Memoirs of Everyday Sorrow

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I hire a taxi-cab to go home....

I chat with the driver in perfect Hebrew, confident that my looks do not disclose my identity.

"Where to, sir?" the driver asks me.

"To Mutanabbi Street," I reply. I light a cigarette and offer one to the driver in recognition of his politeness. He takes it, warms up to me, and says:

"Tell me, how long will his disgusting situation last? We are sick of it."

For a moment I assume that he has become sick of war, high taxes and mounting milk prices.

"You are right," I tell him. "We are sick of it." Then he continues:

"How long will our government keep these dirty Arab street names? We should wipe them out and obliterate their language."

"Who do you mean?" I ask him.

"The Arabs of course!" he replies.

"But why?" I inquire.

"Because they are filthy," he tells me.

I recognize his Moroccan accent, and I ask him:

"Am I so filthy? Are you cleaner than I am?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, surprised.

I appeal to his intelligence; he realises who I am, but does not believe it.

"Please, stop joking," he tells me.

When I show him my identity card, he loses his scruples and retorts:

"I do not mean the Christian Arabs—just the Moslems." I assure him that I am a Moslem, and he qualifies his statement.

"I do not mean all the Moslems—just the Moslem villagers." I assure him that I come from a backward village that Israel demolished—simply razed out of existence. He says quickly:

"The State deserves all respect."

I stop the car and decide to walk home. I am overtaken by the desire to read the names of the streets. I realise that the authorities have actually wiped out all the Arab names. "Saladdin" has metamorphosed into "Shlomo". But why did they retain the name of Mutanabbi Street, I wonder for a moment? Then in a flash I read the name in Hebrew. It is "Mount Nebo", not Mutanabbi as I have always assumed.

I want to travel to Jerusalem . . . .

I lift the telephone and dial the number of the Israeli officer in charge of civilian affairs. Since I have known him for some time, I inquire about his health and joke with him. Then I appeal to him to grant me a one-day permit to Jerusalem.

"Come over and apply in person," he says. So I leave my work and I come over. I fill out an application and I wait—one day, two days, three days. There is hope, I rationalize; at least they have not said "no" as usual. And I continue to wait. Then I appeal to my friend once again, because by now my appointment in Jerusalem is imminent. I beg him for a response:

"Please say no," I plead with him. "Then at least I can cancel or postpone my appointment." He does not respond. Exhausted and disappointed, I tell him desperately that I have only a few hours left to get there.

"Come back in an hour," he says impatiently. I come back an hour later to find the office closed. Naively I wonder why the officer is so diffident, why he hasn't simply refused as usual? Finally, consumed by anger, I decide—not too judiciously—to leave for Jerusalem even at the risk of evading the State's "security measures".

Upon my return, I receive an invitation to appear before a military court. I queue up with the rest and I listen to the charges brought against the people before me. There is the case of a woman who works in a kibbutz and who has a permit which clearly forbade her to stop on her way to work. For some pressing reason, she stopped and was immediately arrested. Similarly, some young men wandered away from the main streets, only to be arrested. The court acquits no one. Prison sentences and exorbitant fines are automatic.

I am reminded of the story of the old man who, while patiently ploughing his field, discovered that his donkey had wandered off into someone else's land. Intent on retrieving his donkey, he left his plough and ran after him. He was soon stopped by the police and was arrested for having trespassed on government property without a permit. He told them that he had a permit in the pocket of his caba, which he had hung on a tree. He was arrested anyway.

I also remember the "death permits" which obliged farmers to sign a form blaming themselves for their own death if they stepped on mines in an area that was used by the army. The signatures allowed the government to shirk all responsibility for their death. Intent on earning their livelihood and unconscious of the dangers, the farmers signed these statements anyway. Some of them lived, but many of them died. Tired, finally, of the dead and living alike, the government finally confiscated the farmers' land.

Then there was the child who died in her father's arms in front of the office of the military governor. The father had long been waiting for a permit to leave his village for the city to hospitalize his sick daughter . . . .

When the judge sentences me for two months only, I feel elated and thankful. In prison, I sing for my homeland and write letters to my beloved. I also read articles about democracy, freedom and death. Yet I do not set myself free; neither do I die.

I want to travel to Greece . . . .

I ask for a passport and a *laissez-passer*. Suddenly, I realise that I am not a citizen, because either my father or one of my other relatives took me and fled during the 1948 war. At that time I was just a child. I now discover that any Arab who fled during the war and returned later forfeited his right to citizenship. I despair of ever obtaining a passport and I settle for a *laissez-passer*. Then

I realise that I am not a resident of Israel since I do not have a residency card. I consult a lawyer:

"If I am neither a citizen nor a resident of the State, then where am I and who am I?" He tells me that I have to prove that I am present. I ask the Ministry of the Interior:

"Am I present or absent? Should you so wish, I can philosophically justify my presence." I realise that I am philosophically present and legally absent. I contemplate the law. How naive we are to believe that law in this country is the receptacle of justice and right. Here, law is a receptacle of the Government's wishes—a suit tailored to please its whims.

Notwithstanding all this, I was present in this country long before the existence of the State that denies my presence. Bitterly, I observe that my basic rights are illusory unless backed by force. Force alone can change illusion into reality.

Then I smile at the law which gives every Jew in the world the right to become an Israeli citizen.

I try once again to get my papers in order, trusting in the law and in the Almighty. At long last, I secure a certificate proving that I am present. I also receive a *laissez-passer*.

Where do I go from here?

I live in Haifa, and the airport is close to Tel-Aviv. I ask the police for permission to travel from Haifa to the airport. They refuse. I am distraught, yet I cleverly decide to follow a different route and to travel by ship. I take the Haifa port highway, convinced that I have the right to use it. I revel in my intelligence. I buy a ticket, and without trouble pass through the passport checkpoint and the health and customs departments. However, near the ship they arrest me. I am again taken to court, but this time I am sure the law is on my side.

In court, I am duly informed that the port of Haifa is a part of Israel—not a part of Haifa. They remind me that I have no right to be in any part of Israel except in Haifa, and that the port—according to the law—is outside Haifa's city limits. Before long, I am charged and convicted. I protest:

"I would like to make a grave confession, gentleman, since I have become aware of the law. I swim in the sea, but the sea is part of Israel and I do not have a permit. I enjoy the weather of Haifa, yet the weather is the property of Israel, not of Haifa. Likewise the sky above Haifa is not part of Haifa, and I do not have a permit to sit under the sky."

When I ask for a permit to dwell in the wind, they smile . . .

I want to rent an apartment . . . . .

I read an advertisement in the paper. I dial a number.

"Madam, I read your advertisement in the paper; may I come and look at your apartment?"

Her laughter fills my heart with hope:

"This is an excellent apartment on Mount Carmel, sir. Come over and reserve it quickly." In my happiness, I forget to pay for the telephone call and leave in a hurry.

The lady takes a liking to me, and we agree on her terms. Then, when I sign my name, she is taken aback.

"What, an Arab? I am sorry, sir, please call tomorrow."

This goes on for weeks. Every time I am rebuffed I think about the apartments' real owners who are lost in exile. How many houses have been built destined to remain uninhabited by their owners! Awaiting their return to their

houses, the owners keep the keys in their pockets—and in their hearts. But if any one of them should return, would he, I wonder, be allowed to use his key? Would he be able to rent but one room in his own house?

And yet they insist:

"The Zionists have not committed crimes; they simply brought a people without a country to a country 'without' a people."

"But who built those houses?" I inquire.

"Which demons built them for which legends?"

On that note, they leave me alone, and they continue to breed children in stolen houses.

I want to visit my mother during the holidays ....

My parents live in a small village an hour's drive from where I live. I have not seen them for several months. Because my parents regard holidays with emotion, I send a carefully-worded letter to the police department. I write:

"I should like to draw your attention to some purely humanitarian reasons, which, I hope, will not clash with your strong regard for the security of the State and the safety and interests of the public. By kindly granting my request for a permit to visit my parents during the holidays, you would prove that the security of the State is not contradictory to your appreciation of people's feelings."

My friends leave the city and I am left behind by myself. All the families will meet tomorrow, and I have no right to be with mine. I remain alone.

In the early morning, I leave for the beach to extinguish my grief in the blue waters. The waves bear me; I resign myself to their might. Then I stretch out on the warm sand, basking in the sun and a soothing breeze with my loneliness.

"Why does the sun squander its warmth so?" I wonder. "Why do the waves break against the shore? So much sun ... so much sand ... so much water." I contemplate the obvious truth.

I hear people speaking Hebrew. I understand what they say, and my grief and loneliness increase. I feel the urge to describe the sea to my girlfriend, but I am alone. With or without justification, those around me curse my people, while they enjoy my sea and bask in my sun. Even when they are swimming, when they are poking, when they are kissing, they curse my people. Could not the sea, I wonder, bless them with one moment of tranquility and love, so they would forget my people for a while? How can they be capable of so much hatred while they lie stretched out on the warm sand?

Saturated with salt and sun, I go to a cafe on the beach. I order a beer and whistle a sad tune. People look at me. I busy myself with a tasteless cigarette, and then I buy an ear of corn and eat alone. My wish is to spend the entire day on the beach in order to forget that it is a holiday and that my parents are waiting for me. Soon, however, I realise that it is time for my daily visit to the police in order to prove that I have not left town. The searing blueness of the sea and the sky blaze my eyes as I leave the beach.

At the entrance of the police station, my little brother meets me and says:

"Hurry up and prove to the police that you are present; Mother is waiting for you at your apartment." I prove that I am present and reach home panting.

My mother has refused to celebrate the feast without me, and so she comes to my apartment bringing everything—the bread, the pots of food, the coffee, olive oil, salt and pepper.

In the evening she leaves. I kiss her and close the door behind her. I cannot take her across the street because the State does not allow me to leave the house after sunset—not even to bid my mother goodbye.

In my room, I become aware of my loneliness once more. I sit on an old chair and I listen to Tchaikovsky's First Concerto. Suddenly I cry as I have never cried before. For years, I have carried these tears and they have finally found an outlet.

"Mother, I am still a child, I want to empty all my grief onto your bosom, I want to bridge the distance between us in order to cry in your lap."

My next door neighbour calls to tell me that my mother is still cleaving to the door. I run out to her and cry on her shoulders.

Translated by Adnan Haydar