

Why Don't You Write a Novel, Instead of Talking About All These Characters?

WE BROUGHT A half-naked Afghan corpse with us. Adel Salim and I dragged it for three cruel nights through a forest that appeared to be endless, with no way out. Adel had taken off the Afghan's black shirt and I'd tied his feet together with the sleeves. It was the last forest before the Romanian-Hungarian border. After ten yards the shirt had torn and from then on we had to drag him by the arms. It had been snowing since we crossed the river, but lying there on that final night, I forgot all this and dreamt I was sleeping in the cells of my military unit from the war days. At dawn we woke to the sight of Hungarian army dogs sniffing the Afghan's corpse.

Your name?

Salem Hussein.

Age?

Thirty.

The woman made a hand gesture, telling me to take off my underpants. Yesterday they took our stool samples, today they're examining our skin. She made a note in the papers in front of her, then made a little upward gesture with her finger. I pulled up my underpants. She waved towards the door without looking up at me. I put on the rest of my clothes. Adel Salim came in after me, then a tall young Nigerian called James. He was wearing summer shorts with a smiley face printed on the backside and a thin shirt in the colours of

HASSAN BLASIM

the Jamaican flag. He protested to the escort when she told him he couldn't go outside for a smoke. The only ones left were the Moroccan, and an old Kurdish man and his wife. We were a new group of inmates. We had reached the hospital early in the morning escorted by a pretty young woman called Anisa from the refugee reception centre. She was an Albanian who had got a job at the centre after living there as a refugee for five years and, in the meantime, had become fluent in Hungarian. We were each given a container for a stool sample and a plastic tube for urine. The Moroccan stood up and undid his trouser belt a little, tucked in his red sports shirt and then fastened the belt tight. James the Nigerian came out of the doctor's room ecstatic, and pulled the cord of his shorts, as if he had just come out of a prostitute's room. Anisa said the nurse would come soon to collect the urine and stool samples and she hoped the tests would go well. Out of the blue she told us what had happened to the previous group. That was a month earlier. She said they were ten young Somali men with a young boy. One of them took all the stool containers and filled them himself, while the others only filled the urine bottles. Of course in the laboratory they could easily tell that all the stool samples came from one man. When they were challenged on this, the Somalis pleaded that they couldn't find any other way to fill the containers. They said they struggled to procure a sample from the Western-style toilets because the shit bobbed about in the water and it was hard to fish it out. So one of them took on the water and it shat on the bathroom floor and with that filled all the containers easily, including the boy's.

Adel Salim and I had arrived three days after the others. They gave us a quick interrogation at the army post on the border and in the morning they sent us to a refugee reception centre in a border town. I don't know where they took the corpse of the Afghan. They told us that after the medical tests the police and the immigration department would question us again on the details of how he died. They put us in the

WHY DON'T YOU WRITE A NOVEL...

quarantine section of the reception centre, a small building attached to the main centre where the rest of the inmates were staying. The Hungarians call it the 'karanten', similar to the Iraqi version of the word - 'karantina'. It was dirty and crowded with Afghans, Arabs, Kurds, Pakistanis, Sudanese, Bangladeshi, Africans and some Albanians. The tests went on for a month. The frightening aspect of the quarantine section was the results of the medical tests, because some of the refugees had tuberculosis or scabies. Those ones were transferred from the quarantine section to the isolation hospital on the outskirts of the town. They would stay there until they were cured. That is what most of the new inmates feared most: not the disease but the time they would need to stay for treatment, which could be more than a year and a half. The Iraqis and Iranians made fun of tuberculosis and scabies because they thought they only infected Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Afghans and Africans. In fact the test results seemed to confirm this, and the diseases of the Iraqis, the Iranians and the Kurds proved to be exclusively venereal, in particular gonorrhoea, which could be treated within the reception centre.

We had crossed the Romanian-Hungarian border with a professional trafficker. At dawn he'd told us that the fog had started to thicken and we would have to stick together to reach the river and then cross the river into Hungarian territory. The trafficker said he had no obligation to wait for anyone who stopped walking and we would keep going until the fog lifted. We did our best to keep up with the trafficker. We swore to the interrogators that the Afghan died crossing the river. He had been very ill, and he soon drowned and we couldn't save him, but the medical reports showed he had died of strangulation. I told them honestly and faithfully what had happened that foggy morning. The trafficker had lost his way (that's what he told us), so he said we had to spend the night in the forest. We got into our sleeping bags, shivering

HASSAN BLASIM

from the cold – you can ask James the Nigerian, the Moroccan or the old Kurd, because they crossed before us and they explained what happened next when we met them in the quarantine centre. It was a shabby trick. The trafficker knew that the river was one kilometre from the forest, but the boat that one of his assistants from the Romanian border villages had left for us would only hold five people, so the trafficker would have to abandon three of us. I'm sure he was aware of the boat problem in advance, before the journey even began in Bucharest. The trafficker waited till about half an hour after we had got into our sleeping bags, then started going round the group, kicking each one gently, in the expectation that only some would wake up. This selection method of his succeeded. Adel Salim, the Afghan and I were fast asleep, while the others were dozing or couldn't sleep at all for the cold. So they left us in the forest, dead to the world. When we woke up we realised we'd been tricked. We started looking for the river so we could cross into Hungary ourselves. God started making the fog even thicker. He seemed to be doing it deliberately. Hours later we reached the river. The cold had exhausted the Afghan and he no longer had the strength to walk. He had a raging fever. Adel very much liked the Afghan, and the two of us carried him. The poor man had stuck with us and become a companion and a brother since we met him crossing the mountains on the Iranian-Turkish border. Adel asked me to cross the river first, to try out the crossing, and then call them from the other bank to explain to them how to cross without getting lost in the fog. Adel said he would help the Afghan by himself. Shivering from the intense cold, I shouted out to Adel from the far bank. Then I heard him jump into the water with the Afghan. I shouted out to show them the way and after a while I heard them splashing around in the water. Adel shouted that the Afghan had started to drown. I shouted out again, begging him not to abandon him. The sound of them splashing in the water quickly grew louder, then suddenly everything was quiet. I was about to jump back into the

WHY DON'T YOU WRITE A NOVEL...

water to help them when I saw Adel emerging from the fog, pulling the Afghan after him, dead. Adel burst out crying and I decided not to leave the Afghan's body, although Adel objected at first.

It's been three years since this incident took place. I'm now working in the refugee camp in place of Anisa the Albanian, who has returned to her own country. I work as a translator for the immigration department, and I escort the new quarantine inmates to the hospital every morning. There's nothing exciting in my life, the same shit and urine problems, the usual refusals to strip off in front of a woman doctor. I wanted to forget my countrymen, and match the rhythm of my life to the slow pace of this border town. I visit the Afghan's grave from time to time, because he was buried in the town cemetery close to the refugee reception centre. His grave is the only one without a cross. People who visit the cemetery take a look at it out of curiosity, to see the Quranic verse engraved on the headstone. I drink in the bar every evening. I sleep with a woman who works in the flower shop, who loves me very much. I read the newspaper on the internet. Sometimes I cry all night. But for the last few years I haven't dared visit the prison where Adel Salim lives in the capital, Budapest. Then one day I made up my mind to go and visit him.

The encounter only lasted a matter of minutes.

'Okay, I don't understand, Adel,' I said. 'What were you thinking? Why did you strangle him? What I'm saying may be mad, but why didn't you let him drown by himself?'

After a short while, he answered hatefully from behind the bars. 'You're an arsehole and a fraud. Your name's Hassan Blasim and you claim to be Salem Hussein. You come here and lecture me. Go fuck yourself, you prick.'

He blew out a lungful of cigarette smoke and went back to his cell.

HASSAN BLASIM

On the train back I was bewildered and there was a bitter taste in my mouth. I wanted to sleep but my mind was seething. I tried to put the events of my life in order, but many of them had faded into oblivion: my first meeting with Adel Salim in the south of the country, our plan to escape from the military lock-up, the Iranian border guards who arrested us, the electric-shock torture, meeting the Afghan, the river, Hassan Blasim, the border. The train stopped at a station. I went to the bathroom and when I came back a fat man had taken a seat in the compartment. Next to him he had a small cage with a white mouse inside. He looked up from his newspaper. I greeted him. He nodded and went back to his newspaper.

The train set off and the man put out his hand.

'My name's Saro,' he said. 'My wife gave me this beautiful mouse. It's my birthday. Fifty years old.'

'Saleem Hussein,' I said and shook his hand.

'That's strange,' said the man, examining my face. 'I've read many of your stories. You're a writer!'

'That must be someone else,' I said. 'I don't have anything to do with writing. I'm a translator in the immigration department. It's true I wrote some poems in my youth, but I've never written anything else.'

'Perhaps... perhaps you'll write something later,' he said.

He folded his newspaper and added, 'I was born in the Year of the Mouse.' He started telling me about the Chinese Zodiac, and said that people born in the Year of the Mouse like to talk about themselves and the way they live. They are very kind but they are also very ambitious, and it's hard for them to get on with people born in other years. They love debate and their biggest problem is their selfishness. I gathered he had chosen the Year of the Mouse for himself because he was so interested in mice, and not because of his real date of birth. He described the mouse as a gentle and fascinating creature, and we started chatting about mice and their

WHY DON'T YOU WRITE A NOVEL...

qualities, as the man had extensive experience in all things mouse-related. The conversation led me to expound on my own life and on what had happened with Adel Salim and the Afghan. I started to humour his passion for mice and I told him what I could remember: in my childhood we lived in an area called Air Force Square, close to a military airfield. It was a dirty area teeming with mice, cockroaches and flies. Everyone tried to get rid of the mice, but in vain. My elder sister, like the rest of the women, would set small wooden traps in the kitchen. When a mouse went into the trap it would end up scalded. My sister would boil some water and pour it on top of the mouse – a special form of extermination. It was a horrible death. The smell of boiled mouse hung in the courtyard for more than a day. My grandfather had his own method. He had a long stick at the end of which he had hammered in some nails, and with a quick flick he would hit the mouse, which would start bleeding and make a horrible squealing noise. My sister never accepted this method, because the floor would get spattered with blood and, like the other women in the neighbourhood, she preferred boiled mice to bleeding mice.

'Permit me to tell you that you're lying. These are not memories. Doesn't what you say come from a story called 'My Wife's Bottom'?

'If you say so, Mr Saro,' I said, shifting in my seat.

The man looked at me calmly and said, 'Listen, young man. Can you tell me, for example, who wrote 'The Killers and the Compass'? It's the one about the Pakistani kid who finds a sacred compass, and tells how he carried it from Pakistan to Iran, and the rape incident. Your friend Adel Salim killed the Afghan to obtain the compass. It sounds like a riddle or a silly detective story. I'm sure you'll clear the matter up in another story. Why don't you write a novel, instead of talking about all these characters – Arabs, Kurds, Pakistanis, Sudanese, Bangladeshis and Africans? They would make for mysterious, traditional stories. Why do you cram all these

HASSAN BLASIM

names into one short story? Let the truth come to light in all its simplicity. Why not enjoy your life?

'Mr Saro, I don't understand what you're saying. Besides, you're talking about truth and for a start I hate anyone who utters that word as if he's a prophet or a god. Maybe you've heard of Jalal ad-Din Rumi, the Sufi Muslim who died in 1273. Rumi says, "The truth was once a mirror in the hands of God. Then it fell and broke into a thousand pieces. Everybody has a very small piece of it, but each one believes he has the whole truth."'

Saro said, 'I know your friend Rumi but I've never heard of him saying that. Listen, mice are colour blind, but they can distinguish shading, from black through to white, and that's enough to get a grip on some reality.'

Then Saro stopped talking and left me to myself. He took a lump of cheese out of his bag and started to break it up into small pieces, which he threw at the mouse in the cage.

'Mr Saro, you seem to be a foreigner like me.' I said.

'It's true. I'm from Turkey,' he said, looking at his mouse.

'It's a beautiful country.'

'Really?' said Saro.

'Definitely.'

'You cursed your time there. You ate shit in Istanbul, as you put it. You worked like a donkey in restaurants and factories for a pittance,' said Saro.

I examined his face in the hope of uncovering his personality.

'We didn't meet in the way you imagine. Everything exists in stories,' said Saro.

'We're going back to the subject of writing again.'

'Why not? It's an impressive human activity,' said Saro.

'Let me ask you, Mr Saro. Are you interested in literature? Do you write?'

'No, I'm only interested in the lives of mice.'

WHY DON'T YOU WRITE A NOVEL...

The train stopped again. Mr Saro put on his coat, picked up his mouse and left.

Then he came back and stuck his head through the compartment door. 'Why didn't you mention your real name in this story?' he asked. 'Your friend Rumi said, "There is no imagination in the world without truth."'

'Rumi also says, "You saw the image but you missed the meaning,"' I answered. I wanted to ask him not to leave me on my own.

'But I hate rats,' came Saro's reply.

The train moved. My tooth was hurting. I took an aspirin and tried to relax. I browsed through the newspaper without interest. On the back page there was a story about a poisoning incident:

A Belgian woman set sail on a boating expedition last week, accompanied by only her dog and a few cans of her favourite drink, Coca Cola. Once out in clear water, the woman stowed her cans in the boat's refrigerator and then, according to police reports, began to play with the dog by vigorously rubbing its penis. The next day the woman was taken to hospital and put in intensive care. She died three days later. After a post-mortem examination, and prior to the dog being handed over to a shelter for stray pets, it was established that rat urine on the Coca Cola cans was the cause of the illness, having infected the woman with a deadly spirochaetic-related pathogen. As part of the investigation police and public health officials have now visited the supermarket where the woman purchased the cans. The rat is still being sought.