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Devours Himself Starting at His Feet

يلتهم نفسه بادئاً بقدميه

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DEVOURS HIMSELF STARTING AT HIS FEET

Prologue

In 1990, a white Daihatsu pickup truck crashed into a family home in al-Nuzha neighbourhood in Zarqa, Jordan's second largest city.

A girl in a blue school uniform had crossed the road just as the pickup tackled one of the town's most challenging inclines. The driver stepped on the brakes, and the vehicle screeched to a halt then, a moment later, began a backward descent, gathering speed until it collided with a ramshackle metal gate and careened into an old warehouse, that was home to a mother and her son.

Fatema was ladling food onto plates and reciting a prayer about God's favour and abundance. The clamour of the spoon hitting the concrete slab went unnoticed.

The ten-year-old boy swallowed, then raised his eyes to gaze at what was visible of his mother's body, suspended between the wall and the truck bed. The white paint on the truck was peeling. Fatema, eyes wide-open, lips slightly parted, like a masterful sculpture of a forty-year-old woman, dead before she could scream – that was the last image the boy had of his mother until she bent over the edge of the truck bed and disappeared from this sight. The violent quake of the collision subsided into an eerie silence.

Chapter 1: 'Sonder'

Out of the window of Cullacino on Karama Street, I watched Amer leap from a taxi and walk towards the café without looking back. He plucked the earphone from his left ear, spotted me, waved with a half-open hand, and stepped inside.

It was here, in this very café, that I had first met Amer. It was also here that I first encountered the dictionary of obscure sorrows, and the word that would live with me day in and day out, like an incantation or talisman: Sonder.

I had once asked, 'What does this word mean, Amer?' 'Oh man,' he'd said, 'it's the realisation that everyone in the world has a unique story, that each passer-by is living a life as vivid and complex as your own!'

Silence.

He approached an empty chair and lifted the bag off his shoulder. ‘What took you so long?’ I asked him. I wasn’t really seeking an answer as much as an opening to the conversation. He replied without looking at me, ‘The plot, my man.’ Then he broke off a piece of the cookie on my plate and stuffed it in his mouth.

‘Sonder,’ I said it as a question. He responded without looking at me, ‘Sonder.’

‘How can you distinguish between what’s happening to you, in reality I mean, and what’s happening in the writing? Is there a word for that state?’

‘I have words for describing the person experiencing it. It will be the title of my novel when it’s done.’

‘What are they?’ I asked. He didn’t answer me. Instead, he steered the conversation where he wanted. ‘Listen,’ he said. ‘This is a mediocre way to start!’

Clearly, he was fed up with all the beginnings that had brought us together. He rolled his eyes theatrically, as though searching for something deeper that lay at the back of his head.

‘If there must be dialogue in a story where we’re the protagonists,’ he said, ‘it has to be different.’

His eyes wandered around the place.

‘A story? A story of today’s meeting?’

‘Of every day’s meeting. We’re a subplot in the universe’s tale, my man. You’re the protagonist in the story that you wake up each day to continue writing. And I’m a secondary character in it. I’m the protagonist of my story, and you’re a secondary character in that. Both of us are minor characters in the story of the café we’re sitting in. The café is a transient location in the city’s story, and so on and so forth.’ He moved his hand as if blending things together in the air.

I murmured in a tone that suggested I was trying to understand what he said, ‘The story of the universe. Hmmm.’ In truth, I was trying to understand him, not necessarily what he was saying.

He surprised me by placing a hand on my mouth. ‘Shh!’

‘What is it?’ I mumbled.

‘Don’t speak.’ He whispered and raised his eyebrows to point above us. He seemed so serious. I glanced where he pointed and didn’t see anything of note. I thought to myself, ‘What is it?’ and tilted my head to indicate the question.

‘The pigeon!’ he finally hissed.

I saw the pigeon on the terrace above us.

‘Pay attention!’ he said. ‘She’s the narrator.’ He burst out laughing.

‘Fuck that!’ I said and swatted his hand, which he was still hovering near my mouth.

‘That was merely an example of inventive dialogue.’ He said while munching on more of my cookies. He took off his shoes and lifted his feet to squat on the armchair facing mine. ‘Yes indeed,’ he muttered as if to himself, ‘this is inventive dialogue.’

Amer often behaved in shocking ways, but those moments were usually the ones that stayed. Every time the uncanny surfaced in his words or actions, things started to take on unexpected shapes. This explained my tendency to reach a new understanding or attribute new meanings to things in his presence.

‘If I ever decide to write, I’m not sure what I’d write about you. You eat the cookies off my plate every time we meet, and put your feet on a seat that’s intended for people’s bums, not for you to squat on as if it were a pit latrine.’

‘That sounds fun. “The man who squats on chairs and begins to speak... as the road flows beneath his feet.”’

‘Is that a quote or have you just made it up?’

‘Both.’

A small smile formed on his lips.

He never let a moment pass without aiming a blow towards an exposed spot in his listener’s mind. That’s how he viewed conversation: if it’s not a knockout blow, it’s nothing but mere talk.

Once, when I had taken off my glasses to wipe them clean, he said to me, ‘You have another personality confined behind your glasses. It vanishes when you remove them and reappears when you put them back on.’

He closed his eyes and I thought to myself, ‘And you have two irises that become fish swimming under the sand when you close your eyes.’

He stared out of windows a lot, lost himself in thought, and shifted in his seat whenever we fell into a long silence or conversation dried up. ‘His mouth holds words that aren’t ripe yet. The idea is still brewing,’ I would think. When he bit his index finger, I would hear the idea bubbling on the fire, and prepare myself.

‘I have a new piece. Would you listen to it?’ he said, and I answered, ‘Please!’

Dramatically, he pulled out two sheets from his bag and raised his eyebrows inquisitively. ‘Shall I read?’

I gesture to him to go ahead.

‘A white Daihatsu pickup truck crashed into a family home in al-Nuzha neighbourhood in Zarqa, Jordan’s second-largest city. The year was 1990.’

He swallowed and looked away from the page.

Silence!

I tried to catch his eye as I encouraged, 'Carry on!'

'I haven't finished writing it and won't be able to. I think you're more qualified to write it.'

'How can I be more qualified to write a story when you're its author?'

'Don't be naïve,' he said. 'Do you think two sheets of paper make a story? This is just the plot.'

'Writing is what comes after the two sheets.' He pushed them to me.

We sat with me for nearly two hours after that, and he talked and wept. His eyes would sparkle like someone who'd just found himself, then their light would fade. He seemed to be in sync with the story as if it were his own, affected by the events as though they were happening just as he spoke them.

I said, 'You have many arrows in your quiver.' I was still striving for eye contact.

He kept his eyes on his feet and said, 'But I can't put any of them to paper.'

'Please try.'

'Why don't you consider me,' he was putting his shoes on, 'a co-author? Just start writing from where I left off! Have I persuaded you yet?'

He lifted his bag onto his shoulder and his headphones over his ears.

'What do you call what you just recounted to me?' I asked.

'A skeleton.'

'The skeleton of a story?'

'Me. It's my skeleton.'

'What am I supposed to do with your skeleton?'

'Flesh it out, man! See you.' He waved to me behind his back.

'Salam?' My goodbye came as a question. I waited for a reaction that would count as a response.

RECORDING

There's a moment that strikes your heart like metal strikes hard tiles in the night, a moment when you're jolted awake by extreme bewilderment and led aimlessly towards what is forming in your head without prior planning.

It's the moment that moves you from the position of the passive recipient to the middle of the scene, from the reader's corner to the writer's, without getting up from your seat. If this happens to you, if you experience any of that, drop everything and throw yourself—with all the focus you can muster—onto the blank page.

You will have transformed from someone who watches life happening to others to someone who is fully alive, from a pawn on a chessboard to an active player.

It's the moment of awakening, the moment your irises dilate to let in more light to the blind spot within you, a moment where the characters come into focus and flow smoothly towards the destiny you will have started to write for them.

It happens like the snap of a finger, except the ensuing silence is extended and cannot be interrupted by boisterous nights. It's a moment that makes you come to a standstill on a high-speed road in the middle of the night just so you can jot down an idea that won't let you go.

You would know what I mean if you've ever written a true poem. If you've experienced a headache so bad it felt like it was about to peel the scalp off your head. Or escaped a family gathering and locked yourself in your laboratory (that is your room) or your car or a public bathroom. You would know what I mean then if you've ever found yourself lying to the people closest to you because your story's last chapter has you in its clutches.

This moment is life. The precious text is life. What falls beyond it is a mere interlude, valuable only in as far as it enables the major event.

Chapter 2: 'Socha' (the hidden vulnerability of others)

I was summoned to see al-Azraq's in his home, a shabby flat nestled deep within a jumble of old houses, behind a colossal mall and near a corner shop that sold nappies and cleaning supplies. It was to be the first ever encounter with this enigmatic figure. He had never before granted an interview or said a word to a journalist.

Two-time winner of Best Arabic Novel (without ever gracing the ceremony in person), recipient of Multaqa Short Story Award (accepted by his publisher) and the State's Creativity Award (collected on his behalf by an orphanage director), al-Azraq had been an authentic recluse until he spontaneously invited me to his hideout in the neighbourhood of Ghouriyya in Zarqa.

'Why me?' I asked him on email. 'If you don't, I'll invite another.' I apologised for the question.

I walked between the houses trying to find a shop that sold nappies and cleaning supplies. I had taken a bus from the Old Station and asked the bus conductor, as al-Azraq had instructed me, to tell me when we get to the Second Square. The conductor had given me no reaction so I'd politely repeated, 'Excuse me. Second Square, please.' He'd given me a look like I was a pile of rubbish then brought his face closer to mine and said, 'You think I'm stupid?'

'Sorry?'

'I heard you the first time! Or do I look stupid to you?'

I had tried to apologise but he'd been busy muttering to himself what sounded like a string of swearwords which, deep down, I was certain were not directed specifically at me. I had just played the unlucky role of recipient of the hate directed at the state of things.

I had kept quiet until another passenger called out, 'Second Square, Conductor!' When the bus stopped, that passenger jumped out. I hesitated for a moment before getting up from my seat and asking 'Is this Second Square?' The conductor answered me only after the bus started moving again, 'We've passed it now.' He'd looked me straight in the eyes, daring me to emit a reaction he didn't like. 'Ok, ok,' I'd said, 'Just let me off here!'

He'd stopped the bus while with a defiance I wasn't aware of having done anything to provoke. I'd disembarked and retraced the distance back to my destination.

'Assalamu Alaykum,' I said when I was finally inside the cleaning supplies shop.

'Second door on the right. The grey one.' The answer came from under the counter, where the clerk was busy looking for something.

'Thank you.' I received no answer.

Al-Azraq must have planned for everything, I thought as I patted the outer pocket of my bag to check on the voice recorder and adjusted my shirt. I knocked on the door. The door was set deep within the walls, like the opening of a tortoise shell. I waited to see whose head would emerge.

'Ahlan wa sahlán.' He almost lunged towards me. I extended my hand to shake his but, in a split-second, he had retreated and began to look for a seat to offer me.

'Here! Does this suit you?' He held out an oddly shaped cushion. I noticed a scar that started near his right eye, extended down to his beard and disappeared there. 'Sure, sure.' I nodded as I took the cushion with the hand I had extended. I wouldn't have objected to any cushion he offered, whatever its shape.

'I'm sorry. I wasn't ready to receive you,' he said, rubbing his hands. 'Ahlan wa sahlán.'

He didn't look ready. It felt like I had dropped in without appointment. I had knocked the door a few times before he'd cautiously cracked the door open and stuck his head out. 'Who is it?' 'It's me,' I'd said. He'd seemed to remember then without waiting for me to introduce myself. 'Oh yes, come in,' he'd said. 'Ahlan wa sahlán' He'd gone in leaving the door half-closed, so I'd had to push it to let myself in.

Still clutching the cushion, I looked from him to the floor and said, "It's all good."

