

A Translation into English of Khalil I. Al-Fuzai's¹ "Before the Station"²

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Abstract

Hassan sits behind his wooden box selling cigarettes and matches. In front of him, he sees people struggling to make a living. This scene illustrates what is going on inside the poor boy's mind. It dramatizes the inability of Hassan to cope with what is going on around him. Yet he has to find a way to earn money and make a living, and this is the reason he is sitting before the station.

As a boy, Hassan is not expected to play such a social role, which is usually managed by adult men. That is why a man asks Hassan, "Do you sell cigarettes?" expecting that he is taking the place of an adult who will be back soon.

Hassan is not the only young person who is in charge of a family in the society, as the story indicates that "there are many people like him scattered in front of this car station." Particularly during the 70s and early 80s, such a case was common.

Indeed, Hassan has only his mother at home. Imagine if he had brothers and sisters: what would happen to this boy? Hassan's family is not the typical family in Saudi Arabia; it is hard to find a family with only one child.

Though culturally and traditionally the family is encouraged to have many children, yet it is the society here that grants Hassan's mother no other option but to send her son out so as to assume his dead father's responsibilities.

In brief, Khalil I. Al-Fuzai manages in this story to criticize the society that creates and enforces traditional and cultural restrictions and at the same time does not provide solutions to the problems of families and individuals like Hassan. Finally, in my translation, some well-known words are kept with their original pronunciation and written in italics to keep the reader aware of the Arabic text.³

Keywords: *Khalil al-Fuzai, Saudi, short story, "Before the station"*

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Translation:

The sun rose from the far distance of the city, struggling through the legions of darkness, and drawing up in the pages of the universe the birth of a new day . . .⁴ new to the world in all surprises it hides . . . every one of this day's moments holds something new for the world. As for Hassan . . . he feels confident that there will be nothing new in his day, as this was the case with his yesterday. Who knows? Perhaps

there will be nothing new in his tomorrow. He yawned lazily, feeling the desire to sleep. But his poverty will not allow him to sleep. He sat cross-legged after putting his wooden box in front of him, and on the top of it he arranged his negligible merchandise.

Again today he started by sorting the packs of cigarettes and matches that lay in front of him . . . in a variety of geometrical shapes. He does so to amuse himself until a new customer comes to buy a pack of cigarettes from him.

This is his work the whole day long . . . except for some skirmishes he finds himself involved in without a choice . . . skirmishes with one of the vulgar drivers scattered about this station in front of which he sits with his inconsiderable merchandise.

From the early morning he awakens . . . and before the sun rises all the people find him isolating himself behind his wooden box, playing many times with the boxes of cigarettes and matches.

Often he becomes absent-minded . . . imagining himself owning one of those cars he sees parking in front of him, while both of his hands are busy arranging the boxes of cigarettes and matches that he intends to sell to passers-by. In the past, he used to carry the box on his chest after he tightened it with a rope and put it around his neck. Recently, he has preferred to sit behind the box in this station in order to have a rest. And he may sell in this location more than he can sell while moving here and there. Despite the fact that there are many people like him scattered in front of this car station, he assumes that his little stock of merchandise will start growing to the extent that he may be able to open a supermarket one-day. Then, he will not resort to putting some empty packs of cigarettes in his box in order to delude people into thinking he owns a lot--which is what he is doing now.

Horns of noisy cars, the uproar of the traffic and the crowds of the passers-by, and the noise of the engines in the near-by workshops, and the shouts of drivers calling the passengers to come and ride their cars . . . they yank in the passengers . . . a passenger's items might be divided by the drivers . . . seeing him coming to where they are waiting, they run toward him: his belongings will be taken and put in one car, while his clothes are divided. His *abaya*⁵ goes in another, his *ghutra*⁶ in a third car, and his *igal*⁷ in a fourth car, while more than one hand pulls him in different directions; every driver wants to have him, as the poor passenger's complaining shouts rise. He throws himself into the closest car, asking the driver to collect all his scattered pieces that have been taken to other cars.

All this distracts Hassan's thinking as he contemplates more than one subject. And every time his thinking takes him away from his real status, it will not be long before he returns again to his small world . . . to his wooden box that contains packs of cigarettes and matches. Suddenly, a customer is standing before him as if he came out from the inside of the earth, hands over paper money, and asks for the brand of cigarettes he wants. Hassan gives him what he wants, and with a sudden movement, searches his pockets in order to give the customer change from the paper money which he carefully puts in his pocket. Then, he heaves a deep sigh, having insured he has enough money to be able to buy the only meal that he will have with his mother when he returns this afternoon to his home—a home he inherited after his father's death. It is all he has. He is proud of it in spite of its age and its antiquated features. Regarding dinner, he has become satisfied with whatever is left from his lunch, if anything, or with stale bread.

Sometimes he finds it enjoyable to entertain himself by repeating one of the songs the nearby café always used to broadcast . . .

Hassan is not content with himself . . . his skeleton is covered with a torn *thobe*⁸ . . . his skin with a pale color that worries his mother . . . his insignificant merchandise that always makes him feel ashamed . . . all this renders him discontented with his true state of affairs.

He notices a man . . . hence he tries to smile for no purpose . . . it seems the man is going to buy a pack of cigarettes from one of those sellers who are sitting before the car station, yet Hassan's smile draws his attention, so he heads over.

"Welcome! . . . which brand of cigarettes do you want?" Hassan said after he squatted.

Before the man replies, Hassan starts looking at him curiously so that the man feels restless because of his ambiguous looks.

"I want . . ." Yet at the last moment he changes his dialect and asks, "Do you sell cigarettes?!"

"Of course, sir! And I think this is so clear that you do not need to ask such a question."

"I know . . . I know . . . but I was asking . . ." He pauses for a moment. Then he says, "Do you see that this work is not suitable for you?"

"Yes it does not suit me . . . but at least it does not require much effort."

The man does not want to continue this conversation, hence he takes a pack of cigarettes and leaves Hassan with his thoughts. The conversation does not make any impression on Hassan for he has become accustomed to such curious customers like this one who enjoy intruding upon other people's business. As long as Hassan's affairs are not of importance, he does not object to talking about them.

He hears people screaming at the station. He guesses that it is a new dispute, taking place among the drivers as usual. So he does not bother himself to turn his face to look at the source of the shouting. He is trying at the same time to ignore the comments coming from many people regarding this disturbance.

Not far away, there is a small row of homeless ants . . . blundering in agitation.

A youth, not much different in social status, asks, "Do you not hear, Hassan?"

Before he finishes what he wants to say, he points to another person of the same low class who seems impudent, and laughs noisily.

"He has farted." He covers his nose with his thumb and index finger and says, "A stinker."

Then, Hassan says, "He has to give up eating fava beans . . . they cause farts."

All three laugh heartily, and some passers-by who hear the conversation from its beginning laugh as well.

The sky becomes cloudy, although it was not like that a few minutes ago. The ground becomes wet. And Hassan begins hitting the sidewalk with his bare feet on his way home where his mother waits for him. The cold permeates his body to the bones. The wind blows away the leaves of the trees--spread on both sides of the street--which are long like "the heads of devils." At this time, cars rush past forcibly. He remembers that one day he wished that he would be hit by a car, on the condition that he would not be hurt much, so that he could get paid for his probable injuries. But he realized that he might lose his life and at that point there would be no monetary benefit. Maybe the driver would be so clever that he would avoid hitting Hassan even if he were to hit one of the trees spread out on both sides of the road. Then Hassan

would have to take the driver's punches, and insults--this would take place if the driver did not bring him to the police station. After considering the risk, Hassan has not thought of it anymore.

There is an alley at the end of the street toward which Hassan turns on his way home. He appears skinnier as he disappears from onlookers. And if it happens that one could read his thoughts, he would find that Hassan's waiting mother's image occupies all his thinking, for he does not think of anyone other than his mother.

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Translator's Notes:

- 1- KHALIL I. AL-FUZAI (1940-) is a literary writer from Saudi Arabia. In his writings, he introduced his culture, addressing many social, cultural, and religious issues he saw in his society.
- 2- This story was translated from the following Arabic source:
Al-Fuzai, Khalil I. Thursday Fair. (سوق الخميس). Taif: Taif Literary Club, 1979: 5-10.
- 3- An introduction a reader may need to connect the text to its context.
- 4- . . . Every now and then there are few dots found in the source text.
- 5- *abaya*: a cloak over the dress; usually thin with different colors for men, and black and thick for women.
- 6- *ghutra*: an Arabian headdress worn by men.
- 7- *igal*: a cord worn on the headdress.
- 8- *thobe*: a gown worn by men.

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