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Shadows

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Shadows

Mahmoud Sharif

The cat hides behind the shrubs, preys at mice, brushes the walls,
stalks the birds and I always follow it faithfully.

I am a shadow.

I am a dark silhouette cast on the surface of all things, following the
cat every time, following its whim, mimicking it, every time it moves,
everywhere.

I shadow the stray cat prowling the alleyways or climbing the walls.
I am a shadow living a life bound to it, our lives forever intertwined.

A shadow never chooses who it follows, it has no will of its own,
it is coerced to all shapes and to various forms. We accept our fate
unequivocally, take it as it is and never question the purpose of our
body. I long for my freedom and wish to break the chains of servitude,
to free myself from this life in captivity. I am lacking a life of my own.
Why have I taken the shape of another body and why do I follow it?

I am the one who follows the animal, I am led by it and have to repeat
the same movements, when it licks its fur or when it plays. I imitate it
when it yawns, follow the cat when it explores the souk, when it treads
the roofs or scavenges for food. It ambles with grace in the gardens, on
the grass, and on the tiled-floor. It tiptoes on the veranda, the balconies,
and on the stairs. I follow it as it scampers on the trees or lies down to
rest inside abandoned buildings.

Some shadows are linked to inanimate objects like tables, trees, walls,
or cars. Others are linked to living beings like sheep, women, children,
or birds. I am not unfortunate somehow, at least I can move.

The cat had blue, almond-shaped eyes, a round head, a fur with vertical
stripes, medium sized ears, an elongated, strong, and healthy frame.

It had a calm demeanor. When the cat walked or prowled, I trailed it. When the cat hissed or meowed, I imitated it. When it opened its mouth or spread its claws, I did the same.

The bondage persisted.

We lived in Mogadishu, a battle scarred city ruled by the madness of men, in a frenzy of war and fear.

We sauntered through the districts of Shingani, Medina, Wardiigle, or Waaberi. The cat wandered in the souk of Hamar Weyne then hid behind bags of rice or car wheels, beneath restaurant tables, or under the ground of the Marwaas Mosque in the heart of the old city.

We walked over tin roofs, landed on soft saffron bags, or ran away from the children teasing and chasing us.

We witnessed all major events such as riots and demonstrations, or marauding soldiers harassing innocent people, foreign armies patrolling the streets. We saw mean militiamen levying taxes on people, hungry children begging on the streets, entire families fleeing the city on donkey carts. We witnessed drones gliding in the sky, spying on everyone.

But I was bonded to the cat, unable to choose my destiny, unable to change the color of my coat, unable to change forms. I had no voice, no freedom to pursue other aspirations, and no way to express my feelings.

We hid during the day under the grounds of the mosque. At night, we sneaked into a grain storage, and the animal lay down on the floor, in the alcove.

In there I met the shadow of a chair.

“Hello,” it would greet me every night.

“Hello,” I would answer.

We met more frequently, and our friendship grew.

One day I asked,

“For how many years have you been a shadow linked to this chair?”

“Thirty-five years since the chair was built,” it answered.

“Is there is any hope for us to escape from our lives of bondage?”

“One day perhaps. One day.”

On the following day, the cat dragged me through the alleyways. We strolled the beachfront, climbed derelict walls, sat on window panes, then stared at pedestrians. The cat watched fishermen carrying loads of fish on their heads, each man hastening his march. We stared at children playing football on the street. We watched women carrying bags near the fish market.

These were normal days. Other days weren't as quiet.

One night, as soon as we returned to the grain storage, the shadow of the chair said,

“Did you have a nice day?”

I answered,

“No. Today children were shot in a crossfire. Women screamed lying next to their dead children. The blood flowed on the roadside like a water stream.”

“That is indeed sad,” the shadow of the chair said.

“How can one begin to free himself from servitude?” I asked.

“We are all servants of someone else. You see, you are the servant of the cat while I am the servant of the chair. The cat and the chair are servants of human beings. The human beings in this city are servants of foreign armies of occupation. These foreign armies - which they call peacekeeping forces - are all servants, directly or indirectly, of the monarch who rules the world from America.”

The cat I served was sleeping, it was unaware of our conversation. The street light outside illuminated the room but was unable to radiate light over the angle that I occupied. Hence, I filled that space where the light source could not reach.

The shadow of the chair was still. I pictured a black figure outlined on the ceramic floor.

It said,

“If you want to be free and if you want to lead others to freedom, then lead by example. Reject injustice and iniquity. Renounce greed and vanity. Live by virtue and patience, protect the weak and the sick, respect the elders, cherish the children, and your cause will be worth fighting for. You will have to unite with all the shadows like us who live in bondage. In this struggle we will have to toil together, let go our differences, forego our egos. There are many millions in the world like us. Let’s all work together to gain our freedom.”

When morning came, I followed the cat under the scorching sun. It was time to leave, not leave the city, but leave the body. I had enough of this life of bondage.

In the afternoon, the cat meandered under the acacia trees, then the coconut trees.

When we returned back at night, the chair was moved in a different spot and the shadow lay in a different angle.

“I’ve had enough,” I said. “I want to break free. Right now. Tonight.”
“But who will you be fighting?”

I remained silent.

He was right. I didn’t know who I had to fight.

The next day the chair was gone. Someone had taken it away. I never met the chair again.

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