounded by rows of sloping gravestones. Some of them were plated with limestone, clear in the fading sunlight. The old man lingered a while and returned. He stood in front of a café with straw chairs, empty except for a man in a *jilbab*.

“Hello.”

The man rested his feet under the chair.

He pointed nearby.

“Wasn’t there a mill here?” he asked.

“Here?”

“Yeah. And the barn for the wheat?”

“It’s always been behind the magistrate’s office, east of town.”

“But it used to be here.”

“No. It’s always been east of town.”

A while passed.

“Are you confused about which one?”

The old man didn’t respond.

He crossed the road and walked slowly along the shore of a narrow canal. Its water dwindled away below a run-down bridge.

He urinated while leaning on the trunk of a bent willow. Then he went up the platform of the deserted train station, toward the empty stone building, and sat on the edge of the old wooden bench. After a while, he laid down on his side and brought his knees to his chest. There were voices, and whispers of steam, and fields. It was only a daydream. A fixed star appeared in a cloudy sky, glowing and going out.

Discussion

Late in the day, a young husband sat on the edge of the bed. He was looking at himself in the mirror on the wardrobe, and time passed.

A young woman came in through the open door, carrying laundry she'd gathered from the roof. Their eyes met. She stopped.

He moved to the couch under the window. She threw the clothes where he'd been sitting on the bed. She set aside the clothespins and began folding his pajamas.

He looked out the window onto Fadlallah Uthman, where the sun had disappeared. He asked her if anyone had wanted to see him.

She said no one had.

The time passed in silence.

He looked at the lamp hanging from the dark, twisted wire and asked if the light was on.

"Sure, turn it on" she said.

He turned back, asking her if it was better to wait until the flies were gone.

"Whatever you think is best," she said.

He smiled and looked outside again.

He said she was always like this. She never said anything.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't I ask you in the beginning if I should turn on the light?"

"And I said yes."

"After that I turned and told you to wait a little. Right?"

"Sure, and I said whatever you think is best."

She opened the wardrobe.

She began putting the folded clothes inside. She closed it and drew near to him.

She sat on the couch and returned his smile.

He put out his cigarette on the windowsill and threw it outside.

He said his words didn't mean he was angry. He didn't want to upset her, but it was important to talk about this.

"'Whatever you think is best' isn't an answer," he said. "If you agreed to turn it on, then why did you say 'whatever you think is best?'"

“What you think is best?” she asked.

She told him that she said that because he didn’t turn it on after she agreed. Instead, he asked her another question, and she was under the impression he wanted to wait.

He said he didn’t want to wait, only to ask her. It was her responsibility to say what she wanted, even if he wanted to wait.

She said she didn’t want anything.

She took her feet off the floor and crossed her legs.

Time passed.

He put his arm around her, resting it on the back of the couch.

His fingertips touched her left arm.

She straightened up a little.

His beard was coming in.

There were tears in her eyes.

His nose brushed her hair.

Sound

A full-figured young woman wandered inside the apartment. She put her hands on the wall, one after the other.

She muted the television and asked the children to be silent. She placed her outstretched palm on different places along the wall and held it there briefly.

The children, who were used to this, kept running around and chattering.

She moved from the walls of the hallway to those of the living room, and then to the walls of the kitchen and bathroom.

She went to the outer room and did the same thing. She was sure the sound was only in that room.

Something was buzzing in the walls and floors.

She could feel it, even if she couldn't hear it.

She put on her headscarf and went up to the next floor.

She stood in front of the apartment door. It seemed to be open.

"May I come in?"

A thin woman was sitting on the couch inside.

"Come in," she said.

She entered.

"Is Abu Mustafa here?"

"He is."

"Abu Mustafa. Umm Ahmad wants you," she cried.

Abu Mustafa came slowly from the other room.

He stood in the doorway, with his white *jilbab* and long black beard.

"Yes?"

"You have to come down, we have a problem."

"Is everything alright?"

"There's something in the apartment. I want you to see it."

"I'm coming."

"Okay, go by the stairs," said the thin woman.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

She went down.

Abu Mustafa stayed where he was, looking troubled.

He went back inside again and sat on the couch in front of the fan.

Abu Mustafa was middle aged, but sugar had made his body fat and weak. He had to climb the stairs in short spurts, and he took frequent breaks because of the pain in his feet. He wanted to cut back, but he never listened to warnings of his diabetic relative. Instead he ate *'aysh baladi* and potatoes, and if he came across a juicy piece of beef, he ate it with rice that his wife cooked in cow's fat. He always regretted it later. As he became older, he grew out his beard to hide his missing teeth.

Abu Mustafa went down and knocked on Umm Ahmad's door.

"I don't know, there's something strange buzzing in the wall," Umm Ahmad said.

Abu Mustafa put his hand on the wall under the light switch.

After a little while, he put his ear up against the same wall.

He said he didn't hear anything.

She told him the sound wasn't here. It wasn't in the bedroom, bathroom, or kitchen either.

"It's in the living room."

She led him there, opened the door, and stepped back.

He entered.

She turned off the lights from outside the room.

"You'll notice it in all the walls, and in the floor," she said.

Abu Mustafa leaned on the *Asyuti* chairs and briefly put his palm on the wall.

He moved to the rest of the walls and did the same thing.

"Can you feel it?" she asked him.

"I can feel something like a water heater."

"Exactly. It's very strong and noticeable in the floor."

He stood between the walls, perplexed.

He was sitting on the carpet in the middle of the room when it started to go away.

He focused as hard as he could.

He felt something buzzing behind him right away.

He felt it going up his backbone and in his ears.

He was sure of it. He struggled to his feet and went out.

He went out to the hall as she came from the kitchen.

He put on slippers and told her the sound was coming from a ceiling fan.

“It’s running in the room under you.”

She said the family living there was on vacation.

“On vacation?”

“Yeah.”

“They must have forgotten it’s running.”

She said she had gone down before that to ask them about it, and she’d never seen a fan.

“When did you ask them?”

“A while ago.”

“Why? The sound hasn’t been here long.”

“It’s been about a year.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Maybe a little more, maybe a little less, it’s borderline.”

Abu Mustafa stayed in the doorway.

He headed to the stairs, gathering up the hem of his *jilbab*.

“In any case, it’s in God’s hands. Let’s see what happens.”

He headed to nearby café and found a seat outside.

He ordered a cup of tea with one spoonful of sugar, and lit a cigarette.

‘Abd al-Fattah got up and joined him with what was left of his tea.

“Hello! How about this heat?” said ‘Abd al-Fattah.

“It’s nothing,” said Abu Mustafa.

He stirred the tea and added that the heat could be dealt with. You could take a shower, have a cold drink, and take off your clothes. There was a solution and that was the end of it. The real issue was a problem you couldn’t solve. He said he discovered a room in the house whose walls keep vibrating, day and night. The rest of the house was fine, but there was one room that buzzed.

“How is it buzzing?”

“Like there’s a ship with an engine.”

“So it buzzes. What else does it do?”

“Nothing, it just buzzes.”

“Wow. For no reason.”

“No reason at all.”

“In your apartment?”

Abu Mustafa turned, his tired eyes suddenly alert.

“Do you believe I forgot?”

“Where is it that it buzzes?”

“In Umm Ahmad’s room. The one under us.”

“Which room is this?”

“The room on the street.”

“Damn.”

“It’s like I told you.”

‘Abd al-Fattah put out the cigarette.

“Are you staying?” he asked.

“A little.”

“Okay, I have to run an errand. I’ll check on it straightaway.”

‘Abd al-Fattah took his normal route until turning off on a side street. He stretched for a minute. He went in and hurried up the stairs, holding up his *jilbab* as he walked.

On the second floor, he stood in front of the wooden door and put his hand on the wall. His listened for a moment and gasped.

He knocked on the door, and when the little girl opened it he pushed her out of the way and turned to the wall in the hallway. He briefly put his hand under the light switch.

“Where’s your mother, girl?” he said.

“Why do you want her, Papa?”

He raced to the television and turned it off.

“God damn.”

He pressed his ear against the opposite wall. He closed his eyes and focused.

Suddenly he drew back.

“Where is your mother, bitch,” he cried out.

The girl drew back, watching.

‘Abd al-Fattah left her and rushed to the room overlooking the street.

He opened the door and went in.

Night

He left Fadlallah Uthman, sat on the sloping shore, and lit a cigarette.

He thought about the water of the river, anything to return to his house and find his married sister cleaning his clothes, and enter his room and sit on the sofa. Any thought to find his words, and he didn't. His sister's daughter thinks he has breasts like Mama and asks him to take them out, and he apologizes. He noticed that he's in his forties, and he sees this like a man who goes to sleep and wakes up to find himself in a strange country. He put out the cigarette and forced himself to stop thinking entirely. He often went swimming, where he could totally stop thinking and become lighter than ever before, content in a pure state of nothingness. But only if he could overcome his eyes, because there were the greatest distraction. This time he was forced to ignore the voice of the washer woman and fix his gaze on the face of the little girl laughing and running in front of him. He struggled silently and thought he succeeded. As soon as he thought about thinking he succeeded, he realized his mind hadn't stopped completely. He slept on his back and stretched out his arms to their full extent on the filth of the sloping shore. He passed by the hall and told his married sister that he would return before she went back to her husband's house, and she said goodbye because she knew that he would be late and she wouldn't see him before she left. He knew that she knew that he knew. He went down to the water of the river, fixed his gaze on the deep darkness, and began his pastime.

Man

He left his house in the morning on his way to work.

Muhsin headed to the small square between the low-income houses. There was an intersection and rest stop for taxis, where cars waited with an open seat.

It was morning, and the square was crowded with people walking everywhere.

He lit a cigarette and turned, noticing a thin man slowly crossing the square. As he walked, he opened a newspaper and read it without looking in front of him. Muhsin followed him with his gaze as he approached the center of the square. There was an iron streetlight standing at the end of the narrow divider between the traffic lanes. Muhsin thought the man's feet would hit the edge of the sidewalk, but he lifted them and climbed up. Then he saw him standing under the streetlight and bending over. The man disappeared, and he couldn't see him through the unending stream of cars and people.

He hurried to leave his spot and stand on the other sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. He saw him spreading out the newspaper and smoothing it out on the narrow divider. Then he sat down and took his shoes off, banging them against each other to dust them off. He folded his legs and raised his socked feet from the ground. The man rotated on his behind, holding his feet in the air, and put the pair of shoes at the base of the streetlight. Leaning on his elbows, he pulled his body down and slept with his back on the spread newspaper and his head settled on the shoes.

Muhsin waited a little while and then crossed the street at a place far from the square. He returned, walking parallel to the divider, and passed the man sleeping on his back in a shirt and pants, his arms wrapped around his chest. His eyes were closed, and he was murmuring in a soft voice. Meanwhile, Muhsin continued until he reached his original place. He lit another cigarette and watched the streetlight as the people walked around it. After a short time, he noticed someone standing motionless at the head of the sleeping man. Then there was another. He had a feeling the man would suddenly sit up, put on his shoes, gather up the newspaper, and leave. A middle-aged man in a *jilbab* came out of the low-income houses carrying a light cotton blanket. He spread it over the man, raised his hands in what looked like a prayer, and returned home. He noticed how some lingered in their path, and others avoided the place entirely. Muhsin stood where he was. The movement in the surrounding streets and the square remained unchanged except for the circle

around the iron streetlight. It was empty, other than the body covered in the light cotton blanket.
Muhsin went home.

Winter

It was night. A woman wandered the muddy streets, gathering her black silken garment around her tall, voluptuous body. Nothing was showing except her gleaming, snow-white cheeks and large, slanted eyes.

She kept walking until she noticed a soft light descending from a far-off shop, and the man sitting on the wooden bench at the side entrance.

He was the coal dealer, and she watched him a while. She knew he spent the winter nights waiting for boys coming from the cafes to get their daily portion of hard coal.

He was wearing conspicuous woolen robes and smoking a cigarette, holding it under his thick mustache. He spoke to himself, oblivious of the approaching woman. She asked for a portion of soft coal.

He rose to prepare it for her. She followed him until she was near the piles of sacks that divided the store into two parts. She took a handful of coal dust and sprinkled it on him. The coal dealer felt as if a light wind touched the side of his neck, and he turned.

She was standing in front of him. Her garment slipped away, revealing her hair and bare chest.

He saw her among the soot, and the baskets of coal, and the darkness. She smiled at him sheepishly. His face was grave. She reached out and let him wipe the coal on his face and mouth with her moist cotton handkerchief.

It smelled strange to him.

He was overcome by weakness.

The package of coal was in his hands.

The woman took the bag of coal and put it on a bent copper scale. She led him behind the piles of sacks.

She made him sit with his back to the wall.

She let the garment fall around her,

She drew near to him, naked. Her soft stomach was disfigured by the scar of an old burn.

The coal dealer saw her, unable to move.

He saw her, as if in a state of soothing numbness. She knelt in front of him, moving her full lips in slow words he couldn't hear. She took his coarse, dark hand in her own, pressing his palm

against her breasts, one after the other. He saw her rich breasts, rising and falling as she spoke. She played with his fingers, brushing his rough fingertips on the wound of her naked stomach and over her scarred pubic hair.

She kept talking.

The coal dealer was overtaken by something like regret.

It got worse when she started to cry, the kohl soiling her blushing cheeks. He was helpless.

She let his hand fall, and became calm.

She pulled away like a cloud, and time passed.

She rose, her pale body shining in the darkness.

Her garment was in a heap around her feet.

She bent down. He smiled, and she struck him harshly on the temple. She bent down farther.

She looked in his eyes. His face was tilted to the side, like he was listening to something. She straightened.

He saw the end of the black silken garment in her hand. She pulled it over her back until it covered her hair, and arranged it over her bare chest.

She hid herself well. Nothing was showing except for her large, slanted eyes. She left.

A Piece of Family News

In the evening, I hesitated to visit my younger brother in the hospital after they amputated the second toe on his right foot a few days ago.

Each morning I expected them to contact me and tell me his injury healed, and I would go to him and take him home. My oldest sister informed me that they were going to cut off his left leg up to knee by almost ten centimeters, like they did to the patient that occupied the nearby bed in the same ward.

My sister said my presence was necessary this time so I could sign the release form with him because I was the oldest one in the family now. There were many times when this role was imposed on me even though the circumstances allowed it to be completed without my presence. So this time a different feeling swept over me, because I had to agree to amputate my youngest brother's leg. It was the thing no one else could do.

When I got to the fourth level designated for diabetics with foot problems, I found my sick brother's wife and her two young daughters (about eight and ten), along with my oldest sister who was there before me. My middle brother was with her standing around him as he slept on the mattress. His foot, with one of the toes removed, was wrapped in thick bandages.

"How are you doing," I said.

I knew from a glance from my brother to stop talking, and I noticed little was left of the leg of the patient in the next bed. After that I left the ward to the waiting room to smoke, and my middle brother came out and saw me. He informed me that the case was contaminated, and the gangrene afflicting the toes was spreading to the foot. They were ready for the operation tomorrow and were regulating his sugar for him. The girls didn't know about the amputation, so he didn't want me to talk about it in front of them. The visiting time was almost over, so I asked him to take them and leave. I sat outside the ward and ordered a cup of coffee while waiting for the doctor so I could sign the release form. The patients were wandering in front of me in wheelchairs, and one was one crutches, all of them with amputated toes or parts of their feet. On the other side of the room, one of them appeared in through the open door of the bathroom sitting in a chair with big wheels, raising his good leg and putting it in the white tub under the running faucet, washing it with rolled up sleeves and performing ablutions. When he finished, he sat back in the wheelchair a little and pulled his whole leg and lowered it into the footrest. Then he gripped the wheels, facing the door

and going out. He passed by me on his way to the ward with his amputated leg resting in front of him. I followed the nurse into my brother's room, and I saw her take a strip for his blood sugar in his urine out of a tin like he used at home. She gave it to him and said she would come back, and then left. I left so he could wet the strip and then went back in. I saw him holding it, and his blood sugar was at the highest level in the light green color. I stood next to him waiting for the nurse, who didn't come. I saw that the color of the strip began moving from color to color. It would give an incorrect result when she took it. I proceeded to look for her until I found her sitting in a small room behind an old wooden desk. The color of the strip changed to dark blue that indicated his blood sugar was at the maximum level, so I cautioned her that this color was wrong and his blood sugar was at the first level. I gave it to her.

"You had to see it before," I said.

She looked at it quickly and tossed it into a basket next to some empty plastic syringes and pieces of cotton covered in blood.

"Where's the doctor?" I asked her.

She said the doctor was in the operation room.

"Will he be very late?"

"Maybe a few hours before dawn."

"Okay, and after that?"

"You want to see him?"

"He's the one who wants me."

"Why?"

"Because of discussing the release form."

"What form?"

I clarified that they wanted me to be present for writing the release form for the operation, because I was the oldest brother of the patient. She told me that this wasn't necessary, and they accepted release forms signed by the patient.

"The important thing is that you're there tomorrow," she said.

"Of course I'm coming."

"At time of the operation, to collect the leg," she confirmed.

"What are you talking about? What leg?"

"The patient's leg."

"What about it?"

“Aren’t you his oldest brother.”

“Yes.”

“Right. So you’re the one that will collect his leg.”

“Collect it how?”

“Like everyone.”

I didn’t say anything.

“If anyone has his leg amputated, one of his family members has to collect it,” she clarified.

“Collect it to do what with it?”

“To bury it.”

“Bury it?”

“Of course.”

She turned the pages of the notebook in front of her. She was dark-haired, in a white apron with her ironed skull cap pinned in her hair from the back. A lock of hair hung on the side of her forehead.

“After it’s been cleaned and wrapped in a shroud, of course.”

I returned to my brother in the ward. As he laid there, he told me that health insurance would provide an artificial leg after six months, and while he waited for that he would need wooden crutches. I told him that they make those legs expertly, and I told him about someone with two artificial legs who walked normally in shoes and pants. I asked him if he wanted anything else, and he asked me to leave two cigarettes for him to smoke at night. I took one for myself and gave him the pack as I left.

I returned home and sat thinking about carrying whole corpses like I had before. Walking while carrying a man’s leg, or any part of him, was a totally different thing. I thought about the little girls when he met them with one leg and wooden crutches. During that time my middle brother contacted me to make sure I had met with the doctor and signed the release form. I told him they didn’t need it and would go ahead with the operation anyway.

“You’ll be there of course,” he said.

“No.”

“But who will collect the leg?”

“Honestly I have no idea.”

“You have no idea?”

I explained that the leg had nothing to do with me and I wouldn't collect it under any circumstances.

"Goodnight," I said.

I hung up the phone.

The next morning I headed to work and stayed there until they contacted me at the end of the day to tell me the operation was complete and Hajj Ahmad, my dead sister's husband, collected the leg and undertook the task of burying it. I headed there and went to the ward. I saw him sleeping on his back, with his amputated leg hidden under his *jilbab* and arms folded on his chest. He motioned for me to come near.

"My leg hurts so much. I want pain-killers," he whispered.

I went to the nurse, who told me he got one dose a day, and it was best that he didn't take it unless the pain afflicted him a lot so the pain-killers took longer. I returned and told him what she said. He just shook his head and peace seemed to come over him. Then I left the ward to the waiting room and sat with my dead sister's husband who looked up laughing. He knew about my refusal to take the leg, and I felt upset but I didn't really care. He told me the matter was very simple, and that the first thing he did when they contacted him was buying a meter and a half of cloth to wrap it. Then he came here, and the doctor gave him a report, which he brought to the Department of Health where they gave him a burial permit.

"Really?" asked my middle brother.

"So what? I had to specify, it was the right leg, not the left."

He said that he collected the leg and undertook cleaning it.

"But where did they clean it?" I asked.

He said they cleaned it at the morgue according to religious custom, as if they were cleaning a whole person. The only difference was when they cut a person, they performed the funeral prayer over him, but they did not for the leg. After that he put it in the shroud and took a taxi from the front of the hospital to the graveyard where he buried it. He intended to bury it with his sister but the gravedigger refused because the grave closed a while ago and it wasn't right to open it now. He told him the owner of the leg was lucky because he discovered a tomb with children buried in it.

"Trust me, when we bury it with the children, it does just as children do," he said smiling.

"Who did it belong to?"

"What?"

"The grave."

“Who knows. It’s a grave and that’s .”

“So you don’t know the place?” asked my brother.

“What for? It’s a grave, enough.”

“Is it ok to be buried somewhere, and have his leg buried somewhere else?” asked my brother.

“Why not? Is he going to say no?” he said.

He added that he honestly considered putting it in a corner somewhere and covering it with dirt, but the gravedigger was afraid a dog might come dig it up and eat it, or take it and run.

“And we had responsibility.”

“How did you carry it?” I asked him as he got up.

“In a plastic bag,” he said.

He raised his hand and went swinging it as if carrying a bag by its handles. He said it was so easy that the taxi driver himself didn’t know it.

“Like you’re carrying a bottle of olive oil, or a piece of chicken.”

He went into the ward.

I heard these words and found it difficult to believe the taxi driver didn’t think something strange was happening when he saw the bag in Hajj Ahmad’s hand. It was preposterous to say he thought he was carrying a pair of chickens or a bottle of olive oil, especially since he took it from the hospital and not the supermarket. But he might’ve said he had doubts even if it was obvious, or he might’ve said the driver was sure but he said to himself something like, “Here’s a ride and that’s all there is to it.”

Silence

It had to be that I left some time ago, because I was standing on the edge and saw the great yellow disk suspended at the end of the street on the other side of the dark iron bridge. The asphalt of the long street seemed softer, and thousands of shadows changed on the leaves of the trees. I was happy, and tired, and lonely.

I crossed the empty street until I came to the polished glass window, to see in night clothes the strange face that I know and sad eyes in front of me. I bury the knife that is between us in his chest, painfully and easily. I put my hands under his arms to hold him up and see him in the dark polished surface, raising his hands like me and collapsing slowly to relieve his back. He stretches his legs and laughs mockingly. Suddenly he dies in the pale light of the day that drives steam from the surface of the river, pushing it up the shore and carrying it across the street. It goes up over the sidewalk and the walls, drowning me. I open a door on a small balcony and sit, covered. I see him shrouded there in the clothes of death. A group of people speak over him, but I hear no sound.

Escape

The street was quiet, and no one else was around. The trees were dense and small on the left sidewalk, and some cars were parked beneath them. I was walking alone when I heard her laughing voice, saying she wanted to talk until we got to the end of the street. She waited to see who heard her. I knew that voice, and I said she wouldn't find anyone better. Then she left the sidewalk and came out from between two cars and walked beside me. I noticed she was an ordinary young woman wearing a poor house dress that was close to wearing out. She wasn't pretty, but good-spirited, and she said whatever she wanted. She talked, and her shoulder touched mine until we arrived at the end of the short street. We climbed the stairs, where she went up ahead of me, and I didn't see her again. As I entered, I heard the mother's tired voice welcoming me through the side door. I saw the man in the old *jilbab* rise from the couch to greet me, opening his arms with delight and something like anger in his face. I felt as if we were meeting after a long separation. He took me to another room so I could sit, and he grabbed a towel thrown on the chair and hid it behind his back. He backed away to let a younger man enter. He greeted me with a timid smile and sat in front of me, looking me over reproachfully. I thought he'd gotten older, and I'm sure he thought the same thing about me. I didn't look at him, and he left. I noticed another door in the room, and found myself heading toward it and going down the back stairs. I hurried to get away before anyone came.

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