

Huzamah Habayeb

A Short Story

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One Afternoon

Just like every afternoon, he was sitting on the large sofa in the corner of the narrow balcony. He was the one who had insisted on keeping it – a remnant of an old suite the family had exchanged three years earlier for a newer model half the size. The sofa's spongy filling was perfect, as was its hard back and broad arm rests which allowed him to spread out comfortably.

Afternoons acquired a unique flavour on that ancient sofa with its faded print, his daily cup of coffee on the small table and the newspaper meticulously folded, while the sounds of people from the street slowly reached the second floor balcony. Afternoons were special, delicately balancing noon and sunset by catching the light of the first with the tender breeze of the second.

Afternoons were when he did a lot of things on his own. He would begin by reading through the paper carefully and slowly, starting with the regular columns, then the political analysis, the news briefs and economic reports, then the interviews and finally the obituaries. Often he felt distracted; he did not know how to be selective in the sense of forming his own opinions. Nonetheless, amongst his colleagues he took pride in his knowledge of current political events, dropping the names of well-known foreign dignitaries, political concepts or passing comments on events. This showmanship required a lot of work on his part which explains why he underlined some words or names with a red pen, then wrote them in the margins of the newspaper before pronouncing them several times out aloud to gauge how they sounded to him.

When he was finished with the paper, he would watch the people go about their daily business, amazed at the number who congregated at the centre of the town, some walking briskly, others sitting, standing, talking, laughing, screaming ... people, people, people ... and when he felt tired he would spend the rest of the afternoon doing what he



loved best, ‘suspending thought.’ This was difficult and arduous at first, taking him years to master. He would pick a distant spot, like a cloud or light or perhaps nothing at all, and focus on it, never allowing any irrelevant thoughts to distract him, almost as if his mind were absent. He would meditate like this for about an hour until the sun set.

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Mr Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah was married with three sons and a daughter. He had worked for the past twenty-two years as a teacher in the boys’ secondary school around the corner from his house. He taught History and Civics to the tenth grade; he knew the subject by heart (being conscious, of course, that this in itself was not a feat – even a donkey can learn from repetition). He discovered only recently that when he was teaching as if on auto-pilot, his mind became crowded with many unrelated thoughts. In spite of this, his teaching was good; he always managed to complete the curriculum a month before the end of the school year. He was the first to set his final exams (ten minutes in total); the questions were the same every year anyway. They never varied: explain, mention, enumerate and fill in the blanks. He was also the first to hand in his grades, having resorted to a simple, but smart method: on reading the first two or three words from the answer he could determine, from long experience, whether the student had got it right or wrong. Over the past years he had received the standard increments to his income.

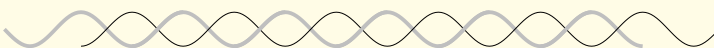
Mr Abdul Karim did not depend solely on his salary. The flat he lived in was one of six in the building that he had inherited from his father in addition to eight shops on the main street. The income from the inheritance – like many other things – was not to be envied since the total did not exceed five hundred dinars per month. Anyway, from the start it was a mistake, something he only discovered later, like many other things in his life. He could never forget, for example, that History was the last thing he wanted to study, let alone to teach. Well, it was not the end of the world. Positive thinking had taught him to overlook such failures; at least he had a college degree and was a successful teacher. When his father had died, his brother offered him either the land and the unattended farm or the building with the eight shops. Without having to think very much, he knew that the value of the land was high, but he had no understanding of matters such as

buying and selling or agriculture. The five hundred dinars a month that he opted for would be better than the thousands promised from the unknown.

[60] But it was the thousands that became a reality. His brother Abdul Rahim sold the land and bought some more cheaper, constructing an apartment building of eight flats and four storage units on the street. Rent alone brought in his two thousand dinars a month, not to mention a lucrative income from the farm. In spite of this, Abdul Karim did not feel bitter. His brother visited regularly with eggs, milk, chickens, things that certainly alleviated but did not negate the bitterness of his wife who, on receiving the two cartons of eggs or the four chickens or the three litres of milk from the farm help, repeated the same mantra: 'All of that goodness could have been ours! What bad luck!'

Zuhur's voice snaps him out of his erratic thoughts. She was limping across the street with a bleeding foot, as though she were a wounded animal, wearing her short orange linen blouse that exposed a large section of her white stomach. Her brown trousers barely covered her ankles and she wore green plastic sandals. Unconsciously scratching her stomach, she placed her other hand on her hair to make sure the large red rose behind her ear was still there. Her fine, straight hair fell round her shoulders like thin untangled nylon strands revealing large patches of baldness.

No one knew anything about Zuhur except her name. She had arrived in the town ten years ago with her mother and her stepfather and always wore that short blouse which exposed her midriff. In the beginning the young men would pinch her stomach or tickle her on her waist. She would scream and spit, often succeeding in catching one of those 'rats' – as she used to call them – biting him in the neck or the shoulder until blood could be seen on her teeth. Zuhur was strong; yet people were unable to explain the source of her strength. Despite her slender build, she appeared sturdy when she ran quickly across the street or when she caught one of those 'rats' under her arm and dragged him to a rubbish heap before biting him in the neck, the shoulders or the ears. Gradually, people got accustomed to seeing Zuhur in the streets; she became a fixture, especially in the late af-



ternoons as the day was drifting towards nightfall as if in a delicious stupor.

It was said that Zuhur got married and divorced the same night, that her mother's husband had violated her and that when she and her twin brother were six years old she had drowned him in a well while they were playing. There were many stories but no one knew for certain the cause of her condition. No one objected to her colourful language. She would take any opportunity – like when a passer-by touched her breast or pinched her midriff, to give vent to the worst insults. The originality and strangeness of these curses aroused men's desires. They would tease her further just to hear more of her colourful insults. Zuhur would eventually reach her peak, that is the moment when her lexicon would be unleashed to the full before ripping her blouse right down the middle.

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It was at that moment one was witness to the vision of a moving image that was difficult to freeze in the memory. Abdul Karim, like all the other men in the street, watched this moving image repeated daily without ever becoming bored. It acquired a sharpness, especially if it was of the two enormous and incredibly round, creamy breasts with their large pinkish nipples, squeezed together inside her blouse. It was this riveting image which the men, young and old, and even the women walking the streets were completely taken by, even to the point of admiration. Abdul Karim wondered at the strikingly incongruous vision of these two voluptuous, hot breasts full of desire and Zuhur's bald head. 'A real shame,' as one of the young men once commented.

One day Zuhur lets out a wail as if someone has died: 'Oh, my God! Oh, my God!'

Abdul Karim's erection subsides. He picks up the carefully folded newspaper, his coffee cooling. He loves the smell of hot coffee and inhales its rising aroma slowly. With a quick sip he breaks through the thick froth, then returns to reading the main headlines. He reads one, two, three, ten and then moves on to the usual features on the last page but one. He reads a few paragraphs from each. He ignores the articles on economics which he doesn't understand. Zuhur is laughing loudly. One of the streetsellers is announcing a sale of plastic jugs and plates. An interview with a member of the opposition party in parliament.

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He reads the first question. He reads the third question. He moves to the sixth question. Zuhur's voice now reaches a high pitch. He is unable to complete the interview. He decides to leave it to last, then skips the news and analysis as well. He jumps to the obituaries. Zuhur curses the lineage of the men in the street promising she will cut off the filthy penis of whoever comes near her, or tries to touch her, and stuff it in his mouth. She opens her mouth and grinds what is left of her teeth giving comic expression to her savagery. The laughter of the men grows louder and with it their ill-fated desire.

'O, you comforted soul, return to your Lord in peace, enter into my Worship, enter into my Garden.' With great sadness and sorrow the family of Abdul Ilah of al-Zarqa announce the death of Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah at the age of 45. Condolences will be received in the house of his brother Abdul Rahim Abdullah Abdul Ilah on Hijab Street next to the school of Riyad al-Salihin for three days starting today. 'We come from God and to Him we return.'

Abdul Karim puts down the newspaper, and looking up to see darkness fill the horizon takes a deep breath. He places his hand on his chest. His heart is beating fast. It is hot outside, hot and suffocating as if the air itself had perished. He tries to take a deep breath and finds nothing. There must be a mistake, maybe it's a joke but who would play a joke like this? Maybe it's no more than a coincidence with the name. But how? Is it possible that a name of that length ... Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah ... 45 years old, and then Abdul Rahim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah ... residing on Hijab street next to the Riyad al-Salihin school...? He wipes the sweat from his face with damp fingers. He re-reads the obituary two, three, four times. He imagines hearing his name for the first time and separating sound from image. Now it sounds strange to his ear. This is the first time he has read his name aloud with indifference and he discovers it has no meaning. A name that does not take or give anything. It was not distinct, strange, obnoxious, funny, ugly, old or new. A very ordinary name, ordinary to the extent of irrelevancy, a name that sounded as if one were saying 'Everything for a dinar.'

He felt the early evening's coolness on his skin. Zuhur's matchless insults are audible and clear. His body jerks, and he throws the news-



paper down on the table and goes to the living room. The three boys are in front of the telly. No one moves or talks. He looks at them as if for the first time. They don't resemble him. The oldest looks fifteen or a bit older. Because this is his home and the children are in front of the telly then they must be his family. He tries to remember their names and is unable to. He moves closer. They do not turn to him. He asks them the name of the show. They don't notice him around them. He screams at them, they cannot hear him. He approaches the older boy and peers into his face but his son doesn't move. Nervously, he waves his hand in front of the boy's face but he continues watching the show without batting an eyelid.

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He runs to the bedroom. His wife is folding some clothes and putting them in the cupboard. He wants to talk to her and realises that he doesn't know her name either. At any rate, it is clear that she doesn't see him because she is moving around the room freely as if he were not there. He is taken by surprise by a cigarette in her hand. Since when did she start smoking? The coarse laughter of the men in the street reaches him. His wife leaves the room. He sees himself suddenly at the centre of a large circle made up of the men in the neighbourhood and obnoxious youths. One punches him in the stomach and they are all laughing non-stop. The circle narrows until they surround him. He suffocates. One of them – or something – chokes him. He runs to the cupboard like a madman. He opens the drawers one by one, hysterically rummaging through the clothes, looking for papers or something that will identify him. He holds up the birth certificates of the boys. Abdullah Abdul Karim Abdullah Abdul Ilah. Mustafa Abdul Karim Abdullah Abdul Ilah. Abdul Ilah Abdul Karim Abdullah Abdul Ilah. He reads the names aloud to himself. He looks for his own birth certificate, his own identity. He looks for the family's ration card, the marriage certificate – nothing!

The laughter in the street grows even louder. In terror, he closes the window, but is unable to completely shut out the guffaws. The laughter rises again, this time from within the house. He rushes to the family room. The boys, together with their mother, are laughing at a comedy show. He tries to share their laughter with them. But the sound of his own laugh seems like a solitary echo swallowed up by a vast desert.

He stands in front of the telly blocking the screen but they don't move; no one objects, no one says 'move away' – no one says anything. As they continue laughing, their hilarity acquires a hysterical edge. He raises his hand to his eyes and sees nothing. He looks down at his stomach and legs – he's not there!

[64] From the balcony off the living room, in the final throes of that unusual evening, Zuhur can be heard wailing: 'Oh, my God! Oh, my God!'

Translated by Mona Zaki

