

Man and His Alarm Clock
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It's not quite four A.M. I woke up twenty minutes before the alarm. Why don't I simply say that I didn't know the taste of sleep that night? The thought that I would work tomorrow was excitement itself. Before I turned in, I stood at length before the only two suits I owned. I had to choose one to wear for my first day at work. I preferred the grey suit but my mother said, 'you wore it to your interview with the manager. Wear the other'. How do women remember such details? I had of course forgotten. I set my little alarm clock to ring at four AM, but I woke up three times, anxious that it would let me down, and tested it every time. When I was instructing my mother to wake me, my aunt volunteered. So did my sister and father. Really, I didn't sleep a wink that night. When the alarm clock jingled loudly I jumped out of bed. My mother, my aunt, and my sister all jumped too, my mother to heat up water for me to shave and wash, my aunt to prepare for me a generous breakfast the likes of which I had never seen before (after all I was employed now), and my sister to shine my shoes. I was standing in the bathroom, massaging shaving cream on my face, and whistling some kind of a tune to cover my nervousness, when we heard the sound of slow but deliberate knocking. My aunt rushed to the front door. She stopped short when she remembered that most people would not yet have started their day. I raced to the door behind her but once I arrived I too hesitated. I collected myself then asked, 'who is it?' From behind the two adjoining leaves of our door, I heard someone say, 'Are you awake, Mr. Fathi?'

I put my hand on the doorknob and turned it. By the time it opened the night caller had already turned around and I could only make out a vague shape moving away in the dark. In wonder, I went back to shaving. My aunt did not waste the chance to brag. She said in no uncertain terms, 'Fathi's job must be really important! Otherwise why would the government bother to wake him up?'

I savoured my aunt's explanation without hesitation, and proudly. I basked in my new sense of self-importance as I got dressed, wolfed down two eggs, reprimanded my sister when she whispered unwanted advice in my ear, wrapped my coat around me, and made for the door, with my aunt's prayers blowing through the cracks of the front door and slapping my back until

the dawn call to prayer finally drowned them out. Her voice faded into that of the muezzin, waves of sound which arose from his very depths only to melt into the white light of dawn and settle on the ears of people on the street, like familiar, soft dew, coaxing smiles on their faces, relaxing muscles tensed in the stinging wind.

Prayer is better than sleep.

But my village was asleep. For the first time in my life I could hear the noise my shoes made on the pavement as I prompted my feet to catch up with the boy who worked at the bakery, and whose head and neck seemed to have disappeared into a fantastic felt hat.

The train station was on the other side of town. There had been an upheaval when it was built, a structure quite at odds with the city's historical walls, about two kilometres away from the southern gate. To reach the gate we have to go through an old market, a hub of buzzing activity during the day with people selling and buying grains and whatever else can be weighed on scales. Traders, brokers, and beasts of burden mill around, while the donkey sticks its snout into any open bag of grain as it waits for its master to conclude his bargain with one trader or another.

It was, however, silent, empty of any pedestrian, and desolate when I went by at dawn. I almost broke into a run but quickly held myself back when I remembered that I was now an employee. I walked energetically across the market, passed through the southern gate and traversed the distance between the gate and the station. I boarded the train displaying the pass my new employer had provided me. It might have attracted the attention of two young men sitting across from me but they did not try to pry. I didn't dare speak to them either. I occupied myself with watching the distances folding up quickly before my eyes, fixed on a horizon now, as morning arrived, aglitter with the colours of dawn.

My first day at work was no easy affair. There were those looks, inspecting, questioning, snubbing, disparaging... There were those enigmatic files, those numbers without beginning or end, and those codes that required instant breaking. It took no time for my pride to dwindle. I was nothing but a tiny unknown speck in a mighty institution crowded with giants. If my aunt could see me at work she would have revised her opinion of me and thought the two eggs I devoured earlier in the morning were too good for me. I had presumed—given that someone was sent to wake me—that I was important. My first day at work taught me that I was but a timid cat frightened by a fierce dog.

I was eating two eggs again the following morning, however, when the same voice came to wake me. The wake-up call did really make me feel important. In fact, I did not even mind opening the door and muttering whatever words of thanks I could think of at the time. We often derive pleasure from the justifications we make and rarely question them. My aunt succeeded in convincing me of its importance for a whole month, for as long as the night caller came to wake me every dawn. I even stopped opening the door to greet my caller.

I was more than surprised when I heard a colleague say, after I managed finally, following ten months of trying, to melt a mountain of ice that the old timers erected before their new colleagues, that the knocks of Abu Fuad were more accurate than any clock, and without them he would have had to take a taxi to work every day to get to his job in Haifa. He would definitely have missed his train if he had relied only on his alarm clock.

It then dawned on me that my night visitor could be a real person, who had a name, a personality, distinct features, and maybe even a life lived in particular circumstances. Until then he had only been a voice I heard repeating the same phrase every dawn. And now that I discovered, by accident, that he had a name, I thought he must have a face too.

When I heard him knock on our door the following day, I opened it faster than he could walk away. When he saw me he responded to my greetings with little enthusiasm, ‘you are Fathi?’ He was a middle-aged man whose body seemed to disappear into his black coat and an old dark fez. But his posture gave the impression that he was always ready to give the door in front of him a knock, on the dot, without fail. I felt obliged to invite him in, please, come in, but he excused himself. He said he had to wake Ghassan, Abdallah, Yusuf, and, and, and... He turned around, left me, and was immediately swallowed by darkness. I asked my new friend Abdallah about him when we were travelling to work on the same train, trying to picture him as a person. The heart-breaking story I heard was not new to me.

We live in a very small village and our stories are not secrets. The kind villagers were all saddened one evening—just as my mother, my aunt, my sister, and the neighbours visiting that night had been—when they heard the tragic story of Fuad. Fuad was an employee at the railway company. He arrived late one morning and the train had already started to pull out of the station. He jumped, hung on to one of the doors and tried to get on, but his hands failed him. He slipped and he fell on the tracks. Tender youth turned into an unrecognizable lump of flesh under the train’s heartless wheels.

During that week the village had mourned the young man, repeating to each other the drama of flesh meeting steel. We learned that his father was a thread merchant who owned a small shop in the cloth market. His wares did not exceed a few plaits of thread in a variety of colours hanging on the walls and a scale that caught my eye for its diminutive size. I saw these when my aunt sent me there to buy her two-dirham worth of yellow silk thread she would use to mend the rims of a scarf she loved to wear.

The accident happened two years ago. When I remembered all the details I forgot to ask my friend about the relationship between the accident and the task Faud's father had taken upon himself to awaken all the employees of the company. I could not suppress my curiosity until the evening. I left my office to look for Abdallah and find out from him. By the time I returned I was even sadder than when I heard about Fuad's horrific death that evening two years before. The father, who had lost his only son, took it upon himself to get up before dawn, make his rounds in the village, and wake all his son's colleagues, one by one, so that no one would be late, and as a result meet a similar fate as his son.

I brought the story home with me and told my family at our dinner table, not concerned about diminishing my own importance in front of them as I revealed the identity of my night caller. My mother wept. My aunt knitted her brows without shedding a tear or a pause in her chewing. However, she made a tremendous effort to be kind the next morning. She got up early, this after she had stopped getting up to prepare my breakfast a week after I began going to work, rushing to the door to open it as soon as she heard a knock. She even brought the coffee pot and a cup with her, and then swore an oath insisting that the poor man drink a cup of coffee even as he stood by the door.

That happened a week before the harsh winter morning when things took another horrific turn. It had rained so hard that the sewers flooded and water was running everywhere, washing the paved alleyways and filling the furrows time had ploughed between one tile and another. I had not set my alarm clock. I had stopped doing that when I knew for sure that my night caller was as accurate if not more. I was lingering in my bed, snuggled up under my warm blanket like a cat curled up in front of a heater, postponing the moment I would get up until I heard the knock on our door. As soon as I heard it, I threw my blanket off me, not bothering to look at the clock, got dressed, and gobbled up my breakfast. When I opened the door, a man huddled against the

door took me by surprise. It was as if he was trying to avoid the light drizzle and the raindrops bouncing off the roof's edge.

As I went out the door, I said to him, 'A rainy morning, isn't it?', to which he replied, as if apologizing for standing there, 'I'm not lingering here because of the rain. The truth is that I was late. I overslept. Maybe the rain delayed me too. Today I started by waking your colleagues first and came to you last. Run, my son, for you only have ten minutes to make it to the station'.

I still took time to look at my watch under the street lamp covered in raindrops. Only nine minutes to departure time, hardly enough for me to make it to the southern gate. I pulled myself together and walked as fast as my strength would allow me, doubling my usual speed, until I made it to the paved alleys of the covered market. Every time I stopped to catch my breath, I saw before my eyes a bloody lump of flesh that had been a human being with two good feet, just like me, before the wheels minced him, hurrying to make it to his job at the railway company. I could taste tragedy in my mouth but could also feel strange power in my feet.

I reached the train before it moved. I was even able to get on and take my usual place, though breathless. It would have been all right for the train to move after I had arrived, as long as I did not have to hang onto its door and fall beneath its wheels. But the train did not move. We understood that a minor fault requiring a few minutes for repair had delayed the train's departure. The train always ran on schedule, like clockwork.

Out of the open window I saw the fields soaking up the rain and the tall grass bending under the weight of the heavy drops. The station that never sleeps was packed with porters who, having finished loading luggage or merchandise, were now sitting on the curb drinking tea and spitting. I was looking intently at the pastry and egg seller when I saw the night caller who, on the other side of the door, looked to me as if he were wiping his face, brushing water off his wet fez, and catching his breath with difficulty.

What brought him to the station? Would he be travelling today as well? Was he afraid that I would miss my train and came after me to make sure I made it? I did not have any definitive answers, for the hoarse whistle of the train tore into the grey lights of dawn, the wheels screeched on the tracks, the noise of their movement surged, and the train lurched forward. As the train moved farther and farther away from the station I could no longer see him except as a dark dot against the horizon, without any distinct features.

When I heard the knock on the door the following dawn all the details of the morning before came back to me. I was relieved to know that the man did not get hurt while chasing me to the station in the pouring rain. I did not link his earlier exhaustion to his absence from our door two days later. I thought his knocks were drowned out by the cranking noise the gas stove made in our old kitchen. I only knew for certain when I heard Abdallah wondering about the reason for his absence.

He did not come the day after, or the third. Our curiosity and astonishment kept us talking all the way home from work in the afternoon. My colleagues charged me with the task of inquiring after him at this little shop in the cloth market. I decided to go to the shop before I went home. I had to ask about its exact location twice. When I finally reached it I found its door closed but the sign still intact in its usual place. I asked his neighbor who said, 'He is either away or sick. He is a man of few words and we are not nosy. If there is anything you want from his shop, we have the same and better merchandise'.

I took the news to Abdallah and we decided to look for his house the next day. We really missed him. I was the most anxious of them all, for I was so afraid that I was the cause of his indisposition. We set out in the morning to look for his house, and after inquiring with his neighbours, we arrived at a wooden door behind which, as we understood, was a courtyard that would lead us to the two rooms in which the man lived. We had already asked two boys in the street whether they had seen the man that day and they said no. Abdallah was about to turn around, for he preferred to make it to his daily journey, but I was not satisfied. I could not explain why, but a hunch drove me to work the outer door, which opened easily to my touch. A courtyard unfurled before our eyes. Half of it was paved with tiles, and a small fountain stood on the unpaved half, as well as naked oleanders. I saw another door in front of me. One of the two hinges had come off. I knocked on the door. Silence replied. I knocked a second time. Abdallah joined me this time. Our knocks drew out a woman next door.

She looked out from a window above the courtyard and watched us curiously. We knocked again. While feeling the doorknob, Abdallah said, 'we'd better go', but I refused. I felt an unknown misgiving and a pricking pain in my conscience. I put my hand on the doorknob once more and tried turning it again but when the door would not open I put my weight against it and pushed hard. I knew the door had opened when I almost fell. I went in. Abdallah stayed

behind and stood by the outer door waiting for me. He did not want to have anything to do with this intrusion.

I went into the first room. In the middle was a table with breadcrumbs and the remains of a meal on top. There was another room behind it. It had two black iron beds. I thought the one that was carefully made must have been the dead young man's bed. I saw on the other bed blankets piled on top of something. I pulled myself together and tried to get close to it but my courage failed me when I saw an open mouth and two glassy eyes.

The man was dead, like everything else in the room, the small dark chest, the desk beneath a striped tablecloth, and the mirror marked by yellow dots as if it were a reflection of an ugly face. Nothing was alive in the room except the clock mounted on the wall, its timepiece swaying in a dance, and singing a tick tock tune.