

Najwa Binshatwan

A Short Story

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His Excellency the Eminence of the Void

I visited my paternal aunt's house a little after noon to check on her health. I had brought a monitor with me to record her blood pressure, as I did on every visit I made to one of my blood relatives. My aunt had gone for an appointment outside the family, with another doctor, to whom she would go on complaining and moaning until he became almost one of the family, while she would still not be cured of that obscure ache that moved from place to place and appeared every time in a new guise.

I found her husband and children at home; the children were doing their homework while her husband, a retired colonel, was watching television (a new patriotic song by Nancy Ajram about scribbles and scrawls was playing). When I arrived, he turned it off and asked me to rewrite his letter to the Commander-in-Chief of the Temporary Armed Forces, as if the song had provoked in him a patriotic fervour that had been on the verge of dying down.

He put his cards on the table, saying that I would be writing the most important letter of his life for him; that good handwriting made the truth clearer; and that my handwriting was good and my sentence constructions elegant and effective. It was as if he did not want to admit to the weakness in reading and writing that his sons suffered from, which was constantly reinforced by their results at school.

However, what the retired colonel said about my handwriting did justice to the ongoing perseverance that had allowed me to finish medical school; this fine handwriting that was said to make the truth clearer was nothing but the fruit of years of reading and writing during which I had used up thousands of pens and sheets of paper that my father would buy for my siblings and me. Even though our father was not well off or highly paid, he still made it possible for us to get an education by sitting on the pavements of the old city and displaying his wares to passers-by, wares that our chamber of commerce had recognised as being too simple to need a shop or store.

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I acceded to the request of my aunt's husband, and put my bag and blood pressure monitor aside to begin checking a previously written draft of the letter. The draft was poorly written; the tone was dominated by begging and beseeching. The import was that the retired colonel insisted that the state honour him and grant him a plot of land, a car and a farm in respect of services rendered to the army for 33 years, since the outbreak of the Glorious Revolution, as if he were a spy and not a soldier ranked as colonel.

I began writing, as he spoke haughtily of his accomplishments, while his eldest daughter served him a cup of cold water in between each surge of anger, advising him to avoid an attack of high blood pressure or diabetes, hereditary diseases in the family.

'This is a state only for despicable or wretched people. He who has no morals gets what he needs, and he who is a self-made, decent man like you dies in the shadows.'

The daughter's expressions soothed him, even if they contained something about his death; he tugged at his leg and tucked it under the other and it seemed as if he was affected by being a self-made man, so he eased up on his orders for me to write such and such hoped-for requests and desires, many of whose details were hilarious.

'Did you write "you did not give me anything after the war"?'

'I did.'

'Tell him: Your Excellency, Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, I have not received anything from Your Highness as my colleagues have done – the officers upon whom You have bestowed medals and grants, and given farms, cars, plots of land and free Hajj and Umra trips.'

'Just a moment, Haj, I wrote that already on page 5 when you told the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, about the lands that formerly belonged to the Armoured Encampment and later to the Missile Base.'

'Then write about the Fateh Barracks that the senior officers split between themselves and sold to a bunch of thieves in Customs. Tell him: "Look, you will not believe your eyes how it has been transformed into a neighbourhood that looks like America in the Middle East, even though its name is still Middle Eastern." Write in parentheses "The Thieves Quarter."'



‘Ha ha – I wrote that in block letters.’

He turned his head and his eyes scanned the paper in search of the thieves. When he happened upon them and their neighbourhood, he complimented me for the way in which I had documented them in his letter addressed to the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, and said to his wife and children: [21]

‘How funny for them – you have written about them in a way that really makes them appear as thieves. Subhanallah, my God, clear handwriting makes the truth clearer!’

My aunt intervened when she felt that her husband was drifting away from the essential point of the petition, while sifting through a bag of medicines that she had brought back from her doctor:

‘Haj, what do these two things have to do with each other? Stick to talking about your needs, and that’s it.’

‘You think so, Hajja?’

He turned to me, running his fingers through his hair, and said: ‘Do as your aunt says.’

The petition continued to be written the way my aunt wished for about an hour and a half, and consumed along the way a pile of white paper and two pens; the first was the pen of Salem, the sixth-grade pupil who reclaimed it at six o’clock and put it in his satchel before going to sleep, for fear that he would go to school without a pen. The second resembled the first but belonged to Najla, an eighth-grade pupil in her second year of preparatory school, who had stopped finishing her assignments because of lending her pen to her father – for the sake of the car, the farm and a plot of land strategically located with regard to the Fateh Barracks, where they would have a villa, and in the villa she would have her own room to protect her privacy later on.

On my way back home after the end of the Eid visit whose meaning had changed, I thought about the retired colonel’s joy the moment he put his signature on the petition. He was confident of its acceptance and that God would influence the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, on his behalf and explain to him the love within his cherished petition; he would immediately sign his approval. The time between the writing of the petition and its approval would not be more

than dozens of years, especially after the mediation of the divine powers.

[22] The retired colonel's agitation had subsided and he calmed down after the petition had been written and signed. His daughter brought him a glass half-filled with water and a pill that he swallowed quietly, withdrawing to a far corner, away from the television that no longer broadcast anything but a torrent of speeches by people who intruded upon our lives every day. And the way in which he withdrew made it possible for one to find excuses for someone who had held a rank that bore down heavily upon his shoulders; when he was relieved of it, the weighty past compelled him to regard his ministry as if it were an agriculture or housing ministry and not a ministry of war.

In spite of the effort expended by my handwriting in increasing the clarity of the truth, my conviction was that the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, would not pay any attention to the overwhelming quantities of petitions presented to him from the officers of his retired army. If this was not the case, why did the Supreme Leader himself resort to buying land in various cities and turning it into shopping centres or commercial establishments if he, as the temporary Supreme Leader (in theory) truly intended to ensure the Armed People were armed?

While I was writing the petition, the Supreme Leader could have been sleeping in opulent comfort, or waiting for dates to ripen, or talking about his lookalike, the commander of the US forces in Iraq. It was the same joke that was told about him during the war with the Sahara separatists, whose nebulousness required all sorts of Russian armaments, including military submarines, which he insisted on buying in order to crush the Sahrawi army in its own backyard, even though the inhabitants of the cold lands pointed out that there was no use for these submarines in the desert, even if he had men who had been trained to embark upon the seas of peril and were not afraid of drowning.

He did indeed buy the submarines, despite his demographic cognizance of the territory, only for them to be eaten by the rust of the sea and for algae to develop on their backs, along with the elite ruling class's illusions, while men drowned without them in inch-deep sewage



water. It was as if he had bought them just to distinguish one kind of algae from another.

I looked at my hand, which had written the petition, resting on the steering wheel while I was held up at a traffic light. Someone buried deep down inside me – the one who protects and respects the laws of our country – wondered how many matters of true significance this hand had carried out that it truly believed in. [23]

But in any case, it was still a very small hand with very little might, even if matched with an eye with true insight that could see past the present hour.

I turned to look towards the corner of the pavement where my father had spent most of his life and it seemed to me that tearing up the sheets of the petition, that would be transformed without being destroyed, was not like disposing of sheets of toilet paper because they were still usable by a fellow citizen of lesser standing in the eyes of those he was writing to.

The traffic signal turned green. I murmured to God to have mercy on my father's soul and left my spectres on the pavement of an age-old street in a city whose roots dripped with the sweat of ages.

Translated by Suneela Mubayi