

Mansoura Ez-Eldin

Two stories

A Gothic Night

His departure came without explanation.

His destination was remote, he said, uttering a series of ominous sounds – the name of a city I had never heard of before. His leaving seemed a matter of fate. In an instant I could see the city he set out for, with its ashen streets.

There are no colours save for the grey that cloaks much of the place, alongside hints of black and white. Throngs of people walk slowly in the faded streets, wearing grim expressions and staring at a still point ahead. A leaden silence bears down on everything.

There he walks, lost in thought. And I, outside the scene, peer at him worriedly, sensing the arrival of a giant with a black coat, sullen face, and heavy footsteps. Suddenly, chaos reigns: people run in every direction, trying to escape.

I feel the earth shake under the footfalls of the man in the black coat. I know he appears on the streets from time to time, stepping powerfully with the aid of his ebony cane. His sightless eyes shift over the faces ahead, until they fall on one that will restore his vision. He points his finger at the face, and its owner vanishes from existence. The giant returns to his blindness, awaiting his next victim.

This time, however, there was only the anticipation of his coming, and the tremors that accompany him wherever he goes. Within minutes, those who were running realized they had been duped, and went back to walking as before.

I scanned the throngs and found him walking with the same slow steps. I looked closer, in search of that cunning-fox expression that characterizes him, but I could not see it. He adjusted the black scarf around his neck, raising his head to the sky like someone startled by raindrops on a dry day, then returned to his daydreaming.

He has been exploring the city since his arrival, wandering its streets without stopping. He wrote to me excitedly that it is a city of the world: 'Every conceivable language is here. No nationalities, no differences. You don't even need to speak to communicate your thoughts!' In the year that followed, his letters became less frequent and said nothing about this city of his – the city that seemed somehow out of this world.

Some time later, he went back to writing about the city: long letters that contained nothing personal – no information about him, no questions about me. Just extensive passages about this city that bears no

resemblance to the cities I know, written in ornate script with small, carefully-drawn characters and an exaggerated attention to style.

He wrote: they called it the city of eternal sun. Its sun set only after the last inhabitant slept, and rose before the first got up. They were all deprived of the night. They were not even aware of its existence.

There was no giant then, or faded streets, or people running. Just the perennial day and a fierce, barely-setting sun. The streets of the city resemble each other so closely they are like infinite replicas of the same street. Its Gothic architecture inspires awe: spired towers and prominent arches; stark, imposing squares; screaming gargoyles with eyes wide open in horror; and gardens – more akin to woods – pooling out along the city's periphery.

These are the same woods from which the giant with the sightless eyes emerged – except, at the time, he was not blind, and his expression was suffused with seduction rather than sullenness. He moved about lightly then, speaking of a beautiful thing called night; he had read about it in the books piled high in his cabin in the woods and heard about it from the fishermen in the neighbouring lake.

They said they had seen it in other cities, while working on big fishing boats in faraway seas. He closes his seductive eyes and speaks of the night as though he can see it: 'A great darkness that not even a thousand lanterns can dispel – only soften it slightly, imbuing it with even greater beauty.' He moistens his lower lip with his tongue, savouring the idea of *night*.

He left the city of the sun in search of the night. He walked for hundreds of miles; days and weeks passed, then years. He asked all those he met, describing it in muddled words.

With the passage of time, he began to lose hope – but he kept on his path defiantly, not once looking behind him. He walked for he knew not how long, picking fruit from trees and drinking spring water, until he found himself on the way back to his city.

He recognised it by its tall spires and crystal domes that reflect the sun's rays, giving rise to a galaxy of brilliant suns. He could not tear his eyes away from their frightening luminescence, until he began to feel the light seeping away. The closer he came, the dimmer they became. At first, he did not understand what he was experiencing; he assumed that the lights of the world around him were slowly fading out. Only when he was submerged in total darkness did he realise that he had finally fulfilled his quest. He had met the night face to face. He was overjoyed, for now he would carry his own private night back to the city of the sun.

The remaining distance, short though it was, was the most difficult in his long journey. He stumbled and circled the city walls several times before he could get in. When he finally entered, the city people were astonished by the sight of this scowling giant with dark clothes and lumbering steps. They discovered that, with his return, their city had been transformed into another: a pallid place, caught between a day that had left never to return, and a night that refused to arrive.

In the next letter my friend appeared to have forgotten about his last one, repeating everything he had already said, with minor adjustments, before continuing the story. The giant with the snuffed-out eyes retreated to his cabin in the woods for a long time, during which he did not utter a single word, instead listening to the sighing of the trees, the twittering of the birds and the roar of the wind when it blew. When he tired of his solitude and his silence, he took to the streets with heavy footsteps that shook the ground beneath – leaning on his ebony cane, sheltering behind his blind and sullen stare and armed with his experience in listening to nothingness. His eyes shift over the faces ahead until they fall on one that has the power to restore his vision. He points his finger, and its owner vanishes from existence. The

giant tries to gather in all the details of the new world around him before he is plunged into darkness once again – but to no avail. He returns, despondent, to his cabin and his waiting.

The city with its Gothic soul takes root in my mind. Its identical streets and imposing squares inhabit me. I dream about the gargoyles on its buildings' facades and awaken feeling like someone who has roamed its paths. I get up at dawn, weighed down by what I've seen. The giant moves in my mind, his expression transformed once again from sullenness to seduction, as though inviting me to follow him.

I read and re-read my friend's letters. I pore over the elegant script with its precisely-penned characters, and I think of how much he has changed. He no longer bears any resemblance to the person he once was. The city seems to have performed some mysterious black magic on him, driving him to write without emotion, without purpose, without stopping. I send him letters asking how he is, what he's doing, whether or not he is planning to return. He does not utter a single word in response to my questions, but continues to write about the city that has cast its spell on him, transforming him into a mere eye that captures the details of its surroundings and a hand that records them tirelessly.

Instead of letters steeped in questions that he skips over as though they weren't there, I began to write about my city. An invented city that lies between mountains clad in lush green plants and trees, and a relentlessly raging sea that films the air with the scent of iodine and whose waves, every morning, spit thick layers of salt upon the beach. Built entirely on the precipice that sweeps down from the mountains to the raging sea, the houses of the city appear to be in eternal freefall. Its people are caught in a never-ending battle with gravity: they walk slowly in ascent or descent, fearful of falling from this great height to the crashing waves below.

I composed a letter for everyone I received from him, not commenting on what he'd written or asking about him, and he – as always – appeared to have not even read mine. Then I begin to write without pause, long letters preoccupied with details and penned with care. I dispatch some and neglect to send most, until I stop corresponding with him altogether, intent only on inking hundreds of letters that I stack high here and there throughout my house.

I write, ignoring my aching fingers and the pain in my hunched back, blurring the lines between my city and his, between the Gothic architecture with its squares and screaming faces and the perilous precipice with its houses resisting eternal freefall; between his giant with the black coat and blind eyes and the people I see when I open my window, walking cautiously up and down.

I re-read my letters, strewn all around me; I contemplate my ornate script with its small, carefully-drawn characters and exaggerated attention to style, and I think of how much I've changed. I emerge from my house, surrounded by plants and thick tangled trees, and come, in shock, upon my city with its grey streets and stark squares and the leaden silence bearing down on everything. Closing my eyes, I succumb to the darkness, and the scene opens up silently before me. I see throngs of people moving slowly, staring at a still point ahead . . . I see him walking, lost in thought . . . and I hear, loud in my ears, the thud of heavy footsteps. Could it be coming from me?

Translated from the Arabic by Wiam El-Tamami

The Path to Madness

I watched my neighbour take her first steps down the path to madness: The same trudging pace at which she puts the rubbish bags out in the mornings; the same painstaking manner in which she cooked those delicious-smelling meals that tempted me each time I walked past her flat, directly blew mine.

When she moved into the building, I didn't notice anything strange or unusual about this woman in her early thirties. She was an energetic housewife and single mother who went a little overboard with her three kids, the eldest of whom, she told me, was nine.

She smiled at me each time we passed each other on the staircase as I was on my way to or from work. Her voice was faint, and her diminutive frame went together with her little face.

Although she covered herself all over with a gown and headscarf, she was quite generous with compliments about my hairdo or my dress or even the smell of my perfume. 'How lovely,' she'd say, her gleaming eyes expressing an eagerness to communicate with others.

I was usually quite guarded when she spoke, and would then feel guilty about it afterwards. From the very beginning, I had been keen to keep a decorous distance between my neighbours and myself. With my life style, I can't afford to waste time talking to people I have nothing in common with. To them, I'm a strange sort of woman, who treats her home as nothing more than a place to sleep, leaving at one in the afternoon and not coming back until around midnight.

It was not a familiar sight, a woman like me, over thirty and living on her own, no husband, no children, no family. But this lady seemed happy to disregard all the preconceptions my neighbours had about me. I saw in her eyes a kind of yearning to communicate with me.

I put that down to how different we were. To her, I was like the stranger you meet when traveling far from home, to whom you spill out your deepest secrets because you know you will not see them again.

Maybe I've read too much into the way she looked at me, but I was certain that this petite lady with the delicate features had something she wanted to tell me.

Something that confused me was her daily screaming, interspersed with loud sobbing, as she punished her children. How could the gentle, fragile lady that I bumped into from time to time on the staircase turn into this hysterical creature who would make my mornings hell with her constant yelling at her children, causing me to get up early even on my days off?

I can't remember exactly when, but she started to come out on to the landing and call out to the doorman's wife at the top of her voice, telling her to go and fetch some things from the shops, even though there was an intercom from which she could have placed her order without raising her voice or leaving her flat.

I pitied the doorman's wife when I heard my neighbour hurling abuse at her and accusing the poor woman of ignoring her. I also felt for my neighbour's kids (whom I never met) when she punished them for being naughty by locking them in their rooms, indifferent to their pleading and endless banging on the door.

I began to picture her mind as a patch of dry, cracked earth in desperate need of watering, and the water that found its way there was the water of madness, seeping through, spreading slowly until her mind became submerged.

I couldn't get out of my head that image of the patched earth and the water flowing through. Whenever I bumped into the woman on the steps or heard her voice, now hoarse of the continuous shouting for no reason, I saw the cracks in her mind filling up with water.

One morning, I was surprised to her knocking on my door. She was disorientated and her eyes were red, as if she had been up all night crying. I opened the door and she walked straight into the living room, as if she knew the layout of my flat like the back of her hand. I was not quite awake, so I followed her in a slight daze, uttering the usual words of welcome. When I sat down opposite her I noticed that she was trembling and her eyes were darting to every corner of the room, nervously checking to see if we were alone. She carefully examined the ceiling and the walls, and then came and sat next to me on the sofa, whispering:

'I hope you don't mind. Can't be too careful.'

I didn't comment, just smiled encouragingly as she began to talk, begging me to believe her and not to suspect her of being mad like other people did. She said she couldn't go on living like this, that her ex-husband was watching her every step, even in the bedroom, so much so that she felt forced to sleep with her gown and headscarf on. She asked me to come down to her flat to see the cameras that he had planted in various corners. I felt obliged to follow her. When we got to the door of her flat, she put a finger to her lips, indicating that I shouldn't speak. She went in on tiptoe, with me behind her. Her place looked like a copy of mine in every respect: the furniture, the colours of the curtains, even the pictures on the walls. Her TV had a cover over it, just like mine. I didn't know what to think; I was deeply unsettled and a fear began to grow inside me. I looked around me to see where her children might be, but there was no trace of them. I went into each room with her and she began pointing out what she thought were hidden cameras and listening devices. My thoughts were taking up with finding some trace of those three naughty children. She left me for a moment to use the toilet, so I slipped into her bedroom. I found a large tape-recorder and, next to it, a pile of tapes. Without thinking I took the one that was inside the machine, hid it inside my clothes, and headed for the door.

Back in my flat, I played the recording and heard the voices of the children, sometimes banging on the door and begging to be let out, other times playing noisily, interspersed with periods of silence. These were the same voices I had got used to hearing from my neighbour's flat, but there was no sign of her own voice. It seemed that she had been playing the recordings and then adding her own voice on top.

So the three children I had never seen were nowhere to be found. Everything I knew about them was taken from the few words exchanged with my neighbour whenever we met on the landing, and from the delicious cooking smells as she prepared food for them, and also from the children's clothes she would regularly hang up on the washing line.

I felt bad for her and decided to visit her the next day on some pretext, even though she would probably think I was some kind of spy acting on behalf of her ex-husband, seeing as she evidently suffered from paranoia, and especially as I had left so suddenly the last time.

In the morning, I found myself standing in front of the flat below mine. I knocked on the door lightly three times. It was opened by a woman of about fifty, wearing a cotton house shirt and beaming a warm, welcoming smile. I asked her about . . . I realized that I didn't know my neighbour's name. I ended up describing her and said she lives in this flat.

This older lady informed me that she had been living here with her daughter, a university student, for the past ten years, and that she didn't know what I was talking about. She seemed to be running out of patience with me and her look changed to one of suspicion. Embarrassed, I apologized to her and left.

I kept my eye on the rather odd woman who lived in the flat above mine but didn't say anything. I'd usually see her from time to time on the steps of the building, always in a rush about something or other. She'd go up and down the staircase in a right hurry, as if someone was chasing her.

She was thirty-something, slim, and had a small face. She had long black hair that hung down over her shoulders. She wore quite short dresses and these really high heels. I did my best to steer clear of her from the very beginning because she didn't seem like she was all there. I'd often see her talking to herself as she went about. I'd just say good morning or good evening when we came across each other, and she'd reply without so much as looking at me, and then she would carry on rambling to herself about I don't know what.

She could have been just like any of my other neighbours. Her being a little bit mad and all was her own business, so as long as she didn't go bothering or hurting anyone. But I began to get really irritated by the constant racket coming out of her flat. I knew she lived alone, but there were all these noises of children crying and fighting with each other, and then the voice of a woman who sounded like she was their mother, always punishing and yelling at them.

When I complained to the doorman and asked him to tell her that she was disturbing her neighbours with all the loud noises coming from her flat both day and night, I got a right shock: he said that demented neighbour of mine had just been complaining of about the same noise, saying it was coming from *my* flat!

One day, I was about to go up and give her a piece of my mind, and how I couldn't sleep with all that noise, when I heard a knocking on the door. It was her. She asked me if I had seen a skinny woman who wore a gown and headscarf, claiming that this woman lived in my flat.

I was speechless, her saying these terrible things. Now, I had seen a woman in a black gown and headscarf. In fact, she looked exactly like my neighbour, and I thought they might be twins or something. But the doorman had told me he had never seen the two of them together, not once. He thought they might be the same person.

I calmed myself down and told her that it's just me and my daughter here, that we'd been living here for ten years now, and that I had no knowledge of the woman she was asking about. She seemed really surprised when she heard me say this, and she was about to ask me more questions, but I made as if I was about to close the door and put on a friendly smile. She got the message and went away.

I am not really sure who's brought me to this awful place, but I have a feeling that delusional woman with the black gown and the little face must have something to do with it, or it could be that older lady that I found living in her flat instead of her.

I want to go back to my home and my work. I won't bother anyone next time, not that I did anything wrong the first time. Why won't anyone believe me when I tell them it that nutcase who lived in the flat below me all along? It does not prove anything that they found her gown and her children's clothes in my wardrobe. They have to believe me. They can ring her ex-husband. He was given the custody of the kids. He'll tell them that she's the mad one not me.

Translated from the Arabic by Haroon Shirwani
