

A Small Sun

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Translated by David Teeple†

Abu Fahd was returning home, walking with slow steps, staggering a little on his path through narrow, zig-zagging alleys, lit by widely spaced yellow lamps.

The reigning silence all around him was oppressive, and he began to sing in a low and resonant tone:

I'm a poor man, and always wanting...

It was almost midnight. Abu Fahd was feeling quite happy, having drunk three cups of araq¹, and he took up the refrain once more:

I'm a poor man, and always wanting...

He imagined that his harsh voice was dripping with unimaginable sweetness, and he told himself out loud, "I am delightful."

He imagined that there were people standing by with open mouths, waving their hands, calling out to him and clapping. He laughed long and hard then, and tilted his red tarboosh back a little. Then he continued his singing, feeling splendid:

I'm a poor man, and always wanting...

He was wearing gray trousers, and around his waist was an old yellow cummerbund. When he had arrived under the bridge, where the darkness was stronger than the light, he was surprised to see a small black sheep standing against the wall, and he opened his mouth in astonishment, saying to himself, "I'm not drunk. Look closely, old man. What do you see? That's a sheep. Where's his owner?"

He looked around him but found no one. The alley was completely deserted. Then he stared closely at the sheep and said to himself, "Am I drunk?"

*Syrian, 1929-present.

†American, 1978-present.

¹A cheap aniseed liquor.

He laughed inaudibly, then said to himself, "God is generous, and he knows that Abu Fahd and his wife haven't eaten meat in a week." Abu Fahd approached the sheep, and tried to force it to walk by pushing him forward, but the sheep refused to budge. Abu Fahd gripped the sheep by his small horns and tried to pull him, but the sheep stayed frozen in place against the wall. Abu Fahd glared at him wrathfully and said to him, "I will carry you if I have to, along with your father and your mother."

So Abu Fahd carried the sheep, lifting it up onto his back and holding onto its forelegs. He continued along his path, singing once again. His joy and intoxication doubled. But after a short while he stopped singing, as the sheep seemed to be growing in weight and size. He heard an unexpected voice say, "Let me go."

Abu Fahd knitted his brows, and said to himself, "May God curse drunkenness!"

After a few moments he heard the voice once more: "Let me go. I am not a sheep."

Abu Fahd trembled, and his terror caused him to cling to the sheep. He stopped walking. The voice spoke once again: "I am a prince of the Djinnns. Let me go, and I will give you whatever you want."

Abu Fahd did not answer, but resumed walking with hurried steps. The voice spoke again: "I will give you seven jars full of gold."

Abu Fahd imagined that he could hear gold pieces jingling as they fell somewhere nearby, and he listened without moving.

Just then the sheep disappeared. Abu Fahd spun around, and almost called out, "Come back!" He found himself alone in the long, narrow alley, nailed in place, terrified, for a few moments. Nowhere did he see the sheep. He gave up and began to follow his route once again, now walking very fast.

When he got home he woke his wife, Umm Fahd, and told her about what had happened. She said to him, "Get some sleep. You're drunk."

"But I only drank three cups."

"You pass out after one cup."

Abu Fahd felt that he had been insulted, and answered sharply, "I wouldn't even pass out after drinking a whole barrel."

Umm Fahd didn't utter a word. She was recalling the stories she had heard when she was a child about the Djinnns and how they liked to amuse themselves.

Abu Fahd took off his clothes and turned off the electric lamp, then spread out on the bed next to his wife, and pulled the covers up to his chin.

Suddenly Umm Fahd said, "You shouldn't have let him go without making him give you the gold up front."

Abu Fahd didn't respond. Umm Fahd followed up enthusiastically: "Go there tomorrow. Grab him and don't let go this time."

Abu Fahd let out a tired, sad yawn, and said feebly, "How am I supposed to find him?"

"You will find him precisely under the bridge. Bring him to the house, and we won't let him go until he gives us the gold."

“I won’t find him.”

“The Djinnns live underground in the daytime. When nighttime comes they rise up to the surface and amuse themselves until dawn. And if they like a particular place they go back to it over and over again. You will find the sheep under the bridge.”

Then Abu Fahd extended his hand to her chest and slipped it between her breasts, and kept it there without moving. And he said, “We will become rich.”

“We’ll buy a house.”

“A house with a garden.”

“And we’ll buy a radio.”

“A big radio.”

“And a washing machine.”

“A washing machine...”

“We won’t eat cracked wheat anymore.”

“We’ll eat white bread.”

At that Umm Fahd laughed like a child, as Abu Fahd continued, saying, “I will buy you a red dress.”

She whispered reproachfully, “Only one?”

“I’ll buy you a hundred dresses.” Abu Fahd was silent a few moments, then wondered out loud, “How long until the baby’s due?”

“Three months.”

“It will be a boy.”

“He won’t suffer like we have.”

“He won’t go hungry.”

“His clothes will be clean and beautiful.”

“He won’t have to look for work.”

“He will study in schools.”

“The landlord won’t demand rent from him.”

“He will be a doctor when he grows up.”

“I want him to be a lawyer.”

“We will ask him: ‘Do you want to become a doctor or a lawyer?’”

She was overcome by compassion. She continued by asking in a beguiling way, “You won’t get married a second time, will you?”

Then he nibbled her ear gently and said, “Why should I need to marry again? You’re the best woman on earth.”

Then it was silent, and a profound and serene joy inundated them both. But after a little while Abu Fahd abruptly threw the covers off his body, whereupon Umm Fahd asked him what was the matter.

“I’m going to go now.”

“Where?”

“I’ll bring back the sheep.”

“Wait until tomorrow night. Right now you should sleep.”

He left the bed in a hurry, turned on the electric lamp hanging from the ceiling, and began to get dressed again.

“You won’t find him.”

“I’ll find him.”

As she helped him wrap his waste in the yellow cummerbund, Umm Fahd said, “Don’t let him go this time.”

Abu Fahd felt as though he were undertaking some dangerous break-in. He would need his dagger, which was sharp and had a dull shine.

He left the house, setting off in a hurry until he arrived again underneath the bridge. A sense of failure overcame him when the sheep was nowhere to be seen. The alley was empty, and there were no lights on in the windows of the houses alongside.

So Abu Fahd stood there silently waiting, leaning his back against the wall. After a little while a faint sound came to his ears, and within no time a drunk man appeared, stumbling and crashing against the walls of the alley while crying out in a drawl, “Look lively!... I’m a man!”

As he came upon Abu Fahd, he stopped walking, and opened his eyes to stare in wonder and amazement. His voice broken up and joyful, he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Get lost.”

The drunk frowned in thought, then his face lit up with joy, and he said, “By God, I love women, too! Are you waiting for someone’s husband to go to sleep so that his wife will open the door for you?”

Abu Fahd was annoyed, and felt displeasure growing inside him as the drunk continued to speak, saying, “She must be a beautiful woman.”

Angrily, Abu Fahd replied, “What woman?”

“The woman you’re waiting for.”

“Get lost.”

“I will be your companion.”

Abu Fahd’s rage intensified, and he feared that the sheep would not appear as long as the drunkard was around. Abu Fahd spoke with some malice now, saying, “Go on your way, or you’ll get your head broken.”

The drunk belched, and said with surprise, “Are you bossing me around? Who the hell are you?”

He was silent a moment, then added, “Come on and break my head. I dare ya’.”

To this Abu Fahd replied, “Go on and leave me alone. I don’t want to break your head.”

The drunk answered angrily, “No, no! Come and break my head!”

He drew back a little ways, and said merrily, “I’ll put you through the ringer!”

The drunk stuck his hand in his pants pocket and took out a long-bladed razor. Abu Fahd quickly plunged his hand into his cummerbund to find his dagger, as the drunk cautiously approached him.

Abu Fahd lifted the dagger over his head, and pounced with it. The drunk moved left as fast as lightning, untouched by the dagger, and drove his razor into Abu Fahd's chest, crying out, "Take that!"

He withdrew the razor from the flesh, and backed up a little ways. Abu Fahd was up against the dirt wall, and lifted his dagger a second time, but the drunk's razor stabbed him once again in the chest. And a third time, this time in the right shoulder, which immediately caused his arm to go limp, and his fingers to let go of the dagger, which fell to the ground.

The drunk yelled, as he jumped all around, "Take that! ... And that!"

Stabbed in the rib cage, Abu Fahd brayed like a mule. He felt his knees go weak, and tried to remain standing firm, while the razor continued to cut into his flesh. It struck him and tore into him over and over again.

Then Abu Fahd was stabbed in the belly, and his intestines began leaking out. He pressed on them with his hands, which were hot, moist and trembling. Slipping, he collapsed on the ground, tumbling onto his back.

The drunk bent over, standing close to him. He coughed a number of times, then vomited. And then he ran off.

Abu Fahd could hear the sheep say to him, "Seven jars of gold."

A great deal of gold came falling down, glowing like a small sun. Then slowly, gently, the sound of it began to drift away.