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The Man who Crossed the Street

Translated by Aida A. Bamia



It happened on an autumn evening or on a certain morning, the exact time would not render the event more meaningful.

It is up to us, therefore, to assume that the young writer could rush to the apartment of his friend, an ageing writer, any time he wanted; after all, they were close friends.

The ageing writer had planned to spend a quiet evening and allow himself total relaxation. He had unplugged the telephone, closed the curtains and turned on the tape recorder from which came soft tunes. He stretched himself on the sofa and experienced a deep sense of contentment. A pleasing sense of fatigue overcame him and he was on the point of happily dozing off when suddenly he heard loud knocks. He went to the door slowly, his steps relaxed, muttering insults. The young writer rushed in, full of verve, put onto the first chair he saw and put his feet up on the centre table. Then he shouted:

"I told you so many times not to unplug your telephone. That really upsets me a lot."

Then he stood up, went to the library and with a look of disgust began to examine the books lining the shelves. He pulled one out, turned its pages recklessly, then threw it down on the table and mumbled to himself:

"Nonsense! It's all garbage! What we spend our life achieving is nothing but garbage!"

He then turned to the ageing writer and asked: "Tell me, in God's name, what distinguishes us

from any old woman, a long-time widow who spends all her widowhood watching events that do not concern her, while others experience real life and touch its naked truth with their audacious fingers? It is these others who dive into its sea and are soaked to the bones by its water, while we hesitate to get close to it, fearing to be touched by its spray. Our relationship with life is hopelessly chaste - we watch people live it, then throw our stupidities onto paper. May we go to hell, we and what we write!"

He went to the kitchen, and to the sound of banging pots shouted out for the sugar. Slightly upset, the ageing writer replied: "I ran out of it a few days ago."

The young writer returned to the room, went to the window, drew back the curtains and opened the window. Resigned, the ageing writer followed him, patted his shoulder and asked in a paternal voice: "Would you like to eat something?"

He answered briskly: "I do not want anything."

Both men leaned on the window sill and watched the street below in silence. The young writer commented: "Look at this man who is about to cross the street! Examine his features carefully, doesn't he seem carefree? I bet he's never heard of Chekov and yet he's enjoying his life. I can even bet that he's bought something special for his wife. She's waiting for him at this very minute while a chubby-faced young child wearing shorts that reveal a small graze on his

knee is holding on to her dress, repeatedly asking for his father."

The ageing writer smiled, shrugged, and asked casually: "What do you think he does?"

"He's a government employee," replied the young writer. "He seems to be a disciplined person and I do not believe that secret reports have been written about him. He is also the punctual type."

The ageing writer interrupted him, somewhat upset: "You're wrong! Look at his features, they're expressionless. That is the face of a murderer. I believe he's just committed a horrible crime; I think he's killed his wife. She was a beautiful woman, extremely intelligent and had great presence. When he returned home earlier than usual he smelled a man's perfume throughout the house. He went up close to his wife and realized that the perfume was coming from her. He also noticed a few cigarette butts crushed in the ashtray. He then rushed to the kitchen where food was cooking on a low fire, grabbed a big knife and plunged it in her chest, shouting: "Traitor!"

The young writer laughed uncontrollably. He had a hard time regaining his composure, trying to stop the tears of laughter that filled his eyes. He said: "That is the worst story I've ever heard. You're so naïve, my friend."

The man in the street crossed to the other side and waited on the sidewalk. The two were watching him with great interest, as he stood still for a few minutes, nervously looking all around him. The ageing

writer whispered cautiously: "He is not able to think; he doesn't know what to do and he's torn by conflicting feelings. He's totally disoriented..."

The young writer interjected: "No, he's nervous because his friend hasn't shown up yet. The two had agreed to meet on this spot to visit their boss who'd undergone surgery following a sudden sharp pain in his side. Greatly concerned, they'd had to

call an ambulance to the office. They disagreed on the cause of his illness, until the colleague who went with him to the emergency department returned and settled the matter by announcing that it was no more than a case of appendicitis."

A taxi cab passed close by and the man hailed it. As it stopped he bent forward and mumbled a few words through the window to the driver, who nodded approvingly.

He opened the car door and sat beside him; and the car took off leaving behind a storm of dust.

The two writers were overcome with a feeling of bitter disappointment, their faces expressing deep resentment toward the man who had crossed the street. They exchanged sad looks and remained still for a long time, staring with dissatisfaction at the street filled with faces rushing towards unknown destinies.

Mohammad al-'Amry



The explorer

The explorer of the seas sails deep
into the oil of his lantern
He sails on between the pitch of night
and almost extinct inkiness
and though he continues on
he still clings to his dreams
as he delivers himself up to the night's frost-bite
He will ask strangers about his resting-place
where a fire blazes contentedly in the hearth.

Drowsiness

In the tender rose of morning
I glanced at my shirt
its reflection sullied with dust
my memories surrendered to the
wailings of bygone times.

There, my coloured shirt shook me
with its chilly sleeves –
as if on a death-bed

and I recalled its lost buttons
as its sleeves became a scarecrow scaring off
drowsiness

Hanging lonely on its peg
it has dazzled the book I was reading
with the lustre of its moon.

Kohl

My life is worn out.
For seven nights
I was tempted to succumb
to the tyranny of seduction
and fall for your radiance

The image of your kohl
endures longer than ink
or the lines that trace
the intense whiteness
and deep blackness of your eyes.

For seven nights
you poured forth glistening waters
so that I could wash at the gate of the sun,
and marvel at your achievement.

Railroad

Some trains arrive on time
others are delayed
leaving passengers behind
but one doubter shouts and raves
in the hope he'll still arrive on time

Translated by Noel Abdulahad