Personal Hero

Abdalmuti Maqboul

Translated from the Arabic by Yasmine Seale

AS IF ON THE EDGE of a precipice, leaning into the world, she is alive to every movement. First the image, then a wash of sound.

Footsteps, faint among the grass and gravel. Quickening. Then nothing. The hiss of whispers circling a structure close to the ground. The wait is over. Hands take hold of the stones set in the earth and slowly prise them out. The sky’s white is disturbed. Then come the howls, rippling.

Soul after soul stirs. Eyes open at the appointed time. Deep darkness. Fingers twitch and stretch into nothingness. Heads rouse themselves from their long sleep, too caught in other bodies to rise. Limbs tangle, flesh kisses flesh. Nostrils flare and the stink rushes in. Then through parted lips, a muffled cry: Where am I? Others can only moan under the weight. We’re alive! Shock broken by new sounds: the clash of picks above their heads. Picks and spades. Rays steal in and brush the bundled bodies. Slowly the dust rises, and the place fills with sweet, invigorating air, like the first feast served in Paradise.

Freed, the heads lift. They are level with the ground, but from where they lie to the moon’s disc nothing is visible. Crossed over them are shadows, long and thick on the
rectangle’s rim. A voice travels down: Ten. Nine. Eight... The counting stops. Shadows move across the light and raise their barrels at them, taking aim. A sight they’ve seen before, the dead of Kazkhana Cemetery. Shots ring around the village. Soil pours over their bodies once more.

*Her own body is jacketed in cold. Frozen, helpless – not that it was possible to help, to warn or keep them safe. Only to sit in silence and watch.*

The half-light of a new day breaking, maybe ending. A pale glow bathes the west side of the village. Then a red glow, then no sun at all. In other countries, people are sleepily returning to work, in time for the four o’clock bell; that’s when observers start taking down names. Those who show up after three are fired: these countries value time, and hold their people dear (these are the claims of their leaders). But in our village, no one goes to work anymore, no one to the fields. They hear gunfire and run for cover, and those who stay in the open are killed.

Common to all these lands is the queer direction of time, its gears in reverse. Tank wheels, windmills, telephone dials, the springs coiled behind clock faces all run counter. Returning home at the end of a new day, people are caught in morning traffic, but arrive in time for the rooster’s first call. Some will go to sleep early (at ten in the morning, say, or eleven) to wake in time for the rowdy parties at the start of the night to come. Others stay up later (until seven or earlier) and get their fill of rest. But in our village, there is no sense of time passing, only a blanket of dread.

Among it all – the fraught nerves, the trying days – a kind of joy catches at the villagers’ souls. It might be hope. It is certainly mixed, with pain and fear of gunfire. The longed-for date is upon them. Today is the ninth of April, and tomorrow,
the eighth, a hero will be returned to life. Nearby, the courtyards of al-Aqsa Mosque are making ready for the eminence buried in their soil; the Shadows, meanwhile, brace for a long night ringed with danger. A critical night, for those they have been coming back to kill, day after day, are simple folk, while tonight’s arrival is settled in the history books: now comes a chance to remove all trace of him. Ben Gurion’s orders. To send out the squads, armed to the teeth, to fan out through the squares, take up positions on hilltops and high ground, to rig the charges and – no need for picks and spades – blow up the shrine. No need to open up the famous tomb and check who lies inside.

Crouched behind their rifles under cover, some propped on their elbows, some lying down, some on their feet. Heartbeats louder than crickets. Their eyes are narrowed, their brows damp. The hours crushingly slow. One o’clock: one hour left until midnight, when souls will slip back into their bodies. Twenty minutes. Battle fury breaks the calm of night, a spray of bullets from all around and nowhere. The Shadows fall, one by one. Masked men rush ahead. As if the shots were the sky’s rage, or its mercy for the people of the city. The fighters form a human shield around the tomb and five men slip between them with spades. One minute till midnight. Enough digging. The dusty national flag is lifted from the body. The spirit returns. A long breath, a swelling in the ribs. The eyes crack open, mirroring moonlight. The circle of fighters, muttering prayers, see it.

_Her old eyes see it too and her heart reacts violently. This is the face she remembers._

Joy breaks over them. Tears crowd their eyes. Outside the mosque, the gunfire rises.

‘Quick,’ says one. ‘Let’s get him out before we’re caught.’ Abd al-Qadir’s first words: ‘What’s happening?’
‘We’ll tell you later. Now hurry.’

The fighters hold out their arms to the man on his back and bring him to his feet. One by one they step out of the pit. There is a flash of the man’s skin, catching the eye of the fighters waiting outside. Abd al-Qadir. It is him, of this they are sure, and their throats unlock to say that God is great, that there is no god but He. More shots: not from the Shadows but from the throngs of fighters. Rifles held high, trembling. People are massing, streaming into the streets. Thousands fill the squares. Abd al-Qadir leaves the earth; on a bed of shoulders he is brushed by palms unsteady as the guns. A smile crooks his black moustache. Snatches of talk drift up to his ears.

‘We’ll never leave you again.’
‘Thank God we made it to you in time.’
‘We are all Abd al-Qadir.’

Something stirs in his mind. A vision of his death, his burial at Bab al-Amoud. A glimpse of the final battle, his attempt to booby-trap the post at al-Qastal. His smile disappears. He freezes.

‘What happened at al-Qastal?’ He asks, agitated.
The crowd is silent. Then a voice speaks up: ‘It falls.’
Abd al-Qadir looks down to the voice and cries out: ‘The road to Jerusalem cannot fall!’

He comes down from the shoulders. He leads the crowds until they retake it, until joy returns to the eyes of its villagers. Until Operation Nachshon² is reversed.

In a house in al-Qastal sit the Army of the Holy War, celebrating with their leader. They tell him about the massacres, the forced departures. About the occupation of the land. They have covered only a small part of what the future brought them when the man goes into a rage. He takes from them a will he wrote himself. He postponed meeting his family in Egypt, because first he had a date with history.
On 26 March 1948, Abd al-Qadir arrives in Damascus and goes straight to meet the Secretary General of the Arab League, Abd al-Rahman Azzam. Also in attendance are the head of the Society for the Defence of Palestine, Taha al-Hashemi, and his deputy, General Ismail Safwat, as well as the Mufti, Haj Amin al-Husayni.

Abd al-Qadir kicks open the door, sending a jolt through the stone wall. Strides up to the men sitting with bowed heads. From a belt around his waist, beneath the two bandoliers that lie crossed over his chest, he fishes out his will and brings it down on the wooden table.

‘What did I tell you? That you were traitors. That you were dogs. That history would record how you gave up Palestine. Well, the record is clear. And here you are, disgraced a second time. Look. Read.’

He holds up the will to them.

‘To the Secretary General of the Arab League, Cairo. I hold you personally responsible for depriving my soldiers, at the peak of their triumph, of material support.’

Without a glance at their sombre faces, he disappears.

*A gleeful smile. A blast of air from her nose.*

His eyes lift and come to rest on the back of his speeding horse, like lovers dancing. His white scarf, pinned under the iqal, billows behind his shoulders. Birds and clouds watch him go; the earth itself thrills that he has returned to walk on it. He stiffens, head raised to the window in the side of the house. Haifa sees him and nearly breaks.

*The old woman’s heart beats harder as Haifa comes into view.*

In disbelief she sits on the sofa, then returns to the window. Yes, he has come, at last. A difficulty presents itself: should she
run to greet him on the front steps? Or stand behind the iron gate? She knows she is incapable, that her feet will not support her. His footsteps louder now, closer. Then silence. Gentle knocks on the door before it opens.

Breath rattles in her throat. Her eyes are pinned open, her heart behaving wildly. The face appears, creasing into a smile when his eyes fall on his angel. He stands his rifle against the near wall. She collects herself and steps off the sofa onto shaky legs. Her eyes shine as she looks into the high sea of his. His fingers brush her curls, her cheek, holding her to his belly as she reaches her hands around him. Abd al-Qadir is his daughter’s hero; in this she is far from alone.

Though she is taller now, he carries her to the sofa and lowers himself down so she can lie in his arms.

‘I told Mother you’d make it. When she said you were wounded I swore it would be like the other times, that your body would recover. I didn’t believe you had died. I waited so long for you. I waited until I was old, then until I was young again. How slow the years were! I kept hearing about you, reading about you. I heard that, as a child, you bought a gun and paid for it yourself. That you ripped up your diploma as soon as you received it from the head of the American University in Cairo, in front of all the important people. I remember what you said: “I have no need of a diploma from your school, a colonial and missionary institution. I have won it, but it has not won me.” Oh Baba, how long it took me to get to know you in your absence.’

His smile broadens. He takes in the face he hardly knows.

‘I am not sure how it is the days are returning. Only that they have brought us together. Only how happy I am to see you.’

‘When I was seventy, you were still fresh in my mind. You died before me, in your prime, just forty. I passed on your stories to my daughter. I had a life, but you were the best of
it. You were my hope. And look, fate seems to have smiled on us…’

A smile. Tears fill her watching eyes.

A movement at the open door cuts off their talk. His life partner, his comrade in arms. And their sons, Musa and Ghazi. The family reunited. (This scene, impossible to describe, follows all resurrections, as if to compensate for the pain of parting.)

The days return for Abd al-Qadir as they once passed, full of sacrifice and protests and love of his people. Except this time there are no twists of fate; everything is known in advance. The only difference is that families hold each other closer now: a lesson they learned from death. The days pass with the same tedium. The old grow slyer and the young slip back to first beginnings. Difficult days for all the parents who have to watch their children fade before their eyes. Difficult for Abd al-Qadir, when Haifa stops talking. When his name falls from her lips for the last time: Baba. When she becomes a wailing, screaming lump of flesh between his hands. Lighter with every passing day. Until the due date: 2 April 1937. The midwife arrives on time. Wajiha, flat on her back, opens her legs and for an hour, pain squeezes her heart. The midwife asks Abd al-Qadir, waiting at the door, for warm water. She says the name of God, pulls the cord between Wajiha’s thighs and ties it to Haifa’s own cord with a rubber glove brought back from the future. Then she begins the difficult operation of returning a baby. (That night, the Husayni family will shrink by one.)

In the other world, the clock strikes four.

The year is 2048. On the 170th floor, high in one of the landmarks of Mountain View, the first technological experiment of its kind is unveiled. Turing’s 10D, many years in the making.
ABDALMUTI MAQBOUL

Laila pulls off the headset, whose ten dimensions hold every detail of the past. Her eyes are swollen. She looks around in silence. Applause breaks the calm, rising to whoops and cheers. A young woman approaches her and helps her up. Laila takes her cane and together they slowly walk to the stage. The applause goes on for the great inventor, the visionary who never gave up her dream.

The next day, the long-awaited announcement is all over the internet. The headline jumps out: ‘TURING CONVERTS ALL DATA INTO VIRTUAL REALITY’. The article expands: ‘The device works by running a fully-intelligent simulation of world history in reverse, while letting players watch. Beta-testing will begin next Saturday, 8 April.’ Crowds show up days before to wait their turn, all excited to meet their personal hero.

By eight in the evening, Laila is alone at home. She passes her hand over the rough wall, feeling for the switch. A corridor of light leads her to the bed. Her remaining strands of white hair are damp, as are her neck, and the legs under her bathrobe. She rests her back on the wooden headboard and takes a sip of air. Then a long breath out. She closes her eyes. Her cheeks rise with a smile. She reaches for the nightstand and picks up a framed picture. Haifa. She holds it to her chest, opens her eyes and whispers: I did it, Mama.

Notes

1. Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni (1907–1948) – a Palestinian Arab nationalist and military leader who founded the secret militant group, the Organisation for Holy Struggle (Munathamat al-Jihad al-Muqaddas) which he later commanded, along with Hasan Salama, as the Army of the Holy War (Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqaddas) during the 1936–39 Arab Revolt and during the 1948 War.
2. Operation Nachshon – a Zionist military operation during the 1948 War (5–16 April) designed to break the Siege of Jerusalem by opening the Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem road blockaded by Palestinians.