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A Novel

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TELEPATHY
Amir Tag Elsir

Translated by
William Hutchins

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A NOVEL

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دار بلومزبري - مؤسسة قطر للنشر
B L O O M S B U R Y
Q A T A R F O U N D A T I O N
P U B L I S H I N G

Contents

Author's Note

– 1 –

– 2 –

– 3 –

– 4 –

– 5 –

– 6 –

– 7 –

– 8 –

– 9 –

– 10 –

– 11 –

– 12 –

– 13 –

– 14 –

– 15 –

– 16 –

A Note on the Author

A Note on the Translator

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One day a woman whose mouth spoke one language and whose eyes spoke many, asked, "What's your view of the sun?"

I replied, "It's what I want beaming down on me."

"And the moon?"

"It's what is never eclipsed, even when it is eclipsed."

"The sea?"

"It's what will never be merely blue."

"Love?"

"What I can sense but never see."

"Man?"

"Someone striving to be a man."

"So how do you write?"

"By sun, moon, sea, love, and man."

A.T.

When I wrote my latest novel, *Hunger's Hopes*, in only about a month, driven by its many inspirations and multiple twists and turns, which suddenly and effortlessly revealed themselves to me, I never imagined it would bedevil me with an apparently intractable problem, that I would be pursued by the nightmare of its associations, or that despite all my efforts, I wouldn't be able to escape.

I had returned from a splendid trip to Kuala Lumpur, an Eastern city that had stirred me profoundly and that I hoped to write about one day to capture its mischievous vigor. There I met cultural luminaries, capitalists, teachers, women of the night, and bums in the street. A number of personalities I encountered intrigued me, and in their distinctive appeal I recognized prototypes for characters in a novel, ones that would enrich any novel. Liyung Tuli, or Master Tuli as they called him, was one of these potential characters who dazzled me. He was an extremely well-known acupuncturist, and I noted his fitness despite his age, his very sincere smile, his extreme elegance, and the way he shed light on an ancient Chinese profession. The secretary at his clinic, Anania Faruq, whose nationality I did not know for sure – a common occurrence within the mix of ethnicities in that tumultuous city – was also a memorable character. Her unusual height, her heavy use of cosmetics such as green and red eye shadow, her dresses that did not defer to any known style, her shoes fashioned from canvas and reinforced cardboard, and the army of patients and their companions who flirted with her overtly or silently, made her a living model for an Eastern princess who undertook an impetuous journey to a repressed Arab land – in a novel that had to be written someday.

I also met the erstwhile American academic Victor Grayland, who had become Hoshi Hisoka, a professor of music in a Japanese institute. He was a truly amazing guitarist, who, as he put it, performed for children and their mothers anytime, anywhere. He had left his native country in 1977, never to return. We became acquainted in a narrow corridor in the Chinese market which was packed with merchandise, people, and trinkets. In a number of subsequent meetings, we debated the question of his identity at length – how someone who had been born in America and had lived there till he was forty could become an honest-to-goodness Asian bearing an ancient Japanese name that meant warrior.

This academic was an old man but vigorous and so slender that he seemed a specter. His presence in Malaysia was part of his regular routine; he visited every year because he loved it madly and because he was a patron of Tuli's acupuncture clinic. As he himself said, he had never suffered from any ailment that required placing needles in his head, hands, or legs and hoped to reach one hundred standing on his own two feet. Acupuncture was merely an annual prophylactic for him. He always returned to his adopted homeland better equipped to deal with life after this treatment. His philosophy about erasing his Western identity and acquiring a different, Eastern one was simply

that when you love, respect, and offer the East valuable services, it will never forget you. It weeps for you fondly when you pass; you will find some old man beside whom you sat in a public garden or a compartment of a high-speed train walking with his head bowed in your funeral procession, and the eleven-year-old daughter of your neighbors will place flowers on your grave at every propitious occasion. It was precisely the opposite in his native country, where geniuses, discoverers, and space pioneers died daily – as a result of traffic accidents, brain clots, and sniper fire in the streets – without anyone missing them.

To my way of thinking, his theory was dotty and based on weak arguments, but I didn't debate it much. I knew the man was a Leftist who opposed capitalism and what he termed America's foolhardy policies. He considered the country's numerous wars – especially the Vietnam War and more recently the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – to be major offenses that even the greatest historical eraser could never wipe away.

Strange stories cluster around Bukit Bintang Street in the center of Kuala Lumpur. Referred to by Arabs themselves as the Arabs' Street, it harbors Eastern and Western restaurants, giant shopping malls, and massage parlors, which can turn at any moment into dens of vipers. The beggars tint their bodies every color of the rainbow. Tourists stagger under the sensory assault: displays of Canon, Nikon, and Yashica cameras, accordion and saxophone players, and shredding guitarists who stage rowdy music parties at street corners, traffic lights, and all the people who cluster together or go about their business.

I was fascinated by the numerous coffeehouses. I hoped to become addicted to one of these (or have one addict me to it) so I would come to it daily to write – the way I do in my country – but that didn't happen, sadly, because I was so busy throughout the trip.

Everything inspired me and motivated me to write.

I returned home delighted with all these memories, feeling my blood pumping, my juices flowing, and expecting a new novel to steal over me at any moment. During my ordinary, daily life, when I lacked inspiration, I would be fortified by these memories; I actually prepared myself to be ravished by this new novel.

I thought that Master Tuli, the practitioner of Chinese acupuncture, would probably become a practitioner of passion's fire in the chest of a vanquished lover or that the heroine would have fallen in love but been conquered, against her will, by another. She might be the secretary Anania Faruq, that savage princess who sauntered down savage lanes, searching for a man she had seen for a moment in a primitive museum and had never forgotten. Hoshi Hisoka, the Leftist, would be a professor of political science at a university overflowing with students and the instigator of a giant revolution that would blow through my writings and bring a mighty dictator to power.

I considered transferring all the commotion of the streets and public gardens to my country, which is stagnant even though it suffers from numerous hardships. Effendi Irfan, the taxi driver who was my companion throughout my stay there, would definitely make an appearance. He immersed me in details of his past and present life and shared his desire, long postponed, to perform the duty of the Hajj pilgrimage. He would be a driver here too but of a different vehicle – one that was grimy and pathetic, a marked contrast to the type of richly appointed vehicle he had driven all his life.

But none of this happened, and there's no hope it will now that I'm embroiled in the

entanglements of *Hunger's Hopes*. I certainly never thought it would turn out to be such a dangerous novel when, with unconscious exultation, I wrote it.

Three months before I traveled to Malaysia I published *Hunger's Hopes* with a local publishing house. A medium-sized novel consisting of 220 pages, it discussed in a purely imaginary way, which bore no relationship to reality whatsoever, a man in his forties named Nishan Hamza Nishan. Illiterate most of his life, Nishan worked as a messenger in an elementary school, where his job was to prepare tea and coffee, to fetch the teachers' breakfast, and to race between the different offices with a folder, documents, or requests. With unusual perseverance he had taught himself to read and write and had obtained his elementary, middle school, and secondary certificates, completing the last of them not long after he turned forty-five. Shortly before he was to enter university, after deciding to study law and become a judge, he contracted seasonal schizophrenia, which ran in his family and which afflicted him for a month or two every year. He would hear imaginary voices calling him. He would experience internal conflicts and pick fights with people, with life. He made ragdolls, stuffed them with explosives, and tossed them at elegant men and pretty girls in the streets. He might carry a sharp knife and attack random people with it. He might also wear a mask portraying a public figure such as the country's president or chief justice, or even a famed fruit seller or tailor, and then act as if he were that person. When the symptoms of schizophrenia disappeared or gradually diminished, he would return to his ordinary life, remembering only what people recounted and apologizing to everyone who had suffered during his frenzies. He would resume his perpetual efforts to study law.

Toward the end of the book, on a normal day without any delirium, Nishan experienced a strange weakness. He felt that his intestines were contracting, that his body was burning hot, that his head was spinning, and that his chest had become a battleground where pains struggled for supremacy. He staggered, without anyone's assistance, to the government hospital. There he was methodically examined, and it was discovered that he had incurable glandular cancer.

The novel was filled with many characters, including a high-society lady who always put on airs; a miserable soldier who attempted to overthrow the government without knowing how and who was executed by a firing squad; a truck driver who was a member of Nishan's family and who was charged with supervising him during his episodes of delirium; and a nurse named Yaqutah, whom Nishan met and fell in love with when she worked in the psychiatric hospital. She tried to help him during his ordeal. Nishan Hamza, however, was the puppeteer who held the strings for all the other characters.

Actually, in almost all the works I have written, I have devised strange names for my characters, names that are not frequently used in this country, or names that are used disparagingly and in certain tribes. This has not been true for all my characters, of course, but just for those who play major roles or those I want to stick in the minds of readers. I never use three-part names; I don't know why I used the tripartite name

Nishan Hamza Nishan in this novel. I noticed this fact during my feverish writing, but its rhythm prevented me from deleting it. I sensed then that I wouldn't like it if it consisted of only two names.

I knew no one named Nishan and have never encountered anyone with that name in my readings or frequent travels around the country or abroad. I mused over it when I first wrote it, surprised and wondering where it had come from, but have never reached a definite answer. Doubtless it was a known name and was certainly used in some Arab or African countries – just not in mine.

I remember the book's launch party was held just two days before I traveled, in a simple hall normally used for wedding parties. The event drew readers and people interested in culture. A beautiful girl asked me in a captivating voice with attractive circumspection: "Sir, how do you select names when you write? I find that the name Nishan Hamza Nishan is a perfect fit for the hero's character and behavior. If he were a real man, this would be his name."

I didn't have a logical answer for her question and had no coherent theory about names or precise strategy for choosing them. I couldn't even claim decisively that the names I wrote actually resembled their characters in the texts. All the same, I liked the attractive girl's question and was flattered that she felt I had cloaked my hero in an appropriate name.

I replied, "It's just something I sense, my dear. Nothing more, nothing less."

It seemed that another character – Nashshar, a perfume vendor in the old market who was wall-eyed and who also appeared in a number of twisting alleys in the novel – was admired by another girl in the audience, because she stood up at the event with a beaming face and asked, "Will I happen to meet Nashshar in the old market one day? If so, will he flirt with me?"

I said, "Perhaps."

She smiled and the rest of the audience did too.

Among those who attended the book launch and lined up to get their book signed was a man of about forty-seven. He was slim and his back was slightly stooped. He wore traditional garb: a thobe, turban, and shoes made of cheap goat skin. His stance seemed a bit shaky, and he kept turning around.

He was the sort of person who would attract attention at any gathering and actually had attracted mine, despite the crowd, the many questions asked, and the haste of some people to obtain a "sound bite", as is often the case at cultural affairs. I saw him rub against a young girl in the queue ahead of him – in a manner that seemed unintentional and caused by his agitation. The girl, who was wearing makeup and eye shadow that did not coordinate, turned toward him, frowned, left the line, and headed out carrying a copy without a signature. I saw him open the book, peruse it for a moment, and then close it. When the man finally stood before me and placed his copy on the table for me to sign, he didn't hold out his hand to greet me the way the others had. He dropped the copy carelessly on the table and stood there with a distant gaze that swiveled in whatever direction his eyes chanced to look, without focusing on anything. I asked him his name so I could write a dedication for him in the book. He turned toward me, providing me an opportunity to notice in his eyes a gleam that quickly passed.

He said, "It's not for me. I'm going to give it to my sweetheart, Ranim. I'll bring

you my own copy to sign some other day. Just write: To my precious sweetheart, Ranim, with my love.”

I wrote the dedication to his precious sweetheart, Ranim, with his love, not mine, on the first page, and held the book out to him. He grasped it quickly and proceeded to stagger off. He was certainly an odd fellow, just as agitated as could be. I had never met a man of his age with such an obvious tremor, wearing traditional clothing, who was supposedly a passionate lover of a girl named Ranim. Ranim is a name used only recently here and it would be impossible for a woman of his generation to be called that. But I didn't brood about this much and soon totally forgot him in the throng of people who clustered around me – among them close friends who wanted us to conclude the evening elsewhere.

When we eventually went out to the street after the event, Ranim's shaky lover was still staggering around the area, carrying *Hunger's Hopes* in his right hand and a lit cigarette in his left.

Suddenly he approached me with quick steps and then stopped in front of me. Panting, he asked me without any introduction, “When will you return from your trip, sir?”

His question would have been perfectly normal if my trip had been announced. But I wasn't attending a cultural conference (so no one would have heard about it that way), I wasn't seeking medical treatment so that a journalist might have written that I was ill and traveling abroad for treatment, and I didn't remember referring to a forthcoming trip on my Facebook page.

It was a personal trip, one of a series I take from time to time to see a new country and to acquire the bits of information I need desperately for my work as a writer. I hadn't even told the friends who were standing with me then and attempting to shield me from a man they thought was an assailant.

I said, “I don't know” and moved away as I tried to think of the source from which Ranim's lover (as I thought of him) might have learned about my travels. I couldn't come up with any leads, however. To spare myself further anxiety, I tried to convince myself that this man had merely guessed I was planning to travel – nothing more. Even so, I didn't sleep well the two nights prior to my departure. I would wake up with a groan in reaction to the acid reflux I experience every time I feel agitated or stressed out on account of the book I am writing. In a grim dream I saw Ranim as a tender girl in the embrace of a beast; her lover, who bore no resemblance to storybook lovers, hit her with a signed copy of *Hunger's Hopes* and disfigured her with a lit cigarette in his left hand.

As I headed to the terminal carrying my suitcase, I sighed deeply and attempted to imagine a new country from which I might return with extraordinary Eastern spices that would get prose boiling on the hearth of my writing again.

The first thing I did when I returned from my splendid Malaysian trip was to seek out Umm Salama. She is a middle-aged widow whose military husband died in the Southern War while it was raging a number of years ago. She has two adolescent children bursting with curiosity, but her limited means curb their enthusiasm. She lives in a district far from my own and comes two or three times a week to clean my house and prepare my food.

I live in an excellent district in the center of the capital, in a house I purchased long ago. I am not married and have absolutely no intention of marrying again after my divorce – from a woman who loved me and whom I loved – seven years earlier. My ex-wife simply could not bear to live with the lunacy of my writing and perpetual travel, my bouts of pessimism and frustration, and the troupes of women who are always twittering at cultural events.

My house actually has been very well fortified against surprise visits of any type, and just a few people know where it is. By and large, no one visits me except my only brother, Muzaffar, who works as an aid coordinator for an NGO and who lives in a city in a distant region in the west of the country. He only comes twice a year, not to spend time with me but to hang out with his friends in the capital, which we residents normally find less thrilling than do people who live in the provinces. On a few occasions, Malikat al-Dar visits me. She is an elderly, retired midwife and my spiritual mother, as I call her. She was a friend of my mother's and helped me a lot when I was starting out. I normally meet my friends and readers, however, in numerous coffeehouses. This strict domestic isolation has permitted me to organize my library the way I want. I have put most of my books in the living room and created two smaller libraries in the two adjoining rooms. Meanwhile, the master bedroom has remained free of everything related to reading and writing. When I enter it, I bring along only my drowsiness or my insomnia – nothing more.

Although I resigned from my post as a middle school math teacher a long time ago and haven't practiced any other occupation since, I have managed to eke out a living, one way or another. It's true that the furnishings of my house are very modest, but I respect that and love their modesty. I do not possess the latest car like those that brokers and social parasites drive, but my cranky old car, a Toyota Corolla, performs its duties on most days admirably and satisfies my limited transportation needs.

The next morning, entranced by the Eastern writing spices I had brought back, I was busily attempting to drag them onto paper when my cell phone rang. The call was from Najma – a presumptuous girl whom I had known for two years and whose arrogance still made me grumble occasionally. She felt so superior to the world that she seemed even to breathe sparingly. She felt superior to the nation and its inhabitants and was fully convinced that the distant stars in the sky had been named for her – not the other way round.

Najma dressed traditionally and didn't follow modern styles, because she didn't care to be swayed by the fashions of this age or any other. Her perfumes were a mix of local and foreign scents so she wouldn't feel confined to one fragrance, as she explained. Her opinion of men could be summarized in just one sentence, and it wasn't favorable.

I met her one day at an out-of-the-way coffeehouse where she read me her story "The Neighbor's Goat". The idea was imaginative and remarkable. One of the writer's neighbors owned a kid that could forecast the weather, volatility in prices, illness, and death. When the goat raged violently through the house, its owner knew that a military coup, a destructive earthquake, or some similar catastrophe would occur that day. Although the story showed a fertile imagination, it was poorly written.

I told the girl frankly what I thought and that she should rewrite it after she read more authors and acquired more literary skill. She did not like that at all. She quarreled with me and broke off contact with me for a number of months. She returned again, however, when she found herself in a quandary that she wanted to implicate me in – not to resolve it, because she would be able to resolve it on her own, at the appropriate time, as she put it – but for me to transform it into a novel.

During that period, she had moved with her family to an old district that was inhabited in the main by people with limited incomes, because her father had retired from a government post in the tax bureau and his resources had shrunk considerably. There, a young man who drafted legal documents in front of the Shari'a Court and who lived in that district, saw her and fell madly in love with her.

At first the young petition writer, named Hamid Abbas but known in the neighborhood as Hamid Tulumba (or "the Pump"), displayed his affection merely in swift, breathless looks at her face and trim body whenever he chanced upon her in the street. This display of affection evolved into the release of ill-phrased exclamations, when he found her waiting for a bus or taxi at the district's public transport station, and finally became thick letters with long, convoluted sentences. She would find these along the district's dusty roads, at the publicity and advertising agency where she worked, or tossed over the garden wall of her house. Sometimes one of her little brothers would bring a letter to her when he returned from playing in the street.

Laughing, Najma informed me with her extraordinary arrogance that she loved this situation immensely and wanted it to simmer for as long as possible so that it could serve as a splendid literary plot in the future. She had devised for the poor petition drafter all types of mud for him to sink in up to his hair. She had plied him with colorful smiles, carefully traced on her lips. She had provided him with glimpses of facial features that could easily be described as those of a dazzling, agreeable girl. Once, she dropped a white piece of paper in front of him with only a question mark on it. One day she wore a screaming red dress and misted her body with a powerful jasmine perfume, because Tulumba had once written she was a red rose that emitted its scent incessantly.

Her dilemma, when I encountered her that day, had apparently reached a climax, and her lover, Tulumba, had informed her in the last of twenty letters that had reached her by various means, that he was preparing a house of love to embrace both of them, building a ceiling over it with a trellis of affection, and furnishing it with soft pillows of love that would never fray.

“Ah! Isn’t this a splendid novel, Master? Isn’t it a plot concept worth putting into words?”

In fact, it was by no means a splendid plot idea for a novel that contemporary writing would embrace. Stories of unrequited love, of requited love, or even of love between one hundred different partners have become so shopworn in all the literatures of the world that I believe they no longer attract mature readers. Moreover, even though I didn’t know that unfortunate petition writer and never expected to meet him, I sympathized intensely with him and hoped that he really wouldn’t need to pull his heart out of the muck and that his true-life ordeal would end. Besides, even if I had found the story concept convincing, I wouldn’t write it, quite simply because I don’t write from experiences that don’t involve me at all. I have never written a novel based on an experience that some random person had and that I happened to hear about. I have my own loose-fitting storytelling shirt that never feels too tight on the body of my writing. I have my imagination, my taste, my perfumes, my spices, and my paved and rocky roads that I traverse when I ride forth on writing’s back.

That day I didn’t laugh, even though I wanted to laugh till I died. I asked the sadistic, supercilious girl, trying not to anger her, “Why don’t you write it? Aren’t you a writer?”

She replied calmly as her right hand tapped her chest gently, “Of course I could write it, but it wouldn’t enjoy a large circulation, and that’s destined to happen when an established author publishes it. I want you to write it and delegate to me the task of enjoying reading and promoting it.”

“No . . .” I said without thinking, as if the computer on which I write my manuscripts had spoken. “No . . . no, I don’t write stories like this.”

That day, when Najma assumed a variety of colorings – primarily anger, indignation, and nervous tension – it seemed to me that she might actually be really captivating and attract many crazed admirers in addition to Tulumba, if her heart were to become more like those of ordinary people and if feelings were inserted into her – not lofty ones – just ordinary emotions.

I watched her hands. Their movements reminded me of a defeated person still struggling valiantly for victory. I observed her eyes a little and discovered that they lacked the limpidity of normal eyes. They seemed to be fitted with contact lenses to shield dark secrets that shouldn’t have light shed on them. She didn’t move from her place but adjusted her posture. She struggled till the hint of a smile found her mouth.

She said with a suavity I did not expect, “You will write it for my sake. Isn’t that so? Every writer offers gifts to girls who are his fans. This will be my gift from you.”

I remembered that she had read me her story “The Neighbors’ Goat” in a corner she had chosen in a noisy coffeehouse that I did not frequent often and that none of my friends patronized. She had paid for my coffee and my cigarettes that day, had listened to my negative opinion of her story, and had left angry, only to return with a dilemma that was hers and not mine.

In my first meeting with her I had probed a lot into her character, more than I should have, but had found no trace of admiration that would prompt me to offer her a text that I could not write. I was certain now that she, even if she had never read a book by me, would understand from my approach to writing that if I did actually write her dilemma as a novel, I wouldn’t elevate her a single centimeter. I would make her the

worst heroine ever. Her “lover,” on the other hand, the petition writer Tulumba, I might transform into a crazed lover who would not accept defeat easily. He would bring her to dwell in a house trellised overhead with vipers and furnished with daggers and knives. He would kill her time and again so that he could survive as a firebrand of love, eternally aflame.

Annoyed with her and her insistence on creating a victim, I sided strongly with her suitor just as I had sided previously with numerous individuals I considered victims of an unjust life. I remember that in my novel *The Course of Events* on the final two pages I saved the hero – Sufyan, an embezzling bank employee – from serving many years in prison because I considered him a victim of a lengthy chain of malfeasance, in which he was merely a minor link, while much more robust links were watching his tragedy and laughing.

In the novel *Tortoise*, published five years ago, I watched Salma, a cruel, perverted public security officer who devised innovative forms of sexual torture, die on the last page; but then I invented an effective remedy that extended her life long enough to give her time to apologize repeatedly to her victims before she expired.

I said to Najma, “My dear, I don’t owe anyone anything. I’m a free writer and write only what I want and what I can. The experiences of other people don’t appeal to me or excite me.”

I think I was rude, because I felt wasted and had a bitter taste in my throat. I saw the supercilious girl vanquished this time so decisively that she made no attempt to inch toward victory.

She plucked her classic gray handbag from the table, opened it forcefully, and took out a strip of aspirins. She popped two pills from the strip and swallowed them without water. Then she rose and turned away from me.

She departed with quick steps, much faster than a girl’s ordinary gait. The adolescent waiter, whose smile revealed teeth corroded by sweets, had, I suspect, a different scenario – involving love and the flight of the beloved – playing in his mind at that moment. When I returned to my house that day, I sat brooding deeply about the petition writer Hamid Abbas, reflecting on his nickname Tulumba – “the Pump” – and how he had acquired it. This chain of thought was far removed from Najma’s dilemma and was a line of reasoning that might introduce this crazed lover to a different text far removed from his actual life.

Najma did not meet with me again for a long time after that – just as she hadn’t after I criticized “The Neighbors’ Goat”. So I was surprised to receive, approximately a year later, on Facebook, a request to be her friend. I responded quickly and did not resist my desire to check out her wall to learn what types of projects she was working on, whether she was still writing short stories, and whether her skills had improved.

I found the story “The Neighbors’ Goat” plastered across the page, with all its linguistic and technical flaws. There were hundreds of comments and expressions of admiration surrounding it, promoting its flaws.

I discovered another story by her, called “Espionage Report on My Grandmother”. The idea was excellent, but the writing wasn’t. The best thing about the story was its title. There were also other brief phrases that did not match her personality, like: “My heart burgeoned in your flank. Straying in your feelings, it rises, soaring . . . I beg you,” or “If my desire to meet you dies, don’t forget to visit its grave.”

I placed a “like” sign on a picture of her in dark clothing and without accessories, leaning against a mud-brick wall, apparently in some village or country estate, even though I didn’t actually like the picture. This “like” opened a passageway in the wall of our quarrel and we met once again.

When we met, I intended to ask her about Tulumba, the wretched petition writer – whether he still was madly in love with her and was creating scenes for her immortal novel. But I didn’t, for fear of becoming involved in her crisis again. She, for her part, gave me no information about what had happened. She also did not refer on her page to that dilemma, which she had said she was trying her hardest to drag out as long as possible.

I answered Najma’s phone call after a number of insistent rings.

She spoke in a very low voice, as if she were too good for the line and did not want to release her voice full force. She apologized for not attending the book launch for *Hunger’s Hopes*, citing an unexpected illness of her normally healthy grandmother, who was over ninety, and enthusiastically invited me to attend an enlightening debate to be held the next evening at the Social Harmony Club, where she would introduce the speaker. The lecture would be devoted to something called “reflexology medicine”, about which there was currently a lot of talk. “People have a right to understand its reality from the experts, in person, and the degree to which it can alleviate pains and treat chronic illnesses,” she said.

Despite my serious efforts to acquire information and despite the fact that I have expended endless hours reading books of every type, all I knew about reflexology was the name, and it had never occurred to me to learn about it firsthand. The topic had never interested me much, and I had no wish to seek treatment, should I get sick, from any alternative form of medicine. The invitation was delivered persistently, however, by a girl who had been humiliated by me often; I had to go, to humor her.

I was a little late arriving at the Social Harmony Club – which was near my house – because when I had already dressed to go out and was ready to leave, I was suddenly overwhelmed by some literary passages that I considered extremely important. I wrote down the title of a possible novel, part of the plot idea, and some random scenes that might make it into the final text or that might be torn up straightaway. I was inspired to think that this novel might include some characters from Kuala Lumpur such as Master Tuli and Anania Faruq and some other local characters that I wouldn't need to research, since I had them squirreled away in my memory. I wished I hadn't become ensnared in this invitation from Najma so I could continue writing all night long, because I had a strange feeling that the writing would flow and not peter out until I became exhausted.

It was after seven-thirty when I found a parking spot near the venue, parked, and entered the hall. Luckily the lecture hadn't started yet.

The place wasn't as crowded as I had expected it to be. I noticed a number of individuals I knew, sitting in front, their eyes focused on the dais. Among these was the elderly trade-unionist Abd al-Rahman, who used to head the main labor union. He had called himself “Mahatma”, even though he did not go barefoot, wear a loincloth of cheap fabric, or harangue people in the streets – as he should have done to earn that title. Since he used to complain of chronic back pain, he was no doubt searching for relief through reflexology. I also noticed Sonia al-Zuwainy, who owned a successful chain of hair salons. She was of Moroccan origin and had been married and divorced many times. She must have been searching in reflexology for a way to moderate her temperament so she could stick with one man. I noticed the swim coach Shawqi, who was called Shushu by his swimmers. A fourteen-year-old boy sat alone on an isolated chair with his eyes glued on the stage; I didn't understand why, unless he was hoping the lecture would provide a laudable way to attract girls.

I plopped down in the first empty chair I found. This was next to a middle-aged woman wearing heavy gold earrings and an attractive, green thobe embroidered with gold thread. I hoped that my presence would not be noticed by anyone I knew or by any of my readers and that the evening would pass uneventfully and I could continue writing afterwards without any burdens or encumbrances. The woman, however, noticed my presence, although fortunately she did not have a clue who I was. She leaned slightly toward me and asked in a whisper, “I think I've seen you before. Do you give the weather report on TV?”

Without hesitation, I replied, “Yes, occasionally.”

I glanced at the stage, where Najma was sitting. She wore an ordinary white outfit like a nurse's uniform. The speaker, who was beside her, was elegant in a black striped suit and a yellow necktie. Behind them was a large poster on which was written in broad, blue letters: “Reflexology Medicine: Pros and Cons: A Lecture by Dr Sabir

Hazaz.”

Najma introduced her guest, using the title “professor”, which wasn’t by any means an outstanding title in a country that addresses in this way office boys, vagrants who sniff gasoline, guys who sell newspapers on the street, and electricity meter readers. I used to know a parking concierge at one of the big hotels who bore this title. The credentials that earned him this sobriquet included his ability, no matter how many cars there were, to find a parking place for a driver. I have a cousin who is a carpenter in a small shop and who two years ago produced by himself all the doors and windows for a merchant’s house of several stories. Then he awarded himself the title of professor; he wouldn’t saw a wooden plank or tighten a screw on a wardrobe that was coming apart unless the client addressed him by this title. Even Steven Riek, the Southerner who sits in a wheelchair in front of the old Church of the Virgin in the center of the city and draws amateur pastel portraits he sells to passers-by for two pounds is known as Professor Steven Riek. The Ethiopian woman Dama’ir, who used to work as a maid for one of my acquaintances and who occasionally came up with totally novel recipes, was called Professor Dama’ir. At a panel where I spoke on the state of youth writing, I was accorded the title professor but immediately scrapped the idea and explained that I was just an ordinary novelist and possessed none of the qualifications for a title like this.

Najma plunged into the lecturer’s biography and enumerated his various forms of expertise, all his successes, and the numerous trips. He had treated an Arab leader for savage migraine headaches that the Americans with all their facilities had been unable to cure. He had treated Africans who were dogged in their countries by psychological complexes and cured Communists who still believed in Lenin and Marx of their ingrained beliefs. He had practiced this profession for the love of God in countries that could not offer him even a loaf of bread and in areas that electricity still hadn’t reached, whereas his theories of reflexology were studied in the most advanced institutes in the world.

The man was very short and very thin, but his fingers were as long and graceful as a pianist’s. Although his face was relatively free of wrinkles, he was definitely over seventy.

The lecturer launched into his speech right away in a large voice that belied his small stature. “Reflexology is a concept that relies on exciting certain points on the hands and feet by massaging them in a special way. This provides an excellent treatment for many health problems. It is not a new science, even though people have not heard much about it till now. Most probably its origins date back more than 5,000 years when the Chinese knew about it and used it to remedy health problems. Ancient Egyptian drawings of it have been found, proving that they knew about it as well. Each of their kings had reflexology physicians who supervised his care. For this treatment to provide the hoped-for results, the body has been divided into ten vertical regions, with five on each side of the body, starting from an imaginary line bisecting the body vertically. Treatment must be provided by a specialist’s hand; it cannot be something haphazard performed by a person without the requisite skill.

“But what happens when the regions we have referred to are massaged?”

“There are actually numerous theories about this, but most probably reflexology treatment influences the body’s blood flow, just as massage assists relaxation, and

thereby helps the body perform its functions in a better way. By this method, we undertake treatment of numerous diseases like anxiety, insomnia, puerperal fever, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic back pain, the menstrual problems of some women, sterility, frigidity, premature ejaculation, even various types of cancer, inflammation of the liver, joints, and prostate, and . . .”

I suddenly felt bored and envied Professor Hazaz his effusive vigor and blazing mind. He would pause occasionally, breathe deeply, wet his throat with a sip of water from the full glass in front of him, or cast a brief glance at a folded piece of paper that a member of the audience had certainly submitted to inquire about some ailment or to request some clarification.

I needed to move a little, to smoke a cigarette, or to flee from the place to return to my draft. I didn't feel at all absorbed in this lecture. I was not enjoying it and had never thought I needed reflexology treatment. To date, I have had a limited number of pains that I have loved and lived on friendly terms with for a long time: nervous tension while writing, bloating of the colon, acid reflux, insomnia on some occasions, mood swings – but nothing else. If I required treatment in the future, Sabir Hazaz would certainly not be the person I sought out. I decided to rise from my seat while the professor was enumerating the dangers of treatment conducted by a non-specialist. These included torn tendons, an increased need to urinate, and thickened discharge of the body's morphine, leading to something akin to insanity. Najma looked bored too. Her expression was reserved and her eyes almost closed. Her diaphanous white headscarf had slipped, but she had not lifted a hand to adjust it.

Even though the audience was small, people had begun to slip away without embarrassment. A young woman whose name I don't remember, although I see her occasionally at cultural events, was taking notes on a piece of paper as if she were a pupil in an important lesson.

It seemed to me that Mahatma Abd al-Rahman wanted the professor to stretch him out right then and massage the map of his feet, because he was holding them out in front of him and kept pressing them together. The seat of Sonia al-Zuwainy, the hair stylist, was empty, and the isolated youth remained alone. The swimming coach, Shushu, was shaking his long hair rapturously, and my middle-aged neighbor, the woman with the embroidered green dress and heavy gold earrings, leaned toward me again the moment I started to rise. She whispered, “Now I recognize you. You courted me when we were in secondary school. You've matured a lot, but I know you with a woman's memory. How are you, dear? Are you married?”

I didn't reply and quickly shot outside.

I stood in a rather dark corner of the outer hall of the club building, smoking my cigarette deliberately while I tensely revisited my Asian memories, hoping they would speak again quickly so I could record them the moment I returned home.

The hall, unlike the inside chamber where the lecture was held, was very crowded. At a number of tables people of different ages were eagerly playing dominoes and cards. People were speaking shrilly about the current political situation, the faltering national economy, and local football matches. A few people were gathered around an old table-football board situated in the opposite corner, waiting impatiently for their turn.

It was a run-of-the-mill hall in an ordinary club where the presence of a novelist,

even a stellar one, would definitely not attract anyone's attention. The people there were far removed from the paths of reading. All the same, something unusual happened at that moment. I suddenly saw Ranim's troubled lover emerge from an inner room. He was wearing his same traditional garb – thobe, turban, and goatskin shoes – and heading rapidly toward me. In his right hand was a copy of *Hunger's Hopes* and in the left was what in my alarm I imagined to be a lethal dagger.

I quickly tossed my cigarette on the floor and hurried toward the exit, fighting a painful urge to scream and summon the people busy playing to protect me as if I were attacked by a lunatic. Scenes and memories raced through my mind: what I had and hadn't produced during my lifetime, what had been really happy and what painful. I thought about the curse that writing is and told myself that it is the greatest curse that could afflict a math teacher who otherwise might today have become Minister of Education or at least a noteworthy educational adviser.

For the most part, my writing has been a mix of reality and imagination – something inspired by my surroundings and something I invent. But even when I find inspiration from reality, I don't write it down the way it is but rather change it so that it won't wound anyone; I don't allow reality the chance to assert its dominion. Friends, family members, neighbors, acquaintances, activists and recluses in the world have found their way into my writing, yet no one has ever said, "That character's me." No protagonist of a scene I borrowed has ever repeated that this was his scene and that he would kill me for writing about him. I don't even use the real names of cities for fear a city will come forward one day to claim I have depicted it. Even though I have described in many passages the liveliness of my street, not one of its residents has ever reproached me.

When the man stood before me, to my intense astonishment, I flashed through all of *Hunger's Hopes* and called to mind all its characters, cul-de-sacs, alleys, paved streets, and rocky paths. I pondered its inspired and uninspired parts, what I considered brilliant in it and what I thought was flavorless and vile. I finished my review without finding anything that resembled this man or that would cause him to pursue me this way.

The novel was in his right hand; what I had imagined to be a lethal dagger was a figment of my imagination, because his left hand was empty.

Shaken, I tried to relax, fearing that he would run away from me. I asked the man, "What do you want from me? Why are you pursuing me?"

He smiled or perhaps laughed – I couldn't tell which. All I could discern was that his wide mouth opened somewhat and his teeth confronted me, although tobacco had marred them so much that none of them could really be called a tooth. I thought I heard a sound that might have been the clearing of a throat prior to a laugh.

He said, "I brought my copy of *Hunger's Hopes* so you could sign it for me. I told you before you traveled that I would bring it to you one day. Do you remember me? Do you remember the copy you signed for my sweetheart, Ranim?"

"Yes, your sweetheart Ranim; who could forget something like that?"

I didn't ask him how he knew that I had returned from my trip and had been conned into attending this lecture. It seemed to me he was stalking me or could predict my movements – I didn't know for certain which.

I took the copy he was holding out to me as my shaken resolve to flee grew. I