



Occupation

By: Mohammad Asef Soltanzadeh

Exactly ten minutes after seven.

The young man took his eyes off the clock. Dressed and briefcase in hand as every morning, he was ready to leave. He threw a satisfied glance at this room where he felt quite safe. Then the old feeling came back to him, Will he return to his house again? And a heavy sadness gripped his chest. He carefully locked the door behind him and descended the stairwell. If someone asks him *When did you leave the house?* what will he say?

The old doorman wasn't in his usual place but his yellow cat had stretched itself out on the chair by the door. Hearing footsteps, the cat opened its eyes and looked at the young man who had his hands in his pockets. •

"I don't have anything for you today."

The wall clock was ticking. Too bad the old doorman



wasn't there so he could ask the time. But that's all right, he can ask the guy at the corner store.

When he stepped out into the street he again felt naked, as if a pair of eyes were in constant watch over him. When he reached the store he asked in a loud voice as he did every day, "What time is it?" and tried to hide his watch under his sleeve.

"Buy yourself a watch," grumbled the shopkeeper, eyeing him suspiciously. "Asking the time every day..."

"I want to know what time I left the house so that..." and he smiled.

The shopkeeper eyed him carefully. "What's it to me what time you left your house?"

"I'm going to the office. I don't know what time it is."

"Quarter past seven."

"No, thirteen minutes after seven."

"If you know the time why do you ask?"

"Just remember it."

He didn't stay to see the shopkeeper's reaction. He felt a little more at ease. If they ask him *What time did you leave your house?* he now had a witness. But if someone asks *What were you saying to the shopkeeper?* what will he say? Well, he'll say he asked the time. *Don't you have a watch yourself?* He does but... *But what? Maybe you were talking to him about something else... What was your business with him?*

Fear returned to the young man again. He heard the sound of a military helicopter overhead. He looked up and searched for it in the sky but could not see a thing. The helicopter had already passed—or maybe there was only the sound but the helicopter itself was invisible. His glance fell on a window on the third floor of a house. The dim silhouette of a woman or a girl was looking out on the street

from a window. She must be young and would undoubtedly look very pretty in a red shirt.

If someone asks him *Why were you looking up at that window?* what will he say? *What was your business with that woman or girl? Do you know her? What does she do?*

He bent down his head and resumed an anxious walk. He saw only the feet of the passing people and only from their shoes and pants could he tell whether they were men or women, young or old. He could even guess their occupations from their manner of walking. This had become his only amusement while walking. He even had names for the owners of the shoes and would remember whom he had seen where. He knew which ones he had not seen that day and worried that maybe something...

He heard the tapping of footsteps. When it got closer, one foot and a cane entered his frame of vision. Surely he must have been wounded in the war. Where had he been...?

Right about now *she* would appear. He slowed down a bit. He heard the graceful and melodious footsteps approaching. They had a way of at once reducing and increasing his anxiety. When they got closer, a pair of delicate feet filled his frame of vision. His heart beat faster. Let it be whatever it may—she is looking only at you. If they ask... well, let them ask whatever they want. You are her lot and you have every right to... and he looked up. It was that composed and dignified girl. When their eyes met, the girl smiled. The young man's lips only trembled a little. The girl passed by him and to the end of the street her perfume...

If they ask him *Are you acquainted with her?* what should he say? No, I'm not acquainted with her... *So why did she smile?* I don't know. I'd like

to be acquainted with her. No, maybe they won't see this one.

No matter how much he tried, the young man couldn't lift his head up. The young woman's feet passed him but her scent still wafted in the air, perfuming the street. He walked on straight to the end of the street though he would have liked to take another direction. He would rather have roamed through the winding alleys that cut through old houses and led to endless others. These side alleys were like the little streams that joined together to make a small river that eventually poured into a big river. The main street was that big river, a river full of cars and people. It gave him such pleasure to discover the headsprings of these rivers—a pleasure mixed with that strange feeling of being lost and unrecognized by anyone, a fear that made your heart tremble, but also the feeling that there were no eyes pursuing you and you were free...

But if they ask him *Why did you go there?* what will he answer? *Maybe you know someone there? Who is your contact?*

And now he reached the main street without so much as turning his head to either side. From the din of the noise he knew that he had reached it and now he had to turn right and walk another couple of hundred meters to reach the bus stop. He stopped and looked to the left.

He had never seen where this street originated or where it led to. Although he had hidden a map in his desk drawer at home and knew the city inch by inch from the map, he had never seen what the streets and town squares looked like in reality. In the evenings when he returned home from the office he would study the map. He spread the map under his desk light and took imaginary walks

in the streets. He walked from one street to the next and ended up at a square. He sauntered over to some cinemas and theaters and lingered in a library or two. On his way back he stopped by a couple of taverns and finally, exhausted and spent, he made his way home. He would then throw himself on the couch, not even feeling like eating. Walking home from the office he had bought a cold sandwich from the shop on his way but he had no appetite. He went to bed without eating and tomorrow he would put the day-old sandwich in front of the old doorman's cat who would give him a thankful glance.

Why did you look to the left? What will he say if they ask him that? Well, he will say he stopped to catch his breath. Did you know that he has developed breathing difficulties now? At that very moment his breath was locked in his chest. It is all because of the pollution of these streets, or maybe it is because of indigestion... Maybe you were waiting for someone? No, I wasn't waiting for anyone.

Quickly he took off to the right. He put his head down again so his glance wouldn't fall on any of the people walking toward him. *Why are you looking at them? Maybe you know them...? I am not looking at them and I don't know anyone.*

At the bus stop many people were waiting. Each was occupied with their own thoughts and not talking to anybody—as if there was nothing to talk about. Again the sound of the helicopter reached the young man and he fruitlessly searched for it in the gray sky. He waited exactly four minutes for the bus as he did every day. A number of people got off and his group got on. The bus was crowded and people pressed against each other and stepped on each others' toes. But nobody protested.

The young man hung from a bar, facing an old villager who had found a seat. The old man held a slip of paper, asking his neighbor about the address written on it. The young man perked up his ears. "The Post Office stop, Branch 48."

The old man's neighbor shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry, I don't know," and stared back out at the street.

The young man found it intolerable. "Will you allow me to guide you?" he asked the old man.

"Please, yes..."

The post office stop was two stops after the young man's office. He knew all the stops by heart and had travelled to all of them on his map.

"Get off two stops after I get off."

How do you know where that stop is?—if someone asks, what will he say? Maybe you have gone there to mail a letter? No, I haven't ever written anybody any letters. Whom did you write to? Who is he? Where is he? What does he do? What is your business together? Or maybe...

He remembered that a while ago there had been an armed confrontation on the street that led to the post office, the one parallel to the street they were on now. A military Jeep guarding the intersection had been shot at. One officer and two soldiers had been killed. The young man had been in his office at the time and he had heard the shooting. The newspapers did not report it and nothing was mentioned about it on the radio. Only on his way home he heard some people whispering about it at the sandwich shop.

The young man went pale. *Maybe you were involved in the shooting? No, you know I was at the office. How can we be sure? Maybe you had gone there before to recon the Jeep and were in on a plan to... With whom?*

Worry and anxiety churned inside the young man. His stomach was shot. Pain gripped him under his chest and slowly made its way toward the intestines. It's all because of this not eating. It's indigestion. Yes, it's because of indigestion... Today he must get a referral slip at his office and show himself to a doctor.

"Are you an employee of Office of...?"

A man standing next to him in an overcoat was looking intently into his eyes. The young man's eyes could not bear the stare and looked down. In a trembling voice he answered, "Yes, how do you know?"

The man in the overcoat smiled. "Well, you said that the Post Office stop is two stops after your office."

"Mm-hm."

"I'd like to see you about something."

"About what?"

"Allow me to talk to you at the office."

The pain snatched at the young man's stomach again and coiled in his intestines. He needed to throw up. What could he do? The bus was pulling into a stop. He must rush out of the bus. "Allow me please..." and he made his way as fast as he could to where people were getting off. The old villager cried after him, "Sir, two more stops...?"

The young man paid no attention and jumped off the bus. The fresh air made him feel a little better but there was still churning in his belly. He rushed off in some direction. If someone asks why he got off at this stop he'll say, well, I was feeling badly and needed to make it to a bathroom. He really was feeling very badly, and if he had not seen the sign for public restrooms at the end of an alley he would have felt even worse. He could not run, but he could not casually walk either. With hurried

steps he reached the bathroom and somehow made it to one of the stalls and sat on the hole in the ground. If someone says maybe he used the excuse of feeling badly to go to the restrooms, maybe to see someone... But he felt reassured. This diarrhea would last a good couple of days.

When his eyes found their bearing he made out some scribbling on the stall door that he sat facing. There were some rushed and badly made drawings of naked bodies and some lines in bad handwriting. He was curious to read what was written. What for? Well, so you do your business and you read something. He concentrated on the writing. It was a vulgar sentence that disturbed him. A little to the side someone had written in a neat handwriting, "How long are you going to tolerate this regime..."

Suddenly it was as if an electric current went through him and made him half jump off the hole. What is this? Maybe someone... He looked around him. He was alone. He looked up. No one could see him. There were no signs of hidden cameras either. His eyes returned to the rest of the writing. "Why isn't anyone protesting the way things are? Only by expanding guerilla operations can the pressures of oppression be..."

He was filled with the fear that someone might come after him and presume that he had written this. Indeed, if they ask *Did you write this?* what could he say? Well, he hasn't written it, this is not his handwriting. *Well, maybe he has on purpose changed his handwriting.* No, it's not possible. The writing was done in a blue ballpoint pen. *Let me see, you too...* He did have a blue ballpoint pen on him, and a red one, and he was now feeling them heavy in his pocket. What if as he opened the door to leave someone snatched

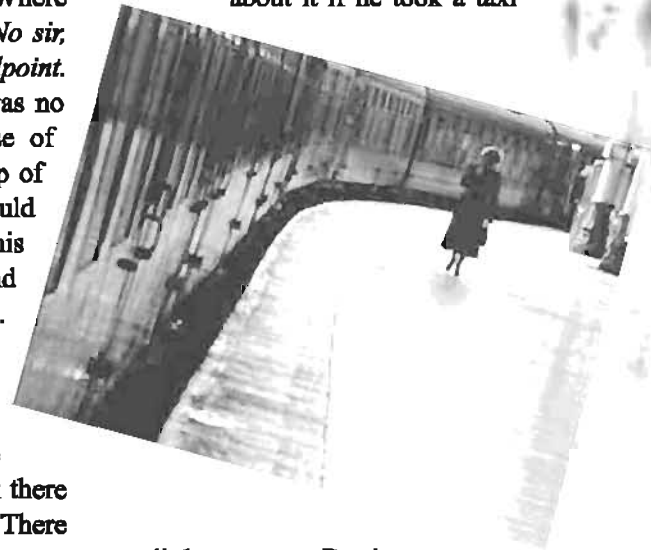
him by the collar...? Someone knocked at the metal door and he once again leapt up from his crouch. Now, who was this? It didn't sound like someone who needed to use the bathroom. Maybe some agent... He must destroy the evidence. He pulled the pens from his coat pocket. Where could he hide the blue one? *No sir, I don't even have a blue ballpoint. Search my pockets...* There was no place where he could dispose of this pen. If he put it up on top of the water tank, well they would search and find it. Anyway his fingerprints were on the pen and that would make things worse. How about if... no, he couldn't swallow it. If he threw it in the hole on the ground... well, that hole was closed at the bottom and it would get stuck there and make things worse again. There was another knock at the door.

"Wait, sir, I'll be right out. One minute..."

He pulled up his pants and looked with confusion in every direction, wondering what to do. At the next knock he threw the pen over the top of the stall and heard it bang against one wall, then another, and then the ground. Then he heard the grumbling of someone sitting in another stall. He opened the door. An angry man gave him a dirty look and entered the stall.

Any moment now he will see the writing... He ran out without washing his hands. He came up chest to chest against another man rushing to the bathrooms. He did not bother with apologies and ran to the end of the alley without catching his breath. What if that man followed him? He gave a quick look behind him and was reassured that no one was after him. When he got to the street he turned right toward his office.

Now, what was he going to say when they asked him why he was late? He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to eight and already past the time he was supposed to be at the office. It would be another quarter to half hour later by the time he got there. How about it if he took a taxi



so a little sooner... But it doesn't make much of a difference. Being late is being late. A little sooner or later does not matter; what matters is why you are late. *Where have you been this time and with whom did you...*

A curse on this life. What good is this life. He turned left, away from the office. He was still walking fast. Not to get apprehended until I get there... after that I don't care.

As he crossed the street he tripped over the rut that was dug into the asphalt by chains from the tanks. He nearly dove, head first, into a guy driving by on his motorbike. Jumping over a water canal on the opposite sidewalk, he ran into another passerby.

"Where in such hurry...?"

The passerby grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. He didn't look like a normal passerby. He had an overcoat on and under his cap his eyes had an intent and searching

look, as if they could read his inner thoughts. Maybe an agent...

"You look suspicious."

"I haven't done anything."

"Who knows...?"

The passerby spoke with a sly and malicious smile on his face. The young man tried to smile and talk softly so he would not be overheard by anyone else. They walked shoulder to shoulder.

"So what is it that you haven't done?"

"I didn't write that."

"Sure you wrote that. It's in your handwriting," he laughed in the young man's face.

Why in the world had he given himself away!

Suddenly he broke into a run. He could not tell if the man was following him. At the intersection he ducked under the gun barrel of a tank that stood there imposingly, and turned right. He knew that the river was near, about a hundred feet from him. In his map he had taken many walks by this river. Sometimes he had climbed down to the bank and sat on the stone steps to fish. The girl whom he passed by everyday had been there too. Many times they had made a bet that whoever fished more would be the guest of the other at the cinema.

He reached the river. It was just as he had imagined it, except that the water wasn't blue. It was a horrific gray that poured fear into your heart. Dying in

such water must be very painful. He grabbed the railing of the bridge and bent over to see if he could see the bottom of the river. There was a layer of yellowish foam on the water and patches of gray showed through the slime the river was carrying. Should he jump or not? It's better to jump. What life is this that he has. Dying is better... It will be a relief. It will be liberation. But won't they ask why he committed suicide? Well, let them ask... They can't interrogate a dead man. He felt a little happy but... What if he jumps and doesn't die? No, he will die. He will certainly die. He had heard many times that people had jumped from this river and drowned in the depths of the water... But what if he doesn't die? What if they rescue him, then they will ask, *Why did you try to kill yourself?* Well, everyone is in charge of his own life and death. What's it to anybody else? *Oh, so now you're in charge! But what is it you have done that you want to be relieved from?* Nothing... *No one kills himself because of nothing. Tell the truth—lying is useless. Surely you've done something. Something...* It was perhaps out of hopelessness. *Hopelessness? Why hopelessness...? You mean you don't have any hope anymore?* No, he doesn't. *But why not? What have we done that you have lost hope? Do you mean to say you don't have hope in us*

anymore...? Yes, he has. He has hope in everything.

Apparently the young man changed his mind because he pulled back and leaned against the railing. He closed his eyes. People walked by without looking at him. Why should he kill himself. Why should he lose his life. Isn't this life worth living?

He sauntered back to the intersection. The tank was still parked there. An officer was now standing next to the guarding soldier, smiling triumphantly at the passersby. The young man went straight up to the officer, grabbed him by the collar and locked his eyes into his. "What do you want from us...?" he screamed.

And he cried, before a bullet rang out from the soldier's gun, "Why don't you get the fuck lost?"

Mohammad Asef Soltanzadeh was born in Afghanistan in 1964 and moved to Iran in 1986. His collections of short stories won the prestigious Golshiri Prize in Iran in 2001 and 2007. This story is from his collection, Asgar Goriz, which won the Golshiri prize in 2007. In 2002, when Afghans were no longer allowed to stay in Iran, Soltanzadeh moved to Denmark. He can be reached at : soltanasef@yahoo.com

Translated by Maryam Pirnazar
pirnazar@urtext.us

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