A STRANGER AT THE DOOR

AND OTHER LEBANESE SHORT STORIES

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Had it not been for the incident that occurred (I still don’t exactly know how it happened), I would have left my country for a utopia, where I could regain my lost identity and enjoy the freedom I had as a little boy, about which I ceaselessly dreamed, and for which I suffered much later, in the prime of my life.

Normally, an actor assumes a role for a while, for fifteen minutes, an hour or even two, but then he takes off his costume, returns to his actual personality, to his real self, and takes a rest from the hardship of acting. In my country, however, we are accustomed to abandoning our real selves and our identities all the time. Here, life is nothing but a charade; we please others, sham, cheat, lie, dissemble, and wheel and deal. In other words, we remain, throughout our lives, locked into role playing, though we agonize over the loss of our "identity."

I am going to relate the facts of that peculiar incident faithfully, accurately and elaborately, as well as my memory serves me. And my memory, as all my acquaintances have acknowledged, is my most powerful faculty. Here is how it started, and because of what happened, I had to postpone my trip for an indefinite period.

Life, in my cell, exists outside the realm of time. And time, in my country, because of its flexibility, resilience, and amenability, is at the courts’ beck and call. Courts, however, are marked with a propensity toward postponement and procrastination. Therefore, only time, in my country, has the power of solving the most complex and insoluble problems. As time allows us to forget the deceased, after they are buried, so does it cause us to forget the most sacred matters, for which we protest, go on strike, write about and suffer for. Having discovered the power of time, our rulers made it their most powerful and terrifying weapon; they use time to weaken our people’s memory, deal with their worries, settle their issues, cure their wounds, alleviate their pains, and in time they make our people abandon their most cherished causes. Thus, our wretched people are deluded into believing that they lead a life of ease and comfort, when, in fact, they live in utmost misery, bleeding to death.

On the very day when the incident occurred, our washer had broken down. The washing machine, a superb appliance marked with faithfulness, precision, and durability, served us for fifteen years, during which it never had a breakdown. My wife, being nervous and up to her ears in work, had forced a washed, thick blanket into the wringer. When it failed to squeeze the blanket, my wife kept on forcing it into the wringer until it choked, screeched, and its steel arch split into two pieces. At once I called the company that sold me the washing machine, inquiring about the price of a new arch. Upon learning that it would cost an arm and a leg, it suddenly dawned on me that, instead of buying a new arch for thirty liras, I could easily weld the broken one for only a couple of liras. We, the citizens of this country, know how to act when faced with a desperate situation. Our motto is “the shrewd one never dies, even if his shrewdness leads to the destruction of others.” But this is beside the point.

I wrapped up the broken arch in an old newspaper and left. I never felt constrained or uncomfortable about carrying the arch until I reached the main street, where I had to wait for a taxi. Being a journalist, the owner of a chicken farm, and a college professor is hardly unusual in my country, for whether we are members of parliament, ministers, or clerks of the lowest rank, we are all jack-of-all-trades, and some of us suddenly drop dead from this excessive vitality and endless work. We are the only people who can live a carefree life if some political party or religious sect can secure us a position as a minister or a manager, even though we are uneducated or completely illiterate. These
are only a few of our traits, for which we are unmatched—but that is beside the point.

Because of my profession as a journalist, in addition to my other careers, I was not used to carrying anything save a book, a magazine, a newspaper, or a fancy leather briefcase. Holding two broken steel bars, about two feet long and weighing more than ten pounds, was something my soft hands were unfamiliar with. Nevertheless, I was resolved to mend that arch as soon as possible because the unfinished laundry and my wife's unpleasant mood could in no way be disregarded.

First, however, I was supposed to stop at the hospital to see my mother, whose gallbladder had been removed. Then I had planned to head to a welder to fix the broken arch. Therefore, I had to take three taxis, one to the city center, another to the hospital, and from there to the welder.

Although it was still early winter, a heavy rain began to fall, turning the streets into streams of dirt and waste. Each year the changing weather challenged our municipality, which must have forgotten to clean the openings of the drains, so the water flooded the sidewalks and rose, spilling into shops and commercial buildings. The thing that drew my attention, as the taxi went down the center of the city, was the street, which has recently been renewed. Its asphalt had already cracked and flaked off from rainstorms, and some of it was washed away, like melted chocolate, by the current. Around the beginning of summer, the old asphalt was pretty smooth and firm, with no sign of cracks or potholes, and I was deeply hurt watching construction workers remove it and replace it. I felt then as if the workers’ pickaxes were breaking up my own body rather than that of the road, because I was able to see through their plan.

You may think I exaggerate and get carried away with my feelings, but that is not true. I personally can’t even tolerate to see a water tap running. Such odd things not only bother me, but they even cause me pain. As a result, I often suffer from migraines and look terribly emaciated and pale. Once, I read an article in an international magazine, the author of which was advising people like me “not to worry about worthless things, not pay attention to those who make a mountain out of a mole-

hill; not to bother about those who are weary, nor be affected by any idiosyncrasies, unpleasanties, or even the iniquities of others.” If people like me want to stay mentally and physically healthy, the author of the article stated, “they have to consider everything unnatural in life as being natural, inevitable, and absolutely logical, like 2+2=4.”

But I must admit; I truly mean it, and my wife and family doctor are my witnesses: I cannot stand being indifferent toward life’s injustices. It is in my nature that I detest all sorts of idiosyncrasies; they make me look ill and feel pain, and I often lose my temper and commit some horrible act, which I later regret.

Had it not been again for the incident that occurred and embroiled me in this trouble and led me into this cell, I would certainly have left a long time ago for an ideal country—a utopia devoid of all idiosyncrasies, where I would spend the rest of my life without feeling headache.

The passenger sitting next to me also noticed, as he was reading the newspaper, the despicable condition of the road and its wasted asphalt. He then remarked sarcastically, “Another year, another contract.”

The passenger to my left responded, “Contracts of huge projects are implemented the same way; buildings are built and rented out to the government for millions of liras every year, and all these transactions are conducted by brokers who are often government officials. No wonder the country is drained of its resources. How could a country not bleed to death when it is stabbed in the back every day!”

As the taxi was approaching the center of the city, the steel arch slipped out of my hands and fell on my foot, causing me some pain. Meanwhile, the driver remarked, “Take it easy, next spring the government will contract with another firm for new asphalt.”

Such whispered remarks were exchanged between my friends and me in private and even in public. At that moment, my eyes caught sight of the headline of the newspaper the passenger next to me was reading. In big and bold letters, the headline stated that a man had wriggled out of a hellish marriage to savor the pleasure of paradise. The man, who was said to be
forty years old, had six children and was arrested with his mistress in a suspicious house.

Noticing that the headline had caught my attention, the man reading the newspaper commented, "Probably the owner or the editor of the newspaper thinks that marriage in general and his parents' marriage, in particular, must be hell, whereas committing adultery, unlawfulness and violating the sanctity of others are to him a source of pleasure. Prostitution, obviously, takes different forms."

"The authorities have to be blamed, because they don't censure such misbehavior, nor do they care about what is going on," observed another passenger.

When we arrived, the city center was packed with people. I noticed two drivers, whom I happened to know, talking on the side and running between the cars parked on both sides of the street, chasing each other. One was cursing and holding a screwdriver with which to hit the other, but when both got tired of the chase, the fugitive turned around, and with an angry motion, grabbed his pursuer's hand, wrenched the screwdriver out, and tossed it in the air. The people who witnessed the scene were so frightened that, while running helter-skelter to avoid the fighting drivers, some were trampled in the stampede. Then when the two drivers resumed cursing and pushing each other, other drivers intervened, breaking them up.

"What is going on?" asked one of the gentlemen who rushed to the site of the fight.

"Nothing," answered one of the drivers sarcastically. "As usual, we're putting on a show for the public."

In less than two minutes, the two bickering drivers were holding hands, smiling, and hugging each other. At once the driver's statement reminded me of some shows we have often seen or read about, in which the nation's assembly and its parliament were the setting and the focus. As the drivers were cursing and fighting, so were the parliamentarians, in the nation's assembly, yelling, accusing, and occasionally, even throwing chairs at each other. However, soon after, they would apologize, shake hands, cooperate to ensure their mutual interests continue to be reelected. It seems as if their perpetuity is modeled after

that of God. Why not? Have we not stripped God of all his qualities when we claim infallibility, greatness, splendor, loftiness, honor, virtue, holiness, exaltedness, and beatitude and bestow them upon ourselves? It is both a parliamentary trick and a sign of professionalism. The people, however, are the ones who are always tricked; they pay the price for their naiveté and simplicity. It is true that the government is independent, but the people are still slaves and colonized—they are a nation of sheep.

Sorry Mom! Being so engrossed in contemplating the current status quo has kept me from visiting you. Sorry poor wife for keeping you impatiently sitting next to your damaged wringer, smoking one cigarette after another, while waiting for the repaired arch.

When I arrived, the hospital was packed with unfortunate people, coming from different parts of the city, and ambulance sirens were ceaselessly heard. There were massive tragedies. Obviously, no capital, as big as ours, would ever be devoid of disasters. Reasons may vary, but the catastrophes remain the same—they range from a person shot by his old enemy or by a stray bullet during a funeral ceremony, to someone who has committed suicide by taking poison, to a woman found with her head chopped off as a result of adultery. This appears to be an immutable situation, and there is no hope of getting it changed, altered, corrected, or improved. As has often been said, "There is nothing new under the sun."

The only thing that made me forget about this unbearable situation and my mother, who was hallucinating, was an evil rumor that caught my attention, and people in every room were whispering about it. The rumor dealt with the owners of a well-known bank who had declared an illegal bankruptcy.

"Those bank crooks are hospitalized in the first-class section," said someone.

That vicious statement stirred a dialogue in my head.

"Is that possible?"

"Why not?"

"Such crooks were supposed to be thrown in jail. If there were a God to watch and judge, such people would have been kept in hell."
“What you’re saying is blasphemy! Even if these people are thieves, they are probably ill.”

“People whisper that those crooks merely pretend to be ill.”

“The doctor is the best judge of that.”

“Then how come they get first-class treatment?”

“Because they can afford it.”

“They can afford it because they steal the money from the poor.”

“The hospital’s administration does not care where the money comes from.”

“Don’t the authorities inquire?”

“The authorities must have done their duty. These crooks were indicted and put in prison, but now that they are hospitalized and have armed guards at their doors.”

“Guards provide protection so those patients can have sex with prostitutes in their rooms?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Rumor has it that instead of medicine, they are supplied with scotch, caviar, and sexy girls.”

“Though prostitution has been condemned, unanimously, by our religious authorities, it has been legalized by our government.”

“Sex in a hospital and under the supervision of the authorities?”

“Even there!”

“If other men were spotted in suspect places, most likely the same authority would have arrested them.”

“Probably.”

“But to assign armed guards to their rooms and have them salute every prostitute that comes and goes…”

“This matter calls for careful study.”

Running a temperature, my mother was delirious; her hands were burning; the hot steel arch was burning my hands; and the heated debate in my head was almost boiling over into an open war. From a room across the hallway, right opposite my mother’s, I saw an eminent doctor looking at his wristwatch and telling his aides and students that the patient around whom they were gathered was seriously ill and would soon die.

The tight, rectangular hallway that looked like the rubber tube inserted in my mother’s nose was resonant with the cry of a child, a painful cry, so touching to those who heard it that they themselves were brought to tears. Then I heard someone saying, “It’s a child whose back is terribly burned. For the second day his mother has brought him to the hospital for treatment, but hospital officials sent her back, saying there is no vacancy. There are plenty of vacant rooms in the first-class section, but the Ministry of Health only permits poor burned children to be hospitalized in the fourth-class section, namely the section for the poor who either don’t have money or who don’t know how to wheel and deal: how to rob other people, or how to declare illegal bankruptcy.”

“But why is the child not treated in the first-class section and then taken home until a room is vacant in the fourth-class section?”

“Won’t he die if he is left untreated?”

“No doubt he will die, for I have checked his burned back,” whispered a medical student to an inquiring person.

Evil rumors, like all evil things, pass from mouth to mouth, like a stink that first penetrates an alley, then permeates the entire city. However, the people of this city are quite oblivious to the threat. Time in this city conceals everything, suppresses every voice, even the cries of dying children.

The child whose back was terribly burned gave a shriek that reverberated through the hallway and stirred a flaming rage in my head, then triggered so much tension in my forearm that I gripped the steel arch tightly in my hand. Suddenly, I jumped up, shifting my grave looks from my delirious mother to the opposite room, where the doctor, with his neck as stiff as the immutable status quo and his head bent over his golden watch, was repeating his irrevocable decision, waiting for his patient to breathe his last. A plea for help echoed through the entire place... pimps making the headlines of newspapers and magazines... the hospital turned into brothel, a tavern, a place of dissipation, wheeling and dealing... pickaxes were falling on the
road's body, tearing it into bits and pieces... and daggers ruthlessly stabbing the nation's body, in the back, in the waist, in the chest, everywhere, until it dropped dead... and with utmost force and intensity, my hand, holding the steel arch, landed on the doctor's stiff neck, smashing his straight body and freezing his life in less than a second, before he pronounced the terminally ill patient dead.

I have already made it clear that I can neither tolerate idiosyncrasies in any shape or form, nor the existing situation, for such oddities often make me lose my temper.

That was the incident that occurred. It not only entangled me in an awkward situation but also forced me to put off my travel to a utopian country for an indefinite time, because time, in my country, is, in its turn, the property of the judicial system and, therefore, subject to its courts.