

Memory of a Fish
A novel
by
Suleiman Olimat

About the Author

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Suleiman Olimat

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Black Stones

It was one of the last days of the final *Tawjihi* exams. I had just sat the National Education subject. Today no one asked me how I did. All were happy to get the exams out of the way, but I was the happiest; no more-worries being awake all night to study, no more shouting from my mother or my father yelling at me. Good riddance, I was glad the exams were over and done with.

I made my way back home and as I got near, a four by four with a red plate followed me. It was a government car and I saw a heavily built stocky man wearing thick glasses, get out. He laced his hand out of his pocket with a handkerchief and was wiping the beads of sweat on his forehead, bald head and neck. He turned to me and asked:

Is this is the house of *Sheikh* Monawer?

This is his house. Please come in, I said.

Thank you, I will just sit here on the veranda in the shade. It's a hot day, and it is cooler than inside, if you do not mind, he said with a flush.

Ah...of course, I said.

At this time of day, my little sister, routinely, splashes the veranda with water to quench the scorching heat, creating a whiff of dampness in the atmosphere. She also waters the shrubs peering out of the large tins and growing upwards to release their fragrance.

I went inside the house to tell my father there was a visitor waiting to see him. I heard a car pull up whilst I was performing the *Asr* prayer, he muttered. I got the woollen mattress out and laid it out on the veranda but left the lower end open for the visitor to take his shoes off and sit on.

My father swept in, wearing his black flowing *abaya* embroidered with golden threads on its sides, heartily welcoming the guest.

Welcome, welcome, he said as he rushed through. It is a great honor for you to come and visit our village. Quick my son, pour the coffee, he said to me with great authority.

I held the coffee *daallah* coffee- pot in my left hand and the tiny cups in the other and carefully poured, watching the spout. I then knelt a little and offered a cup to the visitor. He took the cup slowly, maneuvering it between his fingers and under his nose.

By the grace of God, this coffee smells good, he looked up to my father, still, devouring the aroma of the beans.

Though hot, he gulped down the first sip, the second more slowly and the third, drinking as a connoisseur. After satisfying his palate, he slightly shook the cup, indicating he had enough for the time being. I lifted the cup from him and stood next to my father, ready-and-waiting to pour more.

Drink more coffee, my father yelled at the visitor. We always

say the first cup is for the visitor, second for the sword and third for pleasure. By God we greatly welcome you in this house.

Sheikh Monawer, I have been drinking coffee and tea all morning. The pressure of work has been unbearable, I did not have time to even scratch my head and I have not had anything since morning.

My father immediately took the hint and knew just what the guest meant. He looked at me and remembered, crossing his thoughts. I hope you did well in today's final exam my son, and then gazed back at the guest by way of an introduction.

This is my son Mamdouh. You could say he is entering manhood. He is elated, today was his last day of the general high exams.

The guest looked at me with his eyes brimming with light.

So Mamdouh what are your plans now? Do you plan to go to college?

Yes, I want to go to the military college and become a soldier in the army. This has been my dream since I was a little kid.

My father peered at me and commanded: Go search of the shepherd and slaughter a sheep, be quick, no delay.

I rushed out of the door with my legs out-racing, rather like a horse trotting. I began to feel tired whilst running, I stopped a couple of times to catch my breath, and finally got to the

shepherd, heaving, out of breath with my tongue sticking out of my mouth. It is indeed strange, every time I run and even walk long-distance I find my tongue moving sideways out of my mouth.

The sight of the sheep and goats while grazing is heart wrenching, their heads to the ground almost like a seesaw, picking the seeds of the wheat that have just been harvested. I chose what I thought was the best of the sheep and called on the tractor driver, Abu Ali, to give me a lift back to the house. There, I found my uncle Abu Sulafa ready and waiting; he was sharpening his knives, in readiness for the big feast.

The elders of the village had already started to come to our house. First in line was the *Mukhtar*, Meried Al Ali, *Haj* Obidan Al Mirei and *Haj* Saidaan Al Maneh. This is a common sight for the villagers, especially when they see a government car or any other stray vehicle, and they start flocking into the direction it has stopped at.

My mother also, had already lit the fire, it was glowing hot. As usual I quickly grabbed the liver and the insides and put them in the cooking pot; all try to snatch a mouthful with a piece of bread. My uncle Abu Sulafa, was next with his slaughtering, keeping the fire busy with meat cutlets and other chunks of red meat, as the pleasant smell started to fumigate the place. It was a delicious aroma that certainly whetted the palates.

I returned to where everyone was sitting, and took the coffee pot and started pouring for the visitors. Maintaining an air of

authority, the guest started by asking how everyone was.

Praise be to Allah, things are fine, replied the *Mukhtar* wanting to assume command.

The guest introduced himself as head of the sanitation department in the Ministry of Water and Irrigation.

My name is engineer Tameem Al Sdeiri, he said.

My father's eyes lit up.

Welcome. I have applied, must be more than a year now, to dig a well on my land, I am sure you agreed to grant me a license and have come to bring the news yourself.

No, no, *Sheikh* Monawer, I have no relations to that, I have come about something else, altogether.

I looked at my father. The creases of joy started to move out of his face.

What did you come for, then, I hope it is good news, an utterance made that totally lacked in conviction. Pour more coffee, my son.

The man continued nonchalantly. I have come directly to your village from Amman. I have studied the land plans for this area and I have found that you own more than three hundred *dunums*, he said whilst surveying my father and the rest.

We inherited these lands from our fathers and with God's help, we will pass them on to our next generation. On some patches we grow wheat, some barely and other grains like lentils. We grow enough and need no more to live a simple life.

Sheikh Monawer, can I see your land?

My father's suspicion immediately increased for his eyes narrowed. I could tell he was thinking there was something cryptic behind this request.

The land is not for sale, plus, the lands here are dirt-cheap compared to the fancy prices in your capital, Amman.

I do not want to buy land, but I tell you, the government is thinking of establishing a big project in your area, and from my readings of the plans, I have found the best location would be on your land.

Haj Obidan spoke first. I have some land next to that of *Sheikh* Monawer, it is not big like his but....

...And I have twenty *dunums* next to that of the *Sheikh*, *Haj* Saidaan quickly chipped in. *Mukhtar* Meried joined in. All I own is one *dunum* around my house, nothing else, he said as if wallowing in his misfortune, and trying to emphasize he is also part of the community.

Many of the villagers, do not even know the *Mukhtar's* real

name but long nicknamed him "Zoglol".

Up till now, you have not really told us more about this big project of yours, Mr. Sdeiri, my father added trying to turn the conversation around.

Can we all go to see to your land and there I will explain what we have in mind, I am sure you will all be excited, once you hear what I want to say, said the engineer.

So be it, my father said, signaling for all the men to stand up and follow. By the time we get back the *mansaf* will be waiting and we can eat to goodness, my father said, and off they went.

Their first sight was dense black volcanic rocks out across the land, it almost looked austere but that did not distract the engineer. He stood with arms akimbo but then spread them out, as if to make a great impression of propensity.

This is the best land in the Kingdom to establish the government project, he added with satisfaction. I have long studied it on paper, and I am now standing on it, saying it as if he did not even believe himself, or at last he was realizing his dream. This is the best land as I long imagined it would be and thought about the ways the project is going to be set up.

My father looked ahead, pulling his black *abaya* on his shoulders. He was getting excited, not like a minute before. Many things were going on his head.

By God, you are whetting our appetites, we want to listen. Speak up Mr. Sdeiri!

Its certainly a great project from what you say that would be beneficial to all, the *Mukhtar* chipped in.

My father looked at him somewhat irritated and then eyed the engineer impatiently. Sdeiri, wiping his bald head looked on in contemplation.

Yes, this is a great project, and I tell you secretly, and do not say I said so, this is going to be greatest project in the history of the Kingdom.

We must have a special place in your heart if you choose our area to establish this great project, as you say, *Haj Obidan* added also in anticipation and hurry.

Yes, yes it is a great project, emphasized the engineer. You do have a special place in my heart, and this is why I have chosen your land for this venture, said the engineer, gazing at the lands and rubbing his hands enthusiastically. I cannot believe it I am standing on the land and the black volcanic stones surrounded me! I am defiantly the happiest person in this universe, he reflected.

Please tell us about this project, my father said, almost beseeching whilst scratching his white beard and waiting for the declaration to be made and end the misery of everyone.

Very well, in this region especially, we plan to set up not only the biggest waste water treatment plant in the Kingdom but the whole of the Middle East. There you have it.

There was silence as, everyone aghast, not a word was spoken for a whole minute.

What do you mean a waste water treatment plant? *Haj* Obidan finally uttered.

Well, as you know when you go to the toilet, all the excretions go into the sewer, and finds their way into the earth. There is no benefit from it, at all to anyone. Simply put, the project is about collecting the excretions in this area. We will build a waste-water treatment plant and recycle the waste water and use it in irrigation in agriculture.

You must be joking, I am hearing you correctly, my father burst out. In the village everyone has a hole in the ground, for that waste for himself. In the summer, we take all our belongings, with our goats and build tents and the land is left empty. We have no problem with sewerage or any other. Why would we need a plant?

My friends, my brothers, I am not talking about recycling your sewerage, your area is not included in the project at all. You do not have any problem regarding sanitation... *Sdeiri* added.

The *Mukhtar* could no longer stop himself and let out a loud lough, others had smirks painted all over their faces.

So why are you building the plant then? He managed to say in between sniggering.

For the residence of Amman and maybe Zarqa, and maybe other towns and cities in the Kingdom.

Haj Saidaan could not stop his sarcasm either.

Incredible...Why not let all the people of Amman and Zarqa come here, and let them do their waste here and that way, it may be safer for them and for you.

I am not joking, I am serious. This is the great project that I have come to tell you about, it is one of the biggest to be adopted by the government since the Kingdom was established.

So how will we benefit from this great project?My father said.

Sheikh Monawer this is not only a good question but an excellent one, and it says a lot about how perceptive and clever you are, Sdeiri added.

The engineer took out his handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the sweat on his red bald head and neck.

As you see it is very hot here and as you see it is covered in black volcanic stones, absorbing the sun's heat during the day and releasing it out at night. This is why the atmosphere is always hot, may God help you, he said.

He held my father's hand and indicted with his thumb.

Sheikh Monawer, do you see the lands in front of you ?

Yes, I was born here, I know every inch of it and my feet have trodden on its every stone. Do not forget the land you are standing on belongs to me, bearing in mind everything belongs to God. I agree with you that it is hot but I did not know it absorbs the sun's heat and releases it out during the night. I want to tell you a secret and do not tell your people back in Amman, anybody who has pain in his joints, such as rheumatism, or disk in the back, he can lie on these stones or bury himself in its sand, the pain will not come back again, I have tried it myself.

I know that the land is yours, but I did not know it heals and cures from the pain and illness you mentioned. All I see in front of me is green land with the sown fields you can think of, I do not see any barren earth and this will be because of the water that will come out of the plant at the end of the recycling process. On your point of curable disease we will establish wide lakes to rear crocodiles to treat cancerous tumors. Australian scientists have proved the blood of crocodiles can treat tumors and we will work on increasing the number of these and sell their blood to cancer patients.

Crocodiles tears, what a rubbish! This is the biggest sham story this clever engineer from Amman is trying to pull on these poor people. I muse to myself.

What green spaces and crocodile lakes you are you seeing out there? *Mukhtar* said.

We will grow willow trees in these areas. Do you see the train station from here?

Yes I see it.

The station was built of two stories from black stones since the times of the Ottomans and which due to the absence of government projects has become a nonentity and I fear also, our charcoaled village will wither away too, *Mukhtar* added.

After a number of years, you will not see the station from here, it will be blocked by a band of Poplar and Willow trees over here. We will build the biggest match factory depending on all these trees. I see the factory in front of me now as I see you. It is not logical we import matches from abroad, it is not right. We must build a factory for this, we must depend in ourselves.

Another interjection came from one of the group.

My land is over there on the cliff, you see that lizard jumping about, there? It is not big like that of *Sheikh* Monawer, but its next to it, *Haj* Saidaan, said.

I do not see any lizard there, what I see is a lake with crocodiles dipping in the waters. Visitors will come here from all corners of the world, in addition to those going on outings inside the Kingdom, spoke the engineer.

Mr. Sdeiri, you see all these things around you. Come off it, do

you think we are blind? You see willows and Poplar trees, a match factory and a lake full of crocodiles, be rational, man! You think because you are an engineer you understand more than the others? Everyone in this village understands much more than you do? Do you see that bird flying in the air? Well, my son Mamdouh can tell you his type, species, whether it is a male or a female. Can you do that?

I reflected that I once saw a TV program where scientists managed to discover drugs from the saliva of one type of lizard, which I could not remember, for the treatment of diabetes.

Unperturbed by this monologue Sdeiri thought the best defense was to continue and add to what *Sheikh* Monawer was saying.

, I forgot to say to you sir, the existence of trees and water will mean that the migratory birds will again start flying to this area and especially the seagull, that poor bird which migrated from here, its original habitat.

But Mr. Sdeiri, this country is not the land of the seagull, pointed out *Haj* Saidaan who immediately saw the face of the engineer starting to heat up, with more creases on it.

It does not matter. Believe me my friends, this is a great project and great benefits will come your way and all the surrounding villages will envy you all the more, he said. Stick your hand in mine and we will go places.

At this point, my father became very agitated, unwilling to listen

to any more diatribe.

You have come here from Amman to tell us about your project which is all color, taste and smell. Yes it would have been preferable if there was some kind of a system for our excretions, he started dismally.

Then the tempo of his voice became more forceful.

All government projects have proved useless. Before, we used to grow wheat in Horan, it was the best quality from all around, and then they came to us with a hybrid type that had no origin, we call it government wheat. There is no goodness in it at all. The train station you talked about, now lies in ruins. Years ago there were plenty of travelers but not anymore, and this is the fault of the government. Why do not you take your great project to the deserts, which area is tow third the area of the Kingdom? Is there no land? But here, surely not.

I understand from this *Sheikh* Monawer, you reject the project, the engineer said with circumspection.

My land is not for sale, my father added with a bitter taste in his mouth and he quickly realized why, as doom was about to set in the village.

We chose this area because the waste water will come from

Amman in parallel with the Zarqa stream, of course, through concrete pipes. I have to be honest with you now and tell you that all four hundred and fifty *dunums* of these lands have been acquisitioned but the government will not swindle anyone of his rights, we will compensate you. We do not buy land but acquisition the areas for public benefit, and this project is for the benefit of all citizens.

Sdeiri put his hand in his pocket and got out a brown envelope.

This is for you *Sheikh* Monawer. It is a decision by the cabinet to acquiesce this land.

My father stood still, without a word, his lips without a tremble and his tears blocked inside his eye-lids. I know it is very difficult for him to shed a tear but the moisture remained just the same. I took the envelop from the engineer's hand as we all looked toward unto his demeanor as he strode to his car, looking more like a toad than a man.

My friends take care, I cannot eat *mansaf*, I am diabetic.

At last the lips of my father moved:
I cannot imagine how his mother carried him in her womb for nine months, he muttered.

It might have been seven months, the *Mukhtar* said mockingly.

Leave him be, my father said. His words are like his urine, worthless.

We finally arrived at the house after what seemed a long and lonely walk, my father silent all the way. He, did not say one word. We found my uncle Abu Sulafa ready and waiting.

Where is the guest? He asked as he saw us move one-by-one but he did not dwell on the point. He prepared the *mansaf* in a most auspicious way with the head of the sheep in the middle of the bed of rice, its tongue drooping to the right. We immediately tucked in, in silence. My father refused to eat, saying he had no appetite.

Afterwards the talk centered on the acquisition order which by now, I had fully read, and which stated the cabinet had already made a decision to take the lands and to build the project on it with no questions asked.

My father maintained his silence, deep in thought, slowly picking at the golden threads of his *abaya*. This has developed into a habit, especially when he is not pleased, with the picking going on forever, until all the threads are rendered useless, and the garment becoming unfit to wear. This was his favorite amongst all the others but after this episode, it will gracefully join the dresser like the rest.

Haj Merei and *Haj Saidan* had said they ought to take out a lawsuit against this government decision and there was a clear need to appoint a clever lawyer and make sure he won the case.

The *Mukhtar* was not convinced, saying the government was

stronger than all of us and that court hearings stretched forever.

Your words are gems, *Mukhtar*, my father added as he yawned.

Chapter (2)

Flatfoot

With sunrise and the first rays reaching our village, I was good-and-ready as the first passenger in the Land Rover going to Zarqa. Today was the medical test in the Tadmeed Military Hospital for all those who wanted to enter the military college. There was a whole legion of youths, as old as I was who had finished their Tawjihi and all came for their medical test like me, all patiently waiting their turn.

We rattled around in a big hall. I saw the three-members of the medical committee coming downstairs towards where we were sitting. They were whispering between them with hushed laughs. Suddenly, I was a little fearful. They all were wearing their white coats, and a large stethoscope, it was hanging from their necks with a black tube to their bellies, and a flat silver crown at the end. I imagined it was a black snake with fangs they were going to throw at me which would mean the end of my dreams as a soldier.

I was quickly bought back to reality when I heard my name called out on the speaker, I got up and walked in trepidation, the adrenaline going up with every step I made. This was what my science teacher said, the adrenaline goes up when one is experiencing fear. I sat down and waited for them, all three whispering. The doctor in the middle, placing his glasses on the top of his head said with a sense of command.

Take off your shoes.

I carefully took my new shoes off which I bought especially for

the occasion as if I was going to a party. And your socks, the doctor to the right added.

I slowly took off the black socks and put them in the shoes.

The doctor on the left said: Walk around the room. I paced up and down until they told me to stop.

Now let me see the soles of your feet, he added.

I lifted my feet up in the air for all to see clearly. One of the doctors looking to his colleagues began: As you can see, I think he has flat foot.

All were nodding in agreement. What does this mean? I said anxiously!

The arches of your feet are low and it simply means you cannot become a soldier. The first rule of joining the army is that, a soldier must not have flat feet, the doctor said.

It was as if the whole world caved in. I could not say a word, my tongue was tied, I felt if I spoke they would have launched their snakes at me to gobble me up. I then hoped I could have laid my pen on the floor so it would turn into a snake and eat theirs. I felt for my pen, I saw a blue dampness blotching my shirt, it might have been my high body temperature as a result of the blow I just received.

It was as though my dreams had been dashed as I hoped I would

become a military general one day but now nothing. I left the hall in a state of delirium, almost talking to myself and flickering my hands. I saw myself as going to our village during holidays wearing my army uniform, going to weddings wearing it and hearing the girls chant "Mamdouh is here", Mamdouh is here.

I would be wearing the military suit, and the girls and women would ululate and whoever did not would have their tongue cut off and given to the snake. And they would keep singing my praises, afraid that the snake would gobble them up. But now people will mock me, even my cousin, the daughter of Uncle Abu Sulafa.

So I would not become a general! I do not think I can live with my shame. Unbearable! Our history teacher used to always ask us in. what was the last battle in which the Arab-Muslim armies came out victorious? One after the other, pupils would stand up to cast their answers. A whole generation don't know of any victory during this great period. Unbelievable. Every time the students would name a battle, the teacher would say "Wrong Answer". None of us was capable of giving the right answer. The teacher would scream at the top of his voice, it is the Hittin Battle! Come on kids, have you read your history books?

What a disaster, calamity, debacle, fiasco. Yet, it is true to say that since Hittin we have not succeeded in achieving any victory. Is not there even a minor, orphan, victory for us

anywhere? There are certainly people out there with professional armies. Where are our soldiers? Where are our generals?

In one of the well-known programs on one of the satellite channels I heard the anchor say more than once that generals are selling underwear at traffic lights in America. Another general inside the studio tried to stop him and say; not true, not true, my friend. They sell flowers, and another general who phoned the program said: They sell both flowers and underwear at traffic lights. Who is right here and who is kidding who?!

This is sad, no, downright shameful. The legs of many used to shake in their trousers when they heard the names of soldiers in their past glories. What happened? The slogans and chants were high and echoing. In our bodies and souls we serve you, our nation. However, when the nation needed them every general took off his military uniform and ran away, sitting with his wife, watching television in his underclothes brandishing a cola. They named this operation the "Night Liberators"; but since when did liberators come to have a night called after them? It is the night for singers, pimps, those who trade in nations and the corrupt? Surely the liberators have their own dawn that awaits them.

They became undergarment sellers after the Saigon generals fled after America pulled away from Vietnam. The Saigon generals left with Uncle Sam and they did not find anything better to do in the land of dreams than to sell underwear at traffic lights and road junctions. What a life. Those that were lucky became

bodyguards to famous singers and night birds.

Now the latest brass are carrying the stick after the Saigon generals became old. They are firmly in control of the new Saigon after the liberators changed the city to Ho Chi Minh, becoming a den of vice.

Our generals said there was no way the American generals could enter to free Kuwait after it was occupied by the Iraqi army. There were the wide and lengthy trenches and high sand dunes that prevented them from entry, as if you were reliving the Trench Battle. My aunt's son, Shihdeh told me the coming war would be "Electro-magnetic". He tried to explain to me its nature but it was all double Dutch.

It was hard to see charred corpses of soldiers on top of their machines. No one knows where these generals went, but these became recurring scenes since the *Nakba* and *Naksa*.

Maybe if it was left to my cousin Shihdeh, my situation would have been different now. He had wanted to become a soldier since third grade, intermediary school. He then tried ceaselessly to persuade me to accompany him to join the army. I told him I would join the army later on and I would become a general and he would answer to me. He was always peeved by the food there and always told me. The lunch was no more the piece of (111) .

I asked jokingly what was that?

It was a triangular shaped piece of meat, well that is what I thought. Its angles where never parallel and I would always try and make them so but never succeeded. When I was doing so I would always remember the math's teacher when he talked about the equilateral triangle being always semi-equal. All my attempts failed, he used to say.

We would then burst out laughing at this. I laughed more when he coined the phrase parliament (111) to characterize the sixteenth Lower House. I do not know why our local district deputies made such a fuss about this. I thought it was part of our heritage and laughed in hysterics. How I wished Shihdeh was here with me now to tell him our diet is still the same dull, monotonous kind of tomatoes, potatoes, onions and eggs, the so-called famous four, and we will likely be munching them for the next generation. But enough of idle talk. May God continue to provide us even with these blessings.

Shihedeheh packed up his bags and migrated to America a couple of years ago and I haven't seen him since. In one of his letters, which were far and few, he asked if we still eat the same famous four and I said: Yes, we do, and more avariciously, but eggs are now missing from the menu.

I replied that our cockerel decided to establish his own party, the "Cock Party". He persuaded all the chickens that the sun only rises if it hears his crowing at dawn and they must join his party. However, he started feeding them less and in time, they

protested and stopped producing eggs. I wrote: This is why the eggs are no longer part of our diet.

To my misfortune, or maybe fortune, I did not become a soldier despite my disparate need to join the army. I still remember my uncle's return after fighting in the *Naksa* June defeat. We ran towards him, me and his daughter Sulafa as we usually do, but this time he did not open his arms to his young daughter to throw her up in the air and then catch her and put her on the floor so he could greet her heartily.

I stood in my place so did her daughter. What happened? We walked in short steps towards him, one stride forward two steps back. He was holding his little girl's right hand. He didn't move his lips. What did you do in the war, Father? Sulafa asked. This was a perfectly appropriate question that was being repeatedly asked innocently across the Arab tract by the sons and daughters of soldiers. What did you do in the war Father?

For the first time in my life I saw the tears of my uncle shed. My uncle, crying! I could not believe it. The most precious things to a man are his tears, and especially if he is a soldier. A man does not shed tears unless he is vanquished.

They sold us out, son, a phrase that made the earth tremble from under my feet, mountains cracked, sky thundered and every entity was besieged. What a force behind the expression that

certainly could not be measured on the Richter Scale. The expression bellowed in my ears and my brain. Even now I can still hear it thumping through the corpses of the charcoaled soldiers on their way to all of the Arab lands, echoing across the Atlantic to the wreathing Gulf.

I left the interview feeling much relieved. Thank God, it came from them rather than me. If I had become a general I would have been like them and would not have been able to predict my future, or what I would have sold out.

When I reached my village I insisted that everybody shouts in my face: "Flat foot... Flat foot".

Chapter (3)
Memory of a fish

I went to the Ministry of Water numerous times, to try to receive the compensation for the lands that were snatched from us. Every time I wanted to see the director, I was always met with a specific set of answers from the secretary: The director is not free for you...The director is not here...He is traveling...He is in a meeting... and... We don't know when he will be back.

Every time I tried to explain that I come from far away, from the Samra village and the trip was costly, and what I was to do? She would put on a face and blink with no answer. All the time she should be saying good-bye to me by twisting her lips like the *Hundai* symbol.

I left and saw the office boy standing at the door. He may have felt for me, we ordinary folk sense our thoughts. He came forward and asked, What's the problem?

I told him the whole thing, not leaving any morsel of detail out, the whole story from A to Z.

Wait a minute, I have the solution, he said.

Tell me, quick, be out with it.

Go to his house in the evening after five and don't leave until he solves your problem. This is his address in Abdoun. You probably do not know it so you had best take a taxi.

And this is exactly what I did. I flagged down a taxi and went

straight to Abdoun, passing much traffic and traffic lights. I did not know Amman had grown so big. I stood in front of a palatial villa with a large front gate, a marble stone stared "by the grace of my Lord". I let out a laugh but quickly looked around, hoping nobody saw me. When I was young I would go with my father to Zarqa and I would always see this expression in one place or another and on shops. I read it every where and I used to think these buildings were built from Dubai. How simple children can be. I now know better.

I rang the bell and a mahogany-looking maid came out. "What do you want? she asked in a broken accent.

I told her I wanted to see Mr. Sdeiri.

Baba, not here, she said.

A voice from further inside the villa yelled; Who is it Yasmina?

It is someone who wants Baba. A young youthful girl appeared in the hallway.

Please come in, Sir. My dad will arrive in a little bit. It was so casual but I liked it, feeling we might be lucky this time.

I entered into the visitor's lounge, which was full of luxurious furnishings. I sat with my chin between my hands thinking and watching the big fish tank, one which had a great variety and blazing color.

I was brought into reality by her voice. So you like the fish tank?
she said.

Humm, yes, very much in deed.

What is your name, Sir?

Mamdouh, Mam.

You know Mamdouh, my dad likes to sit where you are and look at the fish tank and say: Do not tell your thoughts, ideas or what you want to do, to anyone but to the fish, because his biology teacher told him a fish has a memory of only three seconds. There was a black fish in the tank swimming aimlessly.

Your father is a clever man, I said.

Indeed he is, she continued.

It was one night he was sitting here by himself peering at the tank, I was with my brother next door, helping him with his math's subject for the exams, and suddenly we heard a shout, I found it..., I found it..., I found it... I ran to him at once and asked him, what did you find Archimedes?

Come and sit next to me. Look at the fish tank. She said she looked at the tank but found nothing unusual.

He laughed loudly. Look at the black fish at the bottom, what do we call that fish? Her father said.

It is the cleaner Dad, the one that eats all the leftovers in the tank.

He put his hands together in contemplation. I always used to say tell your thoughts only to the fish. For a long time I have been thinking about setting up a waste water treatment plant that would process the waste of Amman. I see in this black fish the solution, a plant in Samra.

Amazing! Even the fish tank has a worker. My history teacher used to say the new migrants to America used to capture Africans and take them to the new lands, shipping them in the board of a ship named *Jesus*. With an ironical twist, it transported them to the American dream. Later Hollywood reinforced the fact it is the blacks who die first in films, there is no happiness for them. What there is though, is black slavery, only humiliation and shame. There is no light at the end of the tunnel, but in all honesty if there is not the darkness of the night there would not have been a dawn, something like that said our famous black knight and poet Antara.

Next to the fish tank, there was a prestigious library cabinet with shelves of thick volumes in golden covers. At the top were myriad framed certificates also standing proudly with golden rims. My mind flipped back to the *Zorba the Greek* novel which I snatched from my pathetic old school library. I liked the novel

a lot. Zorba always used to make fun of certificate holders and would spit on their certificates and books. But I think Zorba was too polite, what I would have done is piss on all the books of intellectuals and I would have liked to spray my urine on all their sham certificates and on any thoughts they may have written down.

My thoughts were broken by the entry of a youth, about my age. His hair was in ramshackle waves with a sparse soft beard. My father is on his way, and he asked if you wanted to bring anything with him? I learned quickly, he was her brother, and he passed the Tawjihi certificate with a grade of 51 and was about to go on an engineering scholarship to Britain. He looked at me and asked casually:

Mamdouh, what was your grade in the *Tawjihi*?

It was 89, I answered absent-mindedly, unable to quite fathom what he had just said.

What do you think of my brother, his sister asked.

Well, he is like the bellwether sheep.

Oh, just what do you mean?

The subject is a bit difficult to explain.

Give me a brief answer, I am interested, her expression was amused.

The bellwether, with a bell around its neck, is the spoilt sheep in the flock. It always walks in front before the shepherd's donkey. He is the leader of the other sheep because they all follow wherever he goes, and I forgot to tell you that the bellwether does not participating in the season of flock breeding.

She smiled, I think it was the first time she heard the term. Her father engineer Sdeiri entered the house.

Daddy, I am sure you know Mamdouh, I hope you will not let him go before you solve his problem. He looked at me and said without introductions or comments. For the sake of my daughter consider your problem solved and consider yourself an employee in the Samra treatment plant; you will be the warehouse manager responsible for all the material inside and outside, you will also have responsibility over operations directly answerable to me.

Chapter (4)

Zoqlol

Work started. The digging was dissecting the land workers, engineers came from what seemed all corners of the earth. Experts came, I did not know from where or what they were doing. The project was in need of many things including vast amount of earth for the pools. These were more like lakes, which would have great depth for water purification in their different stages. Nobody wanted to sell the earth and shovel it from his land.

Mukhtar "Zoqlol" was the only one who wanted to sell the earth from his land. No one knows where *Mukhtar* came from. But he is here now and his presence increased when he laughed loudly, you would know it was him from afar. His teeth, maybe the other distinguishing characteristic, are far apart between his gums likes the ruined stones of Samra. He is alone in this world, with neither wife nor son. So who would he leave his lands to? I will sell them my land, and they can have the earth to go with it, he said.

He is a proud man. He talks of his ancestors who came here with the great Saladin, the Islamic warrior, and the one who ordered them to stay here so they could be another line of defense to confront the Crusaders. He is proud as well, saying it was his lineage who liberated Jerusalem and won in the Hittin Battle and willed his way to stay in the environs of Biet Al Muqdes.

When our history teacher mentioned Hittin, one of the students asked him if what Zoqlol said was true. The teacher said: That is nonsense. He believes in a make-believe world. He lives in illusion, like most of our poets and singers do, crying about

why their love is leaving them. In fact they do not have any women ... any love...none ...just illusions. They think so or just want people to think and believe so.

Zoqlol was masterful in telling stories, indeed he was a wizard in pulling your legs. Everyone has a special quality and Zoqlol, our good *Mukhtar*, liked a bit of black comedy and atrocious sense of humor. It was on one cold night in February with men sitting around the fire after the *Isha* prayer, warming their hands, *daellah* coffee pot heating up on the blazing charcoal when he gazed at them all with his lips stuck to his chin.

Whichever of you has the courage to go to the cave on top of that mountain and knock on its door with the pole, he will certainly have all the amount of *raha* sweat he can from me. This was a high cave full of hyenas; nobody goes there during the day let alone on a pitch-black night as this one.

With the desire to be counted as the brave one, Abu Ali said: I will certainly do that and tomorrow morning you can go by yourself and see. All were silent with the only sounds heard being the winds. How much of the *raha* will you give me? If I do that, he asked.

Zoqlol's eyes lit up, warming his hands on the fire and brushing his beard. You can have all you ask for. The pole is marked red so we can be sure it is the same pole, and I will throw in a garment from me to you as a gift, he said.

In a hushed voice, he whispered to *Haj* Obidan and *Haj* Saidaan: Go after him without letting him know he is being followed, we need to make sure he really does go to the cave. When he saw the men were not interested he continued, as you know I brought a pickup truck with the money I got from selling the land, and you can make use of it to carry your goods and transport your children whenever you need.

His words started to get the better of them and continued,

You know I have neither wife, nor children, you are my family and the monies I have are yours and you will inherit from me for there is no one else.

We will follow Abu Ali, and see where he sticks the pole, they both said in one voice.

Abu Ali walked slowly up the hill, feeling his way, through the dark. It was a howling night, the winds blowing in all directions, however, he maintained his steadiness. At last he reached the cave.

He was a strong, well-built man with broad shoulders and thick arms and hands and used to lift the wheel of the tractor in his bare hands, just like a child who holds his toy high up in the air just to tease his peers

He breathed deeply after he fixed the stake into the ground with

nothing visible but a few centimeters painted in red. My God, I reached it, now let us stick this in and be away with it, he mumbled, almost in a hurry to get down.

He placed the hammer under his right arm and tried to start to walk back to the village, but he could not, something was holding him back. Fear started to sneak down his spine. What is happening, he muttered to himself? I may have disturbed the hyenas and woken them up and they are tugging onto me. He did not dare look back, trembling in his pants. He was afraid the hyenas might pee in his face and overpower him. For them I would be hefty meat on this cold night, he remembered telling himself.

From afar and from behind the stone hedge, the two followers were watching. They whispered to themselves: What is happening to the man, why is he fidgeting? It was not clear from their vantage point, but Abu Ali could not move, something was pulling him back.

Poor Abu Ali, he did not know when he drove the stake into the ground the end of his *thob* somehow was also buried in the earth as well. He tried to run, and it was no use, but after strenuous effort and hard work, he pulled his body out of the dress and started to run with nothing but his underwear. A naked *Jinni* is running towards us, retreat is bravery, the two *Hajis* shouted, and started to run themselves.

The three men were running and no one dared look back. It was as if they all went stark, raving mad and no one could stop them.

After a few months on a glorious spring day, a luxurious car stood in front of *Mukhtar* Zoqlol's corner shop. A well-dressed man in an expensive suit and a colorful tie, with a pipe dangling under his right cheek stopped outside the shop.

Where can I find *Mukhtar* Al Ali? He asked politely sticking his head in the door.

Welcome Pasha, I am here, the *Mukhtar* in the flesh.

Ah, I am the director of the new Samra water treatment plant. The first thought that crossed my mind was to come and introduce myself to you. We can not t forget your good deeds or your favors when the people of the village refused to sell us their land. You are a representative of the government and all government apparatuses are proud of you *Mukhtar*, the director said.

Do sit down Pasha, the *Mukhtar* saying this while wiping the dust off the chair. Please have a cool drink, turn off the engine of your expensive car so you would not spend more on oil than you need to.

it is ok, not to worry, the government pays for the gas, so we can keep the engine running, if we want to, he said brushing off the advice. So, how are things in the village?

The news will not please either friends or foes. *Sheikh* Monawer passed away a while ago, God help *Hajj* Obidan and Sidaan, they do not even know where the *Kaaba* is any more, and Abu Ali's tractor has broken down and become a heap of iron, the *Mukhtar* went on.

The *Pasha* almost interrupted by standing up. I know all about that, don't think the government has forgotten about you. He slid his hand into the inside pocket of his suit, but it was empty. He searched elsewhere, but nothing. Oh *Mukhtar*, it seems I have forgotten the money at home. The government has given me twenty thousand dinars to give to you so you can share it among deserving villagers.

The *Mukhtar* was gob-smacked, standing behind his small dilapidated counter. Only shortly after, he beamed with a smile. I do not know what to say, twenty thousand dinars, to distribute as I will! There is an old saying in the village my dear *Pasha*: We do not see you till there is something abundant. But, it seems every rule has an exception. It's fine *Pasha*, come back tomorrow and bring the money with you.

I cannot do that; I have a very important meeting in the plant tomorrow morning. You know I am a new director, and I have only been in the post for a short time. At the end of the day I have another meeting with the Council of Ministers, I have to present a report about the plant's situation to get a loan from the Urban Development Department. Maybe, I can come in a month, the *Pasha* replied

Zoqlol thought hard. Twenty-thousand is a lot of money. I can add this sum to my bank account, his mind ticked. He went inside the shop and came back carrying an antique box decorated with precious stones. He opened it in front of the pasha whose pupils bulged out of his eyes.

I think I can lend you a twenty thousand dinars, and tomorrow I will come to your office and you can give me this twenty thousand and the other twenty thousand you owe me. Here, take it; it would not do for the *Pasha* to walk off without any money in his pockets, now would it?

The *Pasha* looked to the box and back to his car. He made sure the engine was still running, snatched the box and drove off so fast that Zoqlol was left behind watching the cloud of dust made by the screeching wheels of the vehicle.

Chapter (5)

Illness

I felt very tired and weak for I have been suffering from anuria. I went to the plant doctor and he always gave the same diagnosis, you have a urinary tract infection and he always prescribed always the antibiotics that did not work. I was always given the same advice "drink lots water". God bless your soul, Grandmother, how you used to heal the sick, by prescribing Arabic medications that worked so well, leaving people thankful and appreciative. My Grandmother used to treat men in the main house, with women in the side-room. She refused to allow men to talk about their illness or problem in private, everyone had to speak in front of everyone else without shame or apprehension.

I remember once a strange, good-looking man came to her, accompanied by his son who was paralyzed and could not walk. The boy was fourteen years old. The man pleaded: *Hajja* I have seen many doctors and the boy's condition has not improved.

My Grandmother gazed at the boy; she only checked him with her piercing eyes, but never touched him, there was no need to. There is no medication for your son. You and all the people must make sure to visit your kin, give to charity as much as you can, give to widows and orphans as well as poor neighbors and the needy; lighten your earthly load to end up well in the afterlife. But as yet and unfortunately you left yourself no friends."

The man did not say a word as if dumbfounded. He never replied but felt ashamed from the words she uttered. Just as he was scrambling to his feet to leave, a shrill old voice came out.

I can heal your boy on one condition.

The man looked at her, praying, beseeching, that there was some hope or way for healing the boy and ending his misery.

I want you to bring me a healthy person who agrees to take away all of the illness your son has.

The poor man stood for a minute baffled out of his wits. He hurried out and never looked back.

How did you know he would not accept your condition Granny?
I asked.

Mamdouh no one in his right mind, no matter how poor he is, will agree to take this boy's place, even if they gave him all the money in the world.

Granny your words are gems, you taught that man and all the people who were present, a wonderful lesson, certainly much better than the ones given by our Islamic teacher.

Out with you or with your teacher, and do not forget to bring batteries for the radio next time you are out.

Our religion teacher always used to lash Mubarak who seemed

to find it difficult to comprehend and memorize, I think he was suffering from learning difficulties. On one occasion I remembered, one of many, the teacher entered class and blurted to the pupils:

Where did we reach last?

Al-Naser surah Sir, the whole class answered, while looking at Mubarak, expecting another call on him and a beat up.

Okay, Mubarak, get up and recite, the teacher ordered. Poor Mubarak used to stand up and would attempt to recite, but he always made mistakes. The teacher got heated and the crack of the whip would land on the pupil.

Mubarak left school early and never regretted doing so. He is now the most famous used car dealer in Jordan. He has showrooms in many cities and free zones. God indeed astonishes when He gives, and takes everything, when He wants.

At last the doctor decided enough was enough and referred me to the government hospital in Zarqa. I was admitted and subjected to a battery of medical tests that I do not care to remember. Doctors gathered around, all serious and not flinching. They, quite casually, decided at one stroke to remove my left kidney, they said it was not working. I asked the reason for this and why it suddenly stopped working.

We do not know exactly why. There is a strong possibility that it

is because of breathing exhaust fumes.

Yes it is the fumes from the plant; I have been working for eight long hard years, breathing in these fumes day and night, day and night, as if there was no longer any fresh air. I replied with certainty, as if I was now the doctor.

The surgeon will have to come from Amman in a week and he will remove the left kidney, the doctor added.

I sat in the preparation room before going into surgery, the surgeon came to see me cheerfully. He was a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair.

Mr. Mamdouh, the surgery is quite simple, there is simply no need to worry. I have done hundreds of operations like this one. Removing the left kidney is like pulling a thorn from your foot. But that did not help my anxiety to subside.

I am terrified Doctor. Just being in this room freaks me out. I have no one with me, and as you can see even my shadow gave up on me! My shadow keeps me company when I am alone; I always talk to him, tell him my worries, dreams, hopes, secrets and ambitions, just like engineer "Tameem" tells his fish about his projects, dreams and secrets. I tell my shadow my secrets because he will not tell them to anyone, and what better companion could I ask for? But I do not have him with me now. I spent my whole life with my shadow, but now when I need him most he is gone, I can't see him or find him! My shadow to me is like the black fish to engineer Tameem. Losing my

shadow is a very scary thing.

The doctor was sympathetic, trying his best to lessen what I was to go through. Many people live a long life with just one kidney Mamdouh.

I felt good when he said that, and called me by my first name. I was relieved to find out I still had my name to accompany me, not like my shadow which betrayed me and left me to fend for myself. Mamdouh my dear name, you are back! Thank you for standing by me and not deserting me. I am sick and you are healthy; what if you too got sick? What would become of me and you? Maybe nothing, for you are just a name, you have a double letter M there, may be if you got sick they would use one of the letters, just like my two kidneys. If one gets sick they simply remove it. It was hallucinations, my hallucinations, I was babbling.

Chapter (6)

Spikes of wheat bend in humility

Empty ones raise their heads in arrogance

After I recovered from losing my left kidney I decided to leave my job at the plant. I decided I should buy a plot of land and plant it with wheat of the Horan variety. I remembered what my father used to say about the Horan wheat. Well I was going back to it, planting the land with the indigenous saplings and not the imported muck that had no origin or taste.

I toured around town to buy a plot of land to start the process of going back to agriculture. Curiously however, I did not find a suitable piece for my purpose. Suddenly it all seemed to have disappeared, where did all the land go? Houses mushroomed everywhere, everyone was building a house on his land and planting it with olive trees instead of wheat, the stuff that makes people.

Some sold their land to outsiders who also built houses and planted their areas with olive trees and fitted barbed wire around them, which looked out of place and alien. Our fathers and grandfathers would have turned in their graves if they knew this was going to happen. I do not see crops or sheep herders, all the greenery and the livestock have disappeared into thin air, I kept mumbling to myself like a demented idiot.

Abu Sulafa had taken to change like a fish to water, and in a way that I could not understand. You should plant olive trees like other people in the village, and be done with it, accept the change, and go with the flow. Surely they cannot all be wrong and you right, he said.

It is true agricultural engineers roamed the land to convince people to plant olive trees, because they said it is better than wheat and bring in much more money. They brought with them foreign experts who spoke Arabic in a broken accent and told naive and simple folk that this is a blessed tree mentioned in the Quran and we should obey the commands of Allah.

Foreigners have become experts in *Fatawi*, they can tell us what is right and wrong! Said my poor uncle who believed them, and planted his land with olive trees as television, advertising and radio programs were blindly telling us. You are stupid and fool if you do not uproot wheat and plant olive trees.

We are confused and do not know who is mad and who is not. Is the simple-minded citizen, like myself crazy?! I will never plant my land with olive trees, I want to plant it with wheat. My father used to say those who do not plant wheat will enrage the Lord, and used to cite Prophet Yousef's story as proof. He ordered the Egyptians to plant wheat and nothing but wheat. He did not order them to plant olive trees. Ever since the days of the Pharaohs until recently the Egyptians celebrated the wheat festival every year.

Today is the day of wheat, may Allah increase and bless this crop.

This is a song by a famous Egyptian singer Abdulwahab, and my father loved this song and listen it all the time. But this song disappeared with the rush of life.

Wheat has a great value in world cultures; the environment teacher said there is a deliberate, conspiratorial scheme to eliminate the planting of wheat, which goes against our being, culture, dreams and heritage. External forces lurking in the shadows are planning to increase the planting of olive trees, just like they did when they planted sugar cane in Cuba and rice in Vietnam but what is laughable and sad at the same time is that we buy our wheat from such countries.

I still remember the words of our environment teacher; there was a lesson about the environmental cycle and food chain. A mouse eats a piece of cheese, the cat eats the mouse and a dog eats a piece of beef, he might have been angry at the cow which produced cheese for the mouse. The teacher put the book down and said:

This really is nonsense. Read the environmental cycle from our own habitat, not the one in the book translated which has no flavor. During the summer holiday when you go with your families to harvest the wheat, the first step you should make is join the harvest and place the crop in piles in the fields.

One of the greatest joys in our lands is to see the workers leaving their homes at the crack of dawn, all excited to get to their fields and begin harvesting, carrying a sickle in their right hand and a bundle of wheat in the left. They cut the bundle ever so swiftly as if flirting with the saplings whilst singing:

"My sickle, my sickle,
I took it to the jeweler to polish
He polished it and placed in a box".

Their singing echoes louder and louder when they see their breakfast, covered with white cloth, coming. The shrill of excitement reaches a higher pitch especially if it is brought by a fluttering-eyed young damsel.

After the harvesters, come those who stack the wheat in piles and carry it to yards to be harvested, the teacher continues. After that as well, a group of people called, pickers come to the fields; they are allowed to pick the wheat spikes that may have fallen on the ground. These are mostly the poor who do not have land of their own. They pick stray spikes, but are not allowed to harvest the wheat.

The teacher liked to take his time in telling us about the wheat harvest, saying it was close to his heart. The last stage is when shepherds come with their sheep and cattle to graze what is left on the land, fertilizing it with their droppings and thus preparing it for the next ploughing- season, and so this is nature's way of continuing. With that note, the bell rings and the students shuffle out of class.

I became convinced about planting wheat and only wheat; it is not just about planting that crop, for this is our culture and heritage, a way of life. Marriages used to be delayed until after the end of the wheat harvest season, this has become our custom

where the families of the bride and groom take their time to get ready for a big post-harvest splash out that would literally involve everyone in the whole village. It would be a sort of an ongoing joyous affair started during the harvest talk of heroic legends and deeds that would be uttered by farmers with the majority of folktales centering on men fighting hyenas and beating them in their stead.

Sadly, those days now seem to be a distant memory, with the collectiveness of it all disappearing. However, I will not give up, no sir, this is not what my father taught me. It is true, I have not yet found a suitable piece of land to buy and gush it with wheat saplings, but our lands are vast and I will look all over to realize my dream.

Chapter (7)
Etc...etc...etc

It was Arabic class, with only a lesson to go. The teacher wrote on the blackboard:

You cannot get your dreams just by wishing, the world is seized by the strong willed).

This is your homework. Who wrote this verse? You have to explain this verse fully as part of your homework, you have to write the name of the poet, the grammar, the weakness and strengths of the poem, etc-etc-etc, the teacher said.

The science teacher entered the class room and wiped the blackboard clean, which is normal at the start of each lesson. He wiped the whole board but left three words out, etc-etc-etc. He looked at us in a vexed mood. We could usually tell if the teacher was satisfied or not, or if he was happy or depressed. On these occasions we used to whisper among ourselves that he must have had a fight with his wife.

All right pupils, the lesson of today will be about these three words, he started by saying. As you know there are many systems in the human body and each has its own function.

The human body, indeed humans, are the strangest and most complicated in this universe. Since things were not as they should be between the systems, they decided during a meeting, to choose a director, to take care of a variety of matters concerning their role and existence. Democratically, they were allowed to compete for this position, the teacher looked around explaining.

First to speak was the nervous system, Mr. Brain. It said: There is no doubt I am most suitable for this position, I control all voluntary and involuntary movements, I do the thinking and plan what is best. I provide you with warm feelings and soft touch, I give orders to nerve cells to move and attack anything that inflicts harm on you; I am the mind that supplies your rosy dreams, so I am the most eligible one to guide and direct you my friends, the teacher barked.

He added, Mr. Respi, the representative of the respiratory system jumped in interrupting. It is me. I provide all the oxygen and gets rid of carbon dioxide for you, if it was not for my oxygen the nerve cells would not be able to survive, the teacher added

looking at the pupils. You would all be dead if it was not for me, I deserve to be your director.

But Mr. Heart interrupted the discussion saying, I am the strongest muscle in the body; without me you are dead. You know who pumps the oxygen to all the cells of the body. I have strong connection with all the parts, systems and organs of the body, I am your chosen director.

Be quiet, said Mr. Repro, the representative of the reproductive system. You are all my children, if it was not for me, none of you would be alive. So shut up, all of you. Have respect for me, for your father, for I am the only one suited for this task, the teacher added, who by now had all the attention of the pupils.

Mr. Scat, head of the excretion system, was sitting far away, minding his own business at the end of the hall; the other systems kept away from him because of his foul smell, the teacher added. As he approached, the other systems pressed their fingers on their noses. He spoke quietly and deliberately: You would not breathe through your noses now,

only through your mouths but how long can you do that? Great, your noses are blocked but your ears can hear me, hear me well; I do not care about what you said. You know me and you know how dangerous my system can be, and you know the disaster that will befall all of you if you do not release your loads; you will all die, and I mean all of you. The boys burst out into hysterics of laughter.

Quite boys, I had not meant to entertain you. The term I should have used was excretion, a more nondescript somewhat scientific coinage, he said pompously.

Mr. Brain was brave enough and asked, can you tell us your agenda Mr. Scot? Then he answered him: I am Mr. Scat not Mr. Scot.

All the systems looked towards Mr. Scat, pardon me posterior, silently, even smaller organs were dumbfounded with nothing to say. They were all surprised and quite, and this is how it became the boss and the director.

All the pupils looked at each other again, unsure what to think. Later on, they were rather sad because he, the science teacher, was not made principal of

the school; it was rumored that one of principals was transferred to our school for disciplinary reasons, which was seen as an actual demotion by many.

Chapter (8)
Qabla

I put the word around and especially to property commissioners that I was looking for a plot of land to plant wheat. After quite some time, and with a bit of luck someone came up to me, quite out of the blue and made me an offer.

I have, land that I want to sell, forty *dunums*, actually in a place called Qabla, to the north of Ajloun which you are welcome to see, he said.

I agreed and we quickly went together to see it. It was rather rugged terrain compared with the prime land of Samra, but alluring in a distinct kind of way. The man said rain was good in this area, in addition to the dew which kept humidity at good levels.

My family has always planted wheat here, but I migrated to the United States and decided to live there, I do not want to come back here, I have made my life there, he said.

What is it with the United States? I asked him. What is the secret? Everybody wants to migrate there. We curse at them all the time. I have a cousin who migrated to the United States, his name is Shihdeh, maybe you know him!

The United States is huge. No one knows anyone or cares about anyone else, he replied.

We shook hands because we were both in a hurry to make a deal. He had to go back home to the United States at the end of

summer, and I wanted to start digging and planting the land. I put the deed in the inside pocket of my coat, next to my heart. Today you are the proud owner of this piece of land in Qabla, Mamdouh, I told myself in a rather unbelievable kind of way.

With the start of autumn I decided to sow the land, buying seeds from Ramtha, also in north Jordan but to the east. They were the best wheat seeds anyone could buy; they were of the luscious, golden Houran type.

Poor Abu Ali, I thought. He can't drive the tractor any more, and we used to depend on him in these matters, but he is too far and too old. No matter, there are a lot of tractors in town which can lend a helping hand.

I started to sow the seeds of wheat; I felt high and elated over the moon with joy. I saw the clouds above me, and wished I could plant them with wheat too. I loved wheat and only wheat; I looked at the clouds and told them to come back later to splash my golden crop with their waters.

While I was in this state of contemplation, a red number plated car, stopped next to my land. Another car soon followed, and both pulled over. Everyone got out and came towards me. I hope everything is all right, I muttered to myself.

One of the occupants, wearing a navy blue suit and a tie, told me that he was the Governor and these are his aides, waving with his hand. I was in a hurry to introduce myself as well.

I am Mamdouh and as you can see I am sowing wheat on my land which I bought a few months ago.

Not impressed the Governor bellowed back. It is no longer your land Mamdouh, he echoed.

I was too stunned to realize what he had just said. I stuck my index finger in my ear. I thought I was going deaf and could not hear. I do not understand Governor, what did you just say?

This is no longer your land, the government has assumed ownership to establish a nature reserve for wild animals.

What are you talking about man? What reserve? I do not care about your reserve.

This is the decision of the Council of Ministers, they have assumed ownership of the land. He threw the paper at me and without looking went back to his car with his aides following.

I sat on a stone of the wrecked monastery next to my land and lamented deep in my thoughts. Is there only Mamdouh in the kingdom, I meandered. Has the country run out of land and the only bit left was my piece, and to do what with it? Turn it into a nature reserve!

God be kind to me!

.....

Virgin Mary help me!

.....

The ruins of the monastery were there and will still be there until the end of time, reminding us of Jesus and his sufferings on this earth. He sacrificed his body for the sake of a misguided people. After he ascended to the heavens he started to wail, he wanted desperately to come back and save humanity.

I will come back with you Jesus, and we will rebuild your home and plant wheat.

And then...

.....

The sun rises twice.

Chapter (9) Departure

Shihdeh, my cousin, came back to the village unexpectedly. I have not seen him for years, and when I heard of the news, I dropped everything and went to see the rascal for I missed him immensely and thought of the old days when we used to joke and poke fun at the way things were.

I found him sitting alone on the doorstep of his home just like he used to. We were in the same class. At the beginning of my Aunt Mashati's marriage she could not bear children; it was one miscarriage after another, nobody knew why. Doctors said everything was normal and she should be able to have children. Afterwards she and her husband went to perform haj pilgrim with a group of the village people. She clung to the drapes of the Kaaba' and prayed to God to give a child and vowed to call him Shihdeh which literally means a beggar, as in begging from the Almighty.

His father died from tuberculosis while Shihdeh was very young. After we finished ninth grade, he joined the army to provide a secure a living for his mother and has always wanted to become a soldier, a dream come true, he always used to say not like me to be a general.

After a while in that clean-cut, smoothly creased green uniform, his military officers chose Shihdeh and a group of his colleagues to join a special training course in the United States.

I remember him getting into a terrible knot in his stomach before he left. I am terrified of flying, how will I travel there. Sorry, I am non-the-wiser because I have never travelled outside Jordan

either. The farthest I travelled to, was Amman, the capital of our country. I promised him though to look after his mother, my Aunt Mashati in his absence.

Weeks later, my aunt cried her heart out when one of his colleagues came to the village, knocking on her door and told her Shihdeh had not come back. No one knows where he went, it is like he disappeared into thin air, his colleague said. One day before we left the United States, I went to look for him and he was nowhere to be found, and we had to leave and no one has heard from him since, added his colleague.

There were lots of rumors about his disappearance, it was like a mystery. Doom and gloom dominated our households when folk in the village began to whisper about young men disappearing in these places with them later being found dead or being involved in stick-ups. All my aunt could do was cry and my mother joined her.

One year after his disappearance, I, quite unexpectedly received a letter from my cousin telling me he was fine and alive. I could not believe it when I read the letter in the village shop it was sent to. I ran back to my aunt's house to tell her the good news but she cried and wailed more, which is what she used to do when she saw me without Shihdeh.

I greeted Shihdeh warmly. We had a long hug as if we were too long lost friends who finally found each other again. I could not

believe my eyes, he seemed to have changed so much, but it might have been my mind playing tricks. I sat beside him on the doorstep like we used to do and asked about his news.

I am fine, everything is good, I came to sell all I own in this village and go back to America he said matter-of-factly. There is nothing for me here, now, I am building over there.

I quickly changed the conversation around. How is my Aunt Mashati? I asked.

She is good, she got the US citizenship three months ago; I tried to convince her to come and visit the village with me but she declined. She stayed back home with my wife and children.

How strange! Why would Aunt Mashati refuse to come back here to visit?

She changed much after she became a US citizen, you would not recognize her, and her morale rises by the day. She is a changed woman.

What, my Aunt Mashati, you are kidding! Are not you.

Nope, on the day she went to receive the nationality, we saw the judge, he checked her documents which were in perfect order, and he looked her in the face and said: Mrs. Mashati, the United States of America is a great and strong nation, and its greatness and power has increased today, since you became a part of this nation.

I blurted out with giggles as if I was a schoolboy. I could not help myself. How could my aunt be a great addition to the American nation? She always lived here between us. The state never paid any attention to her, in fact nobody in high posts even knew she existed. Once she applied for aid from social security but they said she was not illegible but how come she had a young son to look after and was a widow.

I did not know my aunt had such greatness and power, and do not know she will add to the power and greatness of the United States of America; Aunt Mashati used to wear a black *midraqah*, and sweep the streets while she was walking along.

I continued to laugh non-stop, I looked at Shihdeh who started to laugh as well. Does Aunt Mashati know how to speak English now?

Very little, she gets by when she needs to, I suppose.

And how is your English? by the way.

He shifted his weight, and continued with his smirks of laughter in between. Do you remember our English language teacher? We did not know how to distinguish between a stick and the A letter. He was always telling us off. I remember once he wrote the sentence "The boy eats the apple", we had no problem in pronouncing the "boy", the problem was with pronouncing the "apple". There was always a problem with the letter "P"; we tried to find a similar letter in Arabic but could not. The teacher

always said: Shihdeh pronounce the letter "P" lightly from your lips.

It was like the old days flash back again. We laughed at such meaning and our problem with English letters that used to confuse the hell-out-of-us and put us in trouble, like the letter "Q" and "V", but it was everyone's problem including the teachers.

Mamdouh, do you remember when we read our first color book?

How can I forget that? It was a wonderful story about Aladdin's magic lamp. But why do you ask?

Do you remember when you quizzed me about what I would wish for if I had that magic lamp, rubbed it and found the *Jinni* standing before me kneeling and saying: Your wish is my command, you have three wishes which I can grant.

I remember that well, and I remember asking you about these wishes but you did not tell me about them.

No I did not, but I will tell you now; my first wish was that Zoqlol be run over by a train and maimed. The second wish was for him to ask me to buy him a wheel chair and the third wish was to see him beg me to lift his wheel chair across the threshold into his shop.

Really, this is the first time I have heard of such thoughts, but why?

He wanted to marry my mother. I could not believe my ears that day when I heard him ask for my mother's hand. Of course it could have been just a reaction, as our physics teacher used to tell us: Every action has an equal reaction, equal in power and opposite in direction.

And now you Mamdouh, what would you ask for if you had Aladdin's lamp, and had three wishes to be granted?

This is difficult; I know every person has three paths, a safety path, a regret path and a path that takes you away but does not bring you back. After what I have been through I would choose the last path.

You mean a one-way path?

Yes, one way. Go and never look back even is it mentioned in the Quran.

Do you remember our math's teacher, when he used to say a negative after a negative is a positive? Things may get better for you. It is better than going into the unknown.

And do you remember when he said the unknown has a value and some broken things that cannot be mended?

You would always beat me Mamdouh, I will pay for your one way ticket.

And what are your wishes now that you have grown older?

I will return the *Jinni* back to his jar, as a legacy for my children; maybe he will grant them their wishes.

I was thirsty I leaped inside the house to have a drink of water; on the television screen I caught a glimpse of engineer Sdeiri. I came closer to the set to check it was him. He was accompanied by his wife, and the news said he had won an award from Turkey, because he was the billionth person to cross the Bosphorus Bridge. I went even closer to the television set but the one to his right was not his wife, I remembered that woman perfectly well; she was his secretary who used to put me off and give me the run around every time I went to his office.

Never mind that now. I turned back to the doorstep. Let us get back to reality, tell me about your business my cousin Shihdeh.

Well, I think I can say I have become well off in the States, working in the used car business; it is a profitable trade over there. The Latin American market is much better than ours.

I remembered our friend Mubarak, the one who could not recite the shortest Surah of the Quran. Do you remember him too?

Of course I do, who would not?

He works in car trading and has showrooms in all parts of the Kingdom. It does seem this trade is profitable, but tell me how

did you become a used car dealer?

When I went on the training session to the United States, we used to play volleyball in our free time. One of my colleagues fell and broke his arm. I went with him to hospital, and there in the emergency room, stood a man who was in distress. He approached me saying: My son is in the emergency room and he needs blood, would you mind selling some of your blood? Shihdeh blurted out.

I was surprised by this request and told him my blood was not for sale; the man did not a word and politely said: Thank you. I felt sorry for the man and as he turned around I called after him that I would donate some of my blood to his son, something which he never expected me to say. He remembered the favor, and we later became friends and he persuaded me to stay in America. I started to work with him in his various showrooms and he helped to buy my first used car show room, and now I have come back to sell up. There is nothing to tie me here and that is the whole story. Now, changing the subject how about you Mamdouh?

I told him everything that happened to me, and how I was swindled from my land which had ended my dreams, and he burst out laughing, not in a joyous way, but he seemed so cynical.

You mean you were conned, and you thought there was nothing you could do about it and accepted your situation?

You could say that, definitely.

There is nothing for us here, I wish you would come with me to the land of dreams and opportunities, we could do so much together.

I do not want to migrate to America; I have decided to become an ice cream seller, on a bicycle, screaming: " Ice cream... ice cream, all day.

With this thought Shihdeh laughed all the more. You are serious are not you? He said after managing to control himself. You want to become an ice cream seller?

Yes, why not, do you remember our geography teacher when he said there are two poles on Earth, the North and South Poles? And there are only two seasons in these poles, summer and winter".

Yes, these are two magnetic poles, north and south, but what do they have to do with your future plans of becoming an ice cream seller? Have you decided to sell your ice cream in the village or at the gates of the Samra plant?

Neither this nor that; I have decided to travel to the two poles, I will sell ice cream for the six months of summer in the North Pole, and move down to the South Pole to sell ice cream for the other six months; this way I will be busy all year round.

Shihdeh must have thought I have gone completely bonkers, but

judging from his giggles, enjoyed the humor of what I was saying and he decided to play on.

Why do not you settle down in one pole and sell milk pudding there during the winter?

Putting on my thinking cap, I continued. But they have no cows to produce milk there which I could use to make milk pudding, but, no, no, hold on a minute, I will buy a cart pulled by dogs, and will be the first pioneer to sell ice cream in the North and South Poles in a cart pulled by dogs!

Shihdeh praised. You will be the first man in this field, a Jordanian purebred, and like all Jordanians, you know everything but yourself.

END

Glossary of Arabic words

Abdoun: A posh neighborhood in west Amman.

Abya: A flowing robe, usually black but can be white, worn by men in Jordan and the Arab world.

Ajloun: A city north east of Jordan.

Al-Naser Surah: A chapter in the Quran.

Asr: Late afternoon prayer performed by Muslims.

Baba: Refers to the master of the house.

Biet Al Muqdes: Jerusalem.

Daellah: A coffee pot made for making Arabic coffee.

Dunum : A durum equals roughly a quarter of an acre.

Eisha: Late evening prayer.

Fatwa: A religious ruling to sanction whether its right or wrong to do something.

Gulf: Refers to the Arabian Gulf.

Haj: Is one of the pillars of Islam which Muslim must perform at least once in their life time. The Haj is to the Makkah shrines. After that people are called Haj, an honorific religious title that has become part of the culture of Muslim societies.

Haja: The female of Haj.

Horan: Geographical area bordering Syria and north Jordan

Hattin Battle: Battle between Saladin who lead the Muslim armies and the Crusaders in 1187.

Jinni: A specter, a ghost.

Kaaba: The House of God in Makkah, deeply embedded in the Muslim faith.

Mansaf: Jordan's national dish. Chops of lamb on a bed of thin bread and rice with simmering hot yogurt poured on top.

Midraqah: A Jordanian black traditional dress which women folk wear in villages.

Mukhtar: The local chief, responsible for community affairs related to the villagers.

Nakba: Disaster, catastrophe, cataclysm of 1948 when the Palestinians were driven out of their land and the establishment of Israel.

Naksa: A setback referring to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Pasha: A military rank in the Ottoman army, still used today. Pasha also means a person in a high position.

Prophet Yousef : Story of Yousef and his brothers in the Quran.

Raha: Turkish delight.

Tawjihi: Secondary School final examinations before going into university.

Thob: Traditional garment worn by men covering their full length; it is usually white.

Zarqa (Zarka): The second largest city in Jordan.