

The Battle of the Rabbits

by qisasukhra

A short story by Muhammed Mustajab from his collection القصص الأخرى (Madbouli Bookshop, 1986) [The Other Stories]. Mustajab was prolific but remains largely untranslated, though perhaps his best book ديروط الشريف ومن التاريخ السري لنعمان عبد الحافظ which combines a novella written in 1983 and a short story collection produced a year later, has been translated by Humphrey Davies with the title [Tales from Dayrut](#).

I donned the dark suit, the tight new shoes and leapt into the street. The hour was early. Plans had been laid with modern precision.

I told my sweetheart, the evening before, that I was terrified of meeting her father. She tweaked my ear, brought her eyes closer, caught her breath for an instant, then laughed.

Her father, she said (like any father) loved his daughter and she (my sweetheart assumed an air of gravity) had cleared all obstacles for this encounter. She (she laughed) had *paved the way*: all that remained was to charge. She (her fingertips tickled my chin) cared for nothing in this world but me.

Her efforts, I said, were deserving of my fullest admiration. Nevertheless, I was not going to meet her father. I gazed into her eyes and my voice a whisper, underscored my point: It's not a father I'll be meeting, it's a former prime minister...

My sweetheart laughed and gestured for water. She moved her chair and came closer. For a moment she let her eyes rove over me then lapped up water droplets with the edge of her tongue. This done, she stood up vaguely, stretched out her arm and handed me a smile.

Her father was just her father, she whispered, and I must shake off these thoughts. If I was going to fret over this she'd be forced to quarrel with me.

All night long I wrestled with my demons; tried to pull myself together. I chose a tie, a suit, socks, picked out words and insinuations, times when I would hold my peace. I didn't sleep. And now, early one morning in Haram Street, here was my exhausted frame, fighting fatigue, unable to move.

Quarter of a century passed. My watch begged to differ and ticked past nine a.m. I waved down a taxi, making sure that it looked neat as possible. Would it be better if I smoked in front of His Excellency the former PM? Should I initiate the conversation?

The taxi driver, whose features closely resembled those of Farouq Abbas, a wealthy colleague from work, observed that all people were bastards and then—having solicited my opinion of his stance on traffic cops—proceeded to lose himself in a forest of highly detailed complaint.

I leant back and could no longer see him. The clouds were scattered and colourful, the weather pleasant and mild. I was making my way towards a critical test, me: Nobody, son of Nobody, of the family of Nobody. I work as a translator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and before that I was head accountant at the Doqqi branch of Bank Misr. His Excellency the Pasha naturally inquired if I'd been working there when it was defrauded of 495,00 pounds. Yes indeed, and I had been involved in uncovering the crime.

And before Bank Misr; where had you worked? I was a teacher at a foreign school that closed its doors eight years ago. Well then, you must know Professor Nasr Dous? Yes, I know him and oddly enough, Your Excellency, Professor Nasr Dous happened to be a teacher at Dairut Secondary. And your dad... I mean, your father? My father, sir, is a peasant from the south.

No, I shan't say peasant: My father's a farmer from Upper Egypt. Farmer suggests ownership and affluence.

So you wouldn't describe him as a man with his finger on the world's pulse? As you know, Your Excellency, these farmers are the true cornerstone of the economy and Your Excellency is surely aware that the countryside is the bastion that preserves our traditions and morals. It is from this bastion that I come to you, sir...

But I shall wedge a few up-to-date phrases in there: Inflation; Development; The Spirit of the Age; A Sense of Being, of Individuality; The Modern Conscience; *The Guardian*; *The Times*; *Figra... Figaro*.

I handed the driver a cigarette. He lit it with a practised hand and went on telling the story of some trip through Imbaba. The Pasha reclined in the bosom of my mind.

Indeed, sir. Your daughter was a colleague in the Department of Oriental Languages and we graduated together.

Though I shall add a hint of magic and refinement to our relationship, and though I shall play free with the truth when talking about my family, if I want to raise their standing in his eyes, I shall have to make a point of the simplicity of country life. Truth be told, nothing is more painful to me than the matter of my family's simplicity.

Just fancy, Your Excellency! *The Guardian's* supplement ran a report on the Egyptian peasant, drawing attention to the fact that he and he alone has had the gravity and determination to cultivate the depths of the canals and rocky hillsides; that the Egyptian peasant's relationship with his land is not a mere love affair, but rather a melding; a fusion...

The taxi driver said that he rarely met decent young men like myself and proceeded to relate the tale of his daughter and the headmistress, then the story of his dealings with the local council and then the epic of his wife's relatives.

Furthermore, Your Excellency, I translate stories for serious publications and from time to time add to a diary of things that happen to me and others. At present I am living in a small apartment

at one end of Haram Street and attempting to acquire spacious accommodation in Maadi. I do hope, sir, that we will meet with Sheikh Thabit, a subtle and shrewd country gentleman, keenly observant and quick of wit. My grandmother died aged ninety-five, sir. We are a large family.

Would we were a rich one.

The driver stopped and apologized for his car's inability to penetrate any further into the dunes. I asked him to try but he gave me a quick look and implored the All-Knowing Opener-Of-Ways to protect him from the trials of his profession. I told him that walking the rest of the way would be difficult and explained that the road, though not tarmacked, it was true, was nevertheless flat. The driver opened the door, exited in a rage and started wiping the windshield in agitation. Vexed, I slipped from the vehicle and paid him his fare, trying not to listen to the torrent of irritation, disgust and proverbial wisdom.

I straightened up, brushed from myself the vestiges of pain and readjusted my clothes. The road was not long. I snaked along its back a little and came face to face with my sweetheart's villa. The place was calm and the house fatly clad in verdant but untended foliage. There was music singing out behind my footsteps; the horizon's bloom.

I tried slackening my pace so the dust would not soil me. I had the sudden thought that the place was perfect for an ambush. I almost convinced myself that four hundred cinematic guard dogs were going to spring from nowhere and surround me, snapping at my heels, tearing at my plump thighs.

I am weary, sir.

Have you visited our village? Our village is brave, sir. It attacked the armed English train coming from Deir Muwas and destroyed it with its soldiers and driver. Next, armed with matchlocks, clubs and axes they mounted an assault on the English ships that lay there calm as a sturdy peasant woman's ducks. It seemed to the people of my village that the ships would neither answer back nor defend themselves. The revolutionaries plunged into the Nile to seize the prize. Exactly midway across the river, the revolutionaries in the water, tongues of hellfire leapt out from the ships. Bullets, Pasha. Fire and shells, sir. He who did not die in the Nile perished on its shores and our village, sir, became bodies piled on banks.

The villa was silent. I circled about it, peeping through windows bedecked with weeds and dust. The fragrance of flowers floated about, tickling my nose. A good place to compose an epic romance in ten volumes.

In one of its doorways I manage to grope my way to a doorbell. I pressed it, the climbing weeds blocking sight of what lay beyond the wall. The villa was capped by television cables, phone wires and wooden towers that hinted at pursuits of which I knew nothing.

The gates of Paradise opened and Radwan leaned out: old, black and clad in white. Our eyes locked for an instant.

I wish to see His Excellency the Pasha.

He gave a lifeless grin and opened the doors as wide as his arms could reach and I followed him as far as the first broad marble stair. He stole a glance at me then turned to face me. Sir is Nobody, of the family of Nobody? Though this was, strictly speaking, my father's name I was glad to hear him speak it. Perfectly drilled, you bastard; well-drilled as a secret society.

Welcome. Would I prefer (spoken with the utmost decorum) to wait for His Excellency the Pasha in the hall or in the garden pavilion?

It was winter. The sunshine, the warmth, the morning and the garden all called to me. I indicated (elegantly) that I chose the garden. Radwan went ahead, walking me past little watercourses, clumps of orchard grass and thickets of weed until he brought me to a roofed clearing, with cane chairs and pillows, some of which lay on the ground. The office keys between my fingers gave me strength.

I slumped on a chair.

Your Excellency, I would weep in despair of finding a penny to spend. Do you know what it means to live for twenty-two years on cast-off clothing, charity, kind words, the care and sympathy of others? Today I wear a three-pound tie wrapped about my neck and it arranges the words that surge up through my throat towards my tongue. I come from a noble family; no dirt shall insinuate itself into this meeting of ours...

The garden's fragrances engulf me, whispering that I have to be more watchful, less at ease. The slightest speck of grit, my sweetheart, will be enough to cast me out of the charmed circle.

The prime minister squatted in the bosom of a colourful leaf, bellowing, threatening, swearing, warning, explaining. Powerful, fearsome, vengeful. Does he still smoke his expensive pipe? Does love have the power to create some semblance of equality?

The garden is untended. There is dust upon the pillows. The sun drowns the universe in warmth. There are broken electric lights in the pavilion's square ceiling. To the right, a locked animal pen. I send my gaze gliding over the castle's windows, flower beds, trellises of withered grapes.

I stand up, sit down, brush dust from my clothes. I circle about and approach the pen. I stand, sit down, recline. I think about lighting a cigarette but am afraid to do so. Is His Excellency trying to make me feel his superiority?

Even though he come in the afternoon I shall wait for him. I shall take care to behave impeccably.

I am swept by a violent desire to philosophize. This is not an age of palaces, truly it is not, yet neither is it an age of shacks and bolt-holes. The chairs are covered with dust. I have studied, travelled and returned; I have become a stranger, loved and struggled. I must be due some recompense, some day.

Do you dance?

Sorry, I never got the chance, though I meant to learn.

I moved towards the pen and pressed against the door. It opened easily.

Rabbits. Rabbits of all sizes and colours fled and hid in their hutches. The movement caused me a sudden ecstasy of delight and I laughed. I roared with laughter. Here was an interest in common, albeit my mother's pen was a little bigger.

Feeling safer the rabbits began to creep from their hutches and sniff at the earth and straw. I, too, am a tame creature. I burn with longing for my shack... our shack... Oh, Your Excellency, I beseech you not to attack me, not to strip me naked, not to toy with me, not to rifle through my guts. I am not your equal. If you liked, I could tell you amusing tales of women who have passed through my life.

I held out my hand to a rabbit and grasped him by the ears. He wriggled then fell still, his body warm and tender, pleasant and hot, white and beautiful and pliant. I released him and he shot like an arrow to his hiding place. Another rabbit, a troublemaker, scratched me. I was not able to get hold of him.

Despite the tightness of my trousers I hunkered down and began to circle their leader. He did not run away but fought back ferociously. I attacked him with both my hands. Sensing my determination he sank his claw into the back of my hand. He hurt me. What was this? A wound in the hand that had, since yesterday, been readying itself to greet my future father-in-law.

I grabbed the buck by the ears—a single snatch—and raised him up. He shrieked. From his depths he shrieked, freed himself from my fist and leapt into his hole. Once more the rabbits, all the rabbits, vanished. I wiped my hand and went out, anticipating the arrival of His Excellency the Pasha.

Playing with the rabbits was diverting but it did not dispel my unease. I felt the need to wash my hand and cool off. I searched the garden until I found a tap. I tried it but it wouldn't open. I kept pressing on the tap's neck until it turned with my hand and broke off from the pipe. No water. A mangy hosepipe, its kinks pressed deep in the mud. I followed it and it led me to an abandoned beehive. The buzz of savage insects frightened me. Uneasily, I went back to the roofed pavilion.

I took out a handkerchief (bought yesterday evening for twenty pence). I tried cleaning the hand that was to be (definitely would be) stretched out in greeting. A lizard jumped from the ceiling to the ground and dashed towards a pile of weeds.

Has my dear father-in-law not yet woken from his sleep? Perhaps his Eminence is debating the matter with his daughter. Perhaps they are debating the correct protocols for welcoming me.

One of the strangest stories of all, Your Excellency, is about the time a great death swept our village, laying waste to buffalo, cows, dogs, oats, cats, rabbits, sheep and crows. But this plague

did not affect two types of creature: people and donkeys. I would love to tend this garden, to set it back in order, despite all the chaos, the patches of bare earth and heaps of rubbish. For thirty years my mother has prayed God to let her visit the Prophet's tomb. Don't be impatient, mother: we are getting closer to the account numbers of God's secret hoards.

I sat on a cane chair and it came apart, its parts scattering.

Keep active or you'll seize up. I took off my jacket, took up a stone and began to repair the chair, hammering at its nails. The sun grew hot and I grew wet with sweat. Back when my future father-in-law was prime minister I was a sweating boy whose sister carried him every morning to the Dairut hospital to be injected for bilharzia.

The second chair was rickety. I fixed its back and one of the legs. What to do now? Why not call out to my dear father-in-law? Enough, Your Excellency! For inevitably, a moment will come when I'll be riding the apple of your eye. I've fixed three chairs for you and I can fix for you any of your things that have been, or ever will be, broken.

A rabbit emerged from the pen, brushed against me with its ears and raced back inside. I removed my shirt, hung on the pavilion's roof next to the jacket and ran after the rabbit, making for the pen. The rabbits took fright and my happiness returned. The back of my hand still hurt from the big rabbit's scratch.

What is your goal in life?

My goal is... To be honest I haven't decided what my goal is yet. I eat, I drink and (sometimes) sip a beer. I prevail upon friends to bring me contraband from overseas. Circumstances permit me to make the acquaintance of certain women. I read about people's news in the papers. I sleep well and wake early and on holidays (should I remember to) I go and visit my family in the country.

Enough of these questions, Your Excellency, and let me alone to play with your rabbits. Very well, if you insist so stubbornly: I wonder, sir, if you ever hunt for a single sock beneath the bed?

The rabbits recovered their poise, coming forward and poking their ears outside the pen. The leader advanced and, noticing me, fixed his eyes in my direction. Having made sure it was me, he took two hops back towards his hutch.

Given a free hand, bastard bunny, I'd plant this garden with molokhiyya for you.

He stood defiantly before the hutch. I reached out my hand to him and he went for it. The ears of the tribe pricked up. I fell upon the leader and he shrieked, leapt at my face and clawed me. I received him on my chest and squeezed him between my arms. Hurling into the pen, he fell writhing to the ground. I ran to the hutches and stopped up their entrances with dirt. Those of them inside the hutches would be far from happy and those outside were mine to ambush. Some of the rabbits tried to hide but could not find a way into their hutches.

I moved back and closed the door to the pen. It was full of darkness striped with light.

Your Excellency, I'll pay you a dowry of five hundred pounds for you to give me my sweetheart.

I started trailing the white terror with the long ears. A rabbit sniffed my tight new shoe and I lifted my foot and stamped on him until his stomach burst and it shrieked its guts out, leaping, swaying and banging around. I reached out for another. One hand in its ears and the other on its neck that I might hear the popping of hot, living bone.

I know, Your Excellency, that love alone is not enough, and yet, my soon-to-be father-in-law, I cannot kidnap my sweetheart on horseback for I know not how to ride.

The head of the chief rabbit crumpled between my palms, and crimson blood jetted from his mouth. The cry from the proud white head pierced the darkness, shook the lines of light, lanced my eardrum and galloped into my mind. My blood pushed to me to press harder. A million nights after the thousand and first night the head broke free from the skin and blood sprayed over my palms and arms, my breast and nose and eyes.

Although, Your Excellency, I have grown quite used to the smile of the morning sun, to the burn of its noonday heat, to its eventide elegies—it is hard for fingers addicted to encircling necks to let this white warmth alone to be afraid and take refuge in corners.

I tried hard to gather up the bodies by the pale light creeping through the poles in the pen's walls, but, my dearest daddy-in-law, I couldn't find the time to ready my fingers' tips to shake your hand. Sunset approaches, so let me sling my jacket over my shoulder and hop over the wall.