

Ombunvald

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As I recalled the day I returned from the trip, I sat on the edge of the bus seat. We were on a white-polished bus, and my seat was right behind the driver's. I opened the window, whose protective coating made scratches like falling meteors. I was the only one that did it while inside, others were singing and clapping. The happiness felt close enough to touch my ears. But the louder they shouted at some performance or interesting event behind me—which paid me no attention—the more hollow I felt. It was as if the noise and I were two entirely unmixable entities, and I was being pushed smaller and smaller inward.

As the window opened, the singing was muffled by the thunderous sound of the wind, and I felt my sunken skin inflate like a balloon. Now I watched myself as an outsider across the road, following the path of the bus. My head was placed on the sill, rubber pillow, letting my veiling hair leave my forehead. I saw myself as a character in a film, from across the road, following the pace of the bus itself. The bus was passing an empty road with a background of trees of similar shapes, heights, and colours. It was passing a monocultural plantation. The plants were relatively thin—thinner than most of the average trees I knew around my house. The plant was familiar, and I was sure I had seen them somewhere around my backyard, but I failed to remember what the plant was.

Then my vision cut to a close-up view. I saw myself glow in the morning sunlight, my eyes closed as my skin breathed the coldness. I have been looking at myself for so long that I looked at the blur of green behind me, searching for grassy detail, as if the film was glitching, looping the scene. It was very difficult to be meticulous while watching a continuously moving object. Luckily, as if my suspicion was heard, my eyelids opened, slowly looking towards the side across the road.

It was the view of a narrow passageway—a dirt road between two neighbouring clusters of homes. We were no longer in the plantation. On each side of the passage gateway, lush greenery stretched as far as the horizon.

Now I was here at the gate, at the same position. It was five in the morning, and the call to prayer for Fajr had just ended. Its echoes still vibrated on the leaves and lingered in my ear. I was not going to pray. I was there because I wanted to go to school, and the passageway was a shortcut to the big road. I would pray later at the school's mosque. I usually did not take the shortcut if my friends were with me at the side of the road here, waiting for public transport, but strangely they were not here yet. It was unusually long for me to wait. I came to the conclusion that all of them were either sick or had woken up late, and I could not afford to wait for them any longer.

The passageway was lit by two headlamps with dark orange light, standing tall with square-shaped lamps. Both were fixed to the left wall. They were situated twenty meters apart. On each side, concrete walls rose to the height of my chest, their tops crowned with wires and protruding knots of thorn. Behind them, thick vines slithered and formed bushes.

The lights left most of the road in darkness. I entered on the right side, walking along the wall to avoid the pool and muddy path left by last night's rain. From the gate, the first lamp was ahead on the left, then a stretch of shadow, then the second lamp farther ahead.

When I passed the pool—which revealed a swimming moth on its surface—and arrived at the darkness between the lamps, I pressed my palm against the wall. I did not exactly know why I did it. Dews fell from the vines and wet my shoulder; and my palm, sweeping across the mossy rug, began to itch. The sensation unsettled me, amplified by my thoughts. I began to think that a snake might be dangling from the wire in front of me, looking at me, and that if my hand brushed against it, its slimy body would roll like dough, revealing the white scales of its stomach. I shivered just imagining the snake's stomach, let alone the thought that its body might roll in reaction, our skin touching, and its head would curl upward and bite me. I stopped at the thought, pulling my palm from the wall and shaking it violently. Something had peeled off. Moss—only moss, I told myself. I crunched my palm into a fist. No slimy or sharp thing. Thank goodness.

As I walked further, I realized my steps made a disgusting, fleshy sound, and with each step forward, they became heavier. At first, I imagined a person in the shadows holding both my feet. *Irrational!* I quickly despised myself and let out an audible gasp. The mud had formed new layers on my feet—nothing else! Yet such obvious reasoning could not make me feel fully relaxed. Though everything was almost black, I dared not look at my feet, let alone behind me. Again, thinking of it only made it worse. I felt my back grow cold, more than anything else, and a sudden wind only made me shiver more, imagining that another shadow was following me from behind, carrying a knife.

"Dumb, dumb head," I cursed under my breath, and walked faster toward the second headlamp.

"I will clean them under the second headlamp," I told myself, trying to distract from my breathlessness. My feet became heavier. The air grew lonelier. My back felt colder, as if something was pressed against it, its head near mine, smiling.

I stumbled onto someone, jumped back, and screamed so hard that there was commotion in the tree behind the wall above me. A bird was so startled that when it jumped and departed, a branch fell somewhere.

"I'm sorry," I pleaded from the shadows, even though I could not see him. But the person did not answer me.

"I apologize, sir... ma'am," I added. But the darkness did not answer. I swore it was a person. They were squatting, and I had stumbled against their back.

"Sir..." I added. No answer.

What if he had already turned back toward me and held out a knife while smiling? But what if that was not a person but something resembling... a piled sack of sand? I could not go back to retrace the scene. It felt like I had stumbled against a backbone, and I felt the person stumble slightly forward as well. I stepped to the center of the road and carefully fixed my eyes to my right, watching for something that might jump at me.

"I'm sorry, sir. I was not aware," I added again. I truly was. I could not explain it, but everything felt so wrong at that moment. The air, the road, the light—all of it threatened me. I felt I had to apologize like my life depended on it.

I walked faster toward the second headlamp. Its light radiated in all directions, shining left and right across the road. *A shelter!* It was only a few meters away. I now imagined that on the other side of the wall, behind my back, something was standing and observing me too.

"This stupid bitch!" My eyes screamed with tears.

I scurried like a running crab to the space beneath the headlamp. My breath settled, and my heart bounced back into my chest.

"Nothing is happening. Nothing is happening. No one is following me," I repeated like a mantra, my lips dry.

At the road's end, a grocery store stood on the left, lit with brilliant white light. Across from it was a small restaurant, adjacent to the head of the village's house, its lights lit one after another. On the right was darkness with gaps of light. I would rather stand here in the cold until sunrise than cross that path again.

A roar of children's laughter erupted from the darkness. I screamed again, but my voice was mute compared to theirs. Then came the crisp sound of thin flip-flops—running footsteps with ever-growing laughter, so close to the reach of the light. My heart beat uncontrollably as I waited to see what might emerge into the light. I fixed my gaze on the edge of the lamplight, staring left and right with quick, sharp glances, my pressed hand sweeping across the wall. I could not feel secure anywhere.

The laughter stopped suddenly. The footsteps began to quiet and fade, as if they had encountered the thing I had stumbled upon. Had the children stumbled upon it too? Or had its demonic presence finally come to its final host—a man behind a shadow, nothing visible except his breath, his teeth, and the shimmer of a knife?

Then the flip-flops screamed again, like the mass clicking of tongues, getting closer to the light. My skin grew cold with sweat. I already felt so light. I straightened my hand and bent my back forward, and it seemed my body had prepared to fly. The children laughed again, with the enthusiasm of finding an opponent in a game of hide and seek, yet I heard no words spoken.

From the darkness, a shadowy, bent shape appeared. Then, in the illumination, I saw it was the foot of a girl, running with her mouth open joyfully, looking forward and back repeatedly. She did not seem bothered by the unusual sight on this muddy road—which was me. Soon, more children ran after her joyfully. I counted them: two, three, six, seven. Seven children. Four girls and three boys. None of them noticed me. None of them looked at me, stunned like a possessed person, with any concern. They simply passed me on the road, dancing and jumping as if nothing was happening.

I might be someone of unimportance, but this was not usual for the culture of this village. Everyone greeted one another and cared for each other. They were friendly and polite. I was sure that every house taught the same values. Children here were curious; they would even approach a killer if he had a candy. This was not usual—unless the behavior of someone terrified under this lamp was a daily display. I took a deep breath to clear my mind. Maybe it was the opposite. Maybe my presence was unusual there. What if they mistook me for danger? I suddenly felt calm. These children were actually more educated than I thought.

I ran after the group, straightening my hands forward and making a calling sound to stop them.

"Hey... hey, kid!" I called, as politely as I could. But none of them seemed to hear me. Of course, I thought to myself.

In front of the chief's house, they turned to the right, away from the main road. They must have wanted to take a shortcut. I shouted again, and like a thunderclap, all the children stopped at the same time. With the same precision of angle, they looked backward before fully facing me in a more

varied tempo. The joyful air sank into the abyss. Overgrown leaves rustled in the wind. Their eyes were cold and demanding.

"I... I—" I stammered, still in shock. One girl from the back of the group stepped forward and looked up with determination.

"What is it?" Her little voice, which should have been warming, was neutralized by her seriousness. The group now stared at me with the same expression. Some eyes were larger than others. The boy in the Tosca shirt might have had the biggest eyes of any child I had ever seen. They shimmered in the light's reflection, and their proportion was terribly off.

"I—I wanted to ask, little girl: do you happen to meet someone squatting there in the dark?" The girl nodded her head. The wind came again to my neck.

"Someone... a person?" The girl nodded again, and the entire group nodded with her.

"Why is he there?"

"He is sick," answered the little girl. "He's there every night and will be gone by day."

"Who is he?" I asked, but I did not feel satisfied with my question. The peculiar answer made me mumble. I could not process it enough to think. The little girl shrugged her shoulders. He might be a madman. His daily presence should have made him popular here, if not to children then to adults. But the thought scattered when I heard her say: "You know better."

Then the group turned altogether, running and laughing into the darkness along the muddy road beside the chief's house, until every last one of them was eaten by the shadows beneath the overhanging thick branches of a tree.

I'm not going to follow those children, I told myself. I was no longer shivering. I felt as if I had lost blood in a car accident—terribly weak. I felt defeated as I looked at both my hands, which failed to do what I commanded. They swirled like noodles. I squatted to regain myself. Everything that had happened was wrong. *Something was wrong with me.*

I might be dreaming, or hallucinating, yet the feelings were real. I tried to make sense of what had happened. If this was metaphysical, I might have been doing something wrong in the physical world, or being lured into entering the world of the Jinn—the unknown, the mischievous tribe that made a world resembling reality to confuse me. Or perhaps they wanted to show me something, like mental possession to discover the cause of someone's death.

This cannot be, I repeated to myself. *I am a sceptic and scientific.* There might be nothing wrong with what happened. Only misperception. Or at worst, it was distorted because I had taken or been given substances that made me paranoid, hallucinating, and unable to remember the past.

When my blood rushed back to my feet, I let out a breath and finally stood. I walked along the road, passed the restaurant, passed the grocery store with its foggy terrace, and turned right into the darkness. But the road was already visible as the sky began to blue. The road that formed the neighbourhood was a horseshoe curve. I was now on the other side of the neighbourhood. On my right were the trees behind the chief's house—the shortcut the children had taken. On my left was a gap of forest before the first house. That was the small cafe I was aiming for, a shortcut along the borderline between the forest, the road to the west, and the main road.

Fallen leaves from both sides, especially from the forest on the left, spread across the road. I challenged myself to walk on the left side, where they were most thick. I could imagine red eyes

preying on me from the darkness between the trees, or a woman ghost in a clean white gown, her hair black and wet, hanging as long as her hips, standing silent in a small clearing. I raised my chin and only looked forward. *I control myself. I am physical, more superior than them. I will not let myself and my mind be distorted. Ghosts, jinn, spirits have no authority in the physical world.*

Just being aware of this fact was enough to make me walk in a firm posture. Even as the wind—which my pattern recognition had marked as a bad omen—grew colder and swung around my neck, and my imagination fed me close-ups of the woman's face, rotting and full of grudge, repeating the fact and looking forward did not cower me as before. I distracted myself with my feet. Though last night's rain had been heavy, the nourished, broken skeletons of the leaves beneath my footsteps were satisfying. As the opening of the shortcut became visible, my entire guard faltered. I walked two steps at a time. The wind grew cold again. I heard sounds: music, men, a television. My heart cried with joy while at the same time I felt extreme fear, imagining the white woman floating behind me. I read the mantra again, but it no longer worked. It was like a scale holding two strong weights it could not bear. My bladder was full, and I felt on the edge of losing control.

I ran. For the first time, I ran—so fast that my breathing beat like a heart.

The noises grew louder. Men cheering and shouting. A lot of men. *My refuge. My refuge.* I felt like my heart had risen to my throat. Through the continued blur of darkness, I was in a tunnel of dark blue light. It was very close. Very close. I no longer felt my feet or what they stepped upon. It was like walking on air. The lights grew brighter, and so did my happiness. I felt such utmost happiness that I swore when I arrived I would scream so loud I would lose my voice. The noises became clearer. Music. Static. It was a television show. The men's sounds were for a football match. At the same time, the woman I saw when my eyes closed opened her mouth, and I heard her wail. Very faint—it might have been the distorted sound of something else—but so obvious that my heart could not pretend not to hear. I entertained myself with hope: if it was a football match, at least the watchers must be men.

I was almost there. Finally, oh finally, I heard the sound of muffled conversation. I was so close. Just a step before the turn, I jumped toward it. I saw flickering and darkness mixed, like meteors falling and ascending aimlessly. I heard the sound of grinding stones and the falling of rain. I felt myself being slept upon. My body lay downward on stones, my rolling finished. The erasure of fear and maximum happiness had been actualized. I had never been so satisfied before.

I bent my knees inward to stand, but it was too sharp and sudden. I might have dislocated a joint, or even broken a bone and pierced its flesh, but I did not dare to look at it. Such defecation. Such nightmare. I drew my knees in again, preparing for another attempt, slowly. It worked. I was in a crawling position, moving toward the source of the sound. My soiled hands dripped with strips of thick liquid—red like the shining skin of a ripe pomegranate that fell to the morning soil. *How beautiful.*

I finally managed to stand. Patches of clay on my knees. Grains of black soil on my entire body. With each drip of my blood, my body grew lighter and happier, like melting ice. The television noise became so loud and close. The vision, which had blurred and whirled, slowly integrated into coherence. In front of me was a tall, spotless white concrete wall, as tall as two houses, merged with the doorless cafeteria to form an entrance like a hollowed bone. The light from inside was overly bright. All sides of the wall and floor were painted white.

I finally saw the television. Normal size. Black. Niche to the wall on the left, slightly too high, at three-quarters of the wall. On the right side, a concrete protrusion followed the shape of the wall, curving increasingly inward. On that concrete sat two old men. One face was so similar to the other, yet I was convinced they were not twins. They were familiar to me, but I could not remember from where.

Both wore white shirts and were wrapped in sarongs of the same pattern but different colors—red and green. In front of them was a large table for four, completely white, holding a glass of completely black coffee, scattered peanuts, neat dirt-colored biscuits inside a disturbingly ripped transparent plastic bag that occupied a disproportionate amount of table's space, and a cheap-looking, small, old green plastic basket whose contents I did not know. From the back, I could hear echoes of prayer. The owner must be praying.

I was at the entrance, but they did not notice me yet. They were too focused on the football match, each holding a cup, two just-burnt cigarettes laid beside them.

Didn't they hear me when I fell?" I thought to myself. I walked forward with heavy steps, ready to blame them, but both remained focused on the game. I glanced at the screen—only men kicking and running on a green field. I stomped my feet harder against the ground to announce my presence, but they were too focused, too tense. Something trickled from my nose. My head was still bleeding, the blood pooling at the tip of my nose before falling and scattering in dots on the white floor. There was a sound like a shotgun as it fell. When I raised my head, the television had gone black, and the two men were looking at me at a perfect horizontal angle.

"What is it?" said the bald man at the back.

The room was in complete silence except for the ice-cave echoes of prayer from somewhere behind them. Why were they not concerned with my appearance? I was hospital-worthy.

"I—where is the road there, sir? Why is it now a wall?"

Both men turned their heads toward each other like the folding of paper.

"It's been there for a long time," answered the man at the back.

"You should know," said the front man, calmness behind cold eyes.

Then I remembered. In a vision—when I had come here in sunset light—the road had actually merged with the back of the cafeteria. I had been in this same situation before, following this white passageway that led to the front of the cafeteria, where all the food was available, where the chairs were wood and the tables had red-striped tablecloths, where the floor was shining cement. Why had I forgotten this? What had happened to me?

"Sir, do you see if something is wrong with me?" I pleaded.

The men stayed silent, as if they had heard nothing.

"Am I dreaming?" I added with desperation, slapping my face hard.

"You know better than we do," said the front man, then drank his coffee passionately in one gulp.

"I saw children playing and running this very early morning—"

"Our children," cut the front man, speaking with long eloquence, looking toward the man at

the back. I felt deflated.

"Our children," the back man murmured in imitation.

Something was very wrong about all of this, I thought. None of this could truly be happening.

"Are you Jinns?" I shouted. Their eyes unfazed in the silence.

"The prayer room is in the back," said the back man. Again, a gunshot sound. The television turned on, and their eyes returned to watching deeply, hands on their cups again.

There had been no prayer room on my last visit. The tunnel had led directly to the front of the restaurant. But now I could hear echoes of Arabic chant from somewhere. Where was it coming from? And where had the earlier call to prayer come from? Was my memory actually real, or a fabrication?

I slapped my face left to right, again and again, blood splattering across the floor. I'm dreaming. I'm dreaming, I told myself loudly, painting the floor red even more. Another gunshot sound, and the noise stopped to silence. I raised my head. The front bald man was standing right in front of me. His entire face—even his hair—was splattered with my blood. His index finger made a gentle touch to his rounded lips, yet both his eyes were almost bulging from their sockets. He carried no knife, no weapon, but still these men could kill me in a second. The back man was also standing, though still behind his seat. His eyes were cold, demanding, like the real eyes of a sane person. He stretched his hand toward the back, toward the tunnel. The prayer room, as they said.

At this point, I did not know what to do. I certainly could not go back, and what lay in front of me was even more ridiculous. I could wait until sunrise and take a U-turn to the gate without facing the man, but what if it remained dark forever? There was no clock to show time. No mirror to look at myself, or even to know if I was myself. But did even the self I knew in my memory right now truly exist? I bit my tongue and gasped at the bald man's eyes. This was not fully reality. I did not know what was real. I did not know what was true. But they were trying to tell me something. They were leading me to something.

I told myself I would go to the tunnel. What could go wrong in the prayer room? What could go wrong in seeking protection from God? What I knew for certain: these strange people—or my imagination—had so far only been odd in behavior, never dangerous.

I passed the back man. His eyes were like the stare of an upset leader. Beneath his hand, a bucket held fried catfish. I remembered that it was on the menu. The owner might be here after all, preparing for tomorrow's menu, perhaps preparing the food stall in the front. The passage narrowed, smaller and smaller, until it was the size of two doors. The Arabic hymns grew even stronger.

I reached the choke point, and it was not what I remembered again! The pathway did not lead to the front part of the cafeteria. Ahead of me, yes, there was the continuation of the tunnel as I had walked before. But a large gap separated me from it—a giant hole that revealed a spiraling basement of solid concrete, like a parking garage, lit with dim yellowish light, so deep that at its utmost bottom there was only small blackness. A banister ran along the edge of the hole. Beyond it, the tunnel continued toward the front, unreachable.

But there was also something stranger. To the right of the pathway, a corridor stretched where nothing had been in my memory. This was where the prayer echoed. The room beyond was enormous—the size of two ballerina studios merged together. A small protrusion in the middle of the

wall suggested it had once been two separate rooms. The walls were unpainted, the floor blemished in patches of blue. The painting was unfinished, random and uneven.

As I entered, I saw a hole in the floor. Not like the spiraling one in the tunnel—this was shallow and narrow, like a small basin. It was filled with water, and in it resided two black catfish, circling each other. They barely swam; their bodies occupied the entire space.

Where had the fish come from? I could not understand the reasoning. I let out a laugh of frustration and continued.

"There's nothing real here. Whatever—spirits or alike—just guide me. Show me what I need to do."

The men had sent me to this prayer area, yet I was not sure why there were sounds of prayer when I was the only one in the room. But very quickly, my attention was drawn to something shinier than the blue concrete floor near the middle of the borderline between the two rooms: a squat toilet. Only one, in the middle of the room. There was no door. I could not make sense of these objects. What was I supposed to find here? I could not connect them to my understanding or memory. The prayer sounds now came in gaps, not continuous as before. I went to the edge of the wall. The sound was not coming from behind the wall—it was coming from the narrow space between me and the wall itself. I flattened my neck, curving it like the reverse of the letter r, presented my ears to the floor and the ceiling to listen the waterfall of vibrations. I walk forward and backward in the same position just like a madman. The murmurs grew clearer or fader, depends on the receptor's location. The sound floated in emptiness, neither behind the wall nor in front of it, but in the space between. I tried again, snapping my neck harder to hear the echo; clearer, closer, as if the sound existed only in that precise thinness, vertical sheet above and below my ears.

Were the sounds in my head all along? To what level of insanity had I reached?

My anger suffocated my ribs. My brain boiled. I stretched my limbs like a sumo and roared at my surroundings like a beast. I spun in circles as I shouted everything, round and round, until I stumbled and my forehead struck the wall first.

"Kill me! Kill me!" I screamed as I banged my head against the wall over and over, until I saw fresh blood and pieces of pink flesh falling together.

"Kill me! Kill me!" I screamed, eyes shut.

But quickly I fell silent and opened my eyes again as another gunshot sound came, muffled from afar, as if a blow had been struck to a candle. Blood streamed into my eyes, my nose, both my trembling lips—I tasted the red syrup. My vision was complete redness. Some blood was so thick that nothing translucent remained, only the redness itself, like a red curtain. My breath was short, long, and sudden, like the aftermath of a long marathon. But I felt it was worth the response. After everything, such satisfaction. Everything felt like an insult to my dignity and intellect. Behind the translucent red curtain, two people slowly walked and stood side by side at the entrance of the room. The bald men.

"Tell me what is happening!" I shouted with desperation, ending with a long, trailing cry. With each cry, more blood sprouted from my forehead and wet my mouth. Both men walked three steps, automatically, and spoke like a mother telling bedtime stories, their voices layered in exact tempo:

"The pretty and tiny chamber

suffocatingly pretty!

*it lights in day, dark at midnight
pretty chamber I do not betray
dig a hole deep for air
pretty chamber worry not
for each an hour it is short
pretty chamber is not angry
the man digs most in the head
chamber-man will fall in hurry
chamber-man will return to bed
pretty chamber will never mourn
for what beneath is a burn
it is the pretty and tiny chamber
the suffocatingly pretty!
everywhere and never gone"*

Then they fell silent, still standing before me. I began to see them multiply—four, three—dizziness overtaking me. My breath was sharp, like choking.

"What is your name?" A voice uttered, echoing as if in a cave.

What was my name? I did not know what my name was. I did not know who I was. I did not know why I was here. I did not know if what I knew was true. I do not think, therefore I am not. I was nothingness. I stood and ran with this red vision, my body flailing, snapping to extreme right and left—I might have been walking in zigzags. I crashed between the two bald men and fell to the ground. I pulled myself up by the banister rail, back toward the choke point. I climbed the banister and jumped into the hole.

My cheeks were pressed to the ground, and I felt nothing else. I looked at the floor for a long time in hazy view. I did not see blood around my face. Perhaps behind me there was already a pool of red. Perhaps my limbs had separated far away, my stomach ripped open, my intestines mopping the floor. Just die already, I whispered to my weakening tongue. But then I heard voices. Crowds. Perhaps the angel of death, or the playback voices of my entire lifetime. They grew stronger and stronger. The lights grew brighter, more colorful. I was raised from the floor, and my vision steadily integrated.

A crowd looked at me, holding foods, bread, fruit, new clothes. Was this how heaven was supposed to look? I stared at the colorful lights above me: a red neon sign that read "Supermarket". Beside me were large aisles of products. People looked at me with concern; others were oblivious, cheerfully selecting items and placing them in their baskets. *This was not heavenly*, I thought to myself.

The people slowly departed. The mumbled sounds grew stronger, and I heard a popping sound in my ear. Like a snap, all the voices cleared. I was sitting on a bench. A young woman, probably the same age as me, sat on my right. Her hand massaged my right arm, and I slowly felt the massage.

"Boon, boon," she called me, her face full of concern.

Could my name be Boon?

I looked above me. Spiraling concrete. Nothing. Had I awakened from my dream?

"I was dreaming," I told her.

"You stumbled and fell," she giggled, offering me a cup. She pointed to my shirt. Ice cream was scattered on it. My hands were fine. My feet were not wounded.

"Who are you?"

She threw herself backward and laughed terribly. "Nice joke. But really, nothing is hurt, right?"

"I'm not fucking joking. Who are you?" I said, my voice intimidating, and suddenly she looked perplexed.

"Zahra..." She stretched her hand like in disbelief, then pressed each word of her utterance. "...I'm Zahra. Your friend."

"Who am I?" My voice shrieked.

Her head dropped. Her eyes weakened in a sudden brief. "Ombun... was it that serious? Do any part of your head hurt?" Zahra inched closer to me, flipping my hair, inspecting me. *Ombun*. My name was Ombun. I was in a supermarket in a building—probably a mall. But I still failed to retrieve my memory. The name stirred something distant, like a word heard in a language I had once known but forgotten. There was a shape to it, a weight, but no story attached. I felt the loss of memory not as an absence but as something physical—like reaching for a hand in the dark and finding only air.

"Zahra, tell me if I'm not dreaming. I can't remember any of this place—anything around me, you, even myself."

"You are not dreaming. You just fell, and that was it. We are inside the Grand Olive Mall, buying snacks before we go to class."

"What class?"

"School? You are going to present this afternoon. Ombun, I hope you are joking. You're really making me scared."

"I'm not joking. I don't remember anything. I was—I was in a strange place, like a creepy dream, yet it was very real. I was bleeding everywhere. I jumped off a banister into a giant hole that I surely believed would kill me in an instant. But then I'm here. I don't know if it was a dream or the opposite."

"Well, if that was reality, you would have been dead."

"My body, yes. But what about my soul, Zahra? What if my dream was reality and this is the true dream? I can't retrieve any memory except the present."

Zahra laughed uncomfortably. She opened her mouth to say something but closed it again, searching for the right words.

"I don't know what has happened to you, but this is reality for me," she finally spoke. "What if we walk around, buy something to eat or drink? Maybe that will help you calm down and remember."

She stood and looked back at the store aisle.

"Where was I before arriving at this mall?" I asked.

Zahra let out a big gasp.

"We were in class. And if you're wondering, the class is on the top floor of this mall. We had a lecture with Mr. Lukman. Now we're having lunch before the presentation. And if you don't even know who Mr. Lukman is, I will show you later in class. You need a drink. *Urgently.*"

Zahra held out her hand. I followed her into the supermarket. I looked around. The floor was ceramic. The aisles were proportionately built, like something humans would build. People walked in various clothing, randomly, not with the exact angles and mannerisms of the people I had met in my dream. It appeared very normal. Yet my feelings did not believe it.

I stopped a woman in front of me. She had short hair in a man-style cut, a red jacket, a long black skirt. She held a basket filled with biscuit packs, and her little curly-haired daughter rested on her left arm.

"Excuse me—do you know where I can get bottled water?" The woman rotated her body halfway back.

"Uhm, it's seven aisles from here, if I remember correctly."

"Thank you."

The woman nodded politely and left. Nothing peculiar about her behaviour at all!

"We literally went there before getting the ice cream," Zahra giggled, standing near my back.

"I told you I don't remember, Zahra."

We arrived at the drinks section, empty of people.

"So, what was your dream? I'm curious to know."

"It's complicated and frustrating. It felt as real as now—that's the way to put it. It was as if my memory began from that point. I dreamt about ghosts... Zahra, when did I arrive at this mall? Was it in the morning? Was I alone?"

"Yes to both. As always. First one to enter the class. Always alone."

Zahra took a small bottle of water from the bottom of the aisle. It said it had 8+ pH and a combination of other minerals. I noticed it was thirty percent more expensive than its competitor. She led me to the cashier.

"Don't I have other friends from the same area?"

Zahra giggled. "Which friend, Mr. Ombunvald? We are from the same area, as are most of the children in class."

I gulped dry. I had many friends I had no memory of. I thought about the possibility: I had fallen, hit my head on something sensitive, lost my memory without visible damage, hallucinated in between, and now I was awake, lost as I was. I knew amnesia could be temporary. A minor wound wouldn't make it permanent. *Please, not permanent.* But another possibility crept in, quieter but more insistent: what if the loss was not injury but refusal? What if somewhere beneath the forgetting, I

had chosen to let go of who I was? I could not hold the thought. It slipped away like water through fingers. My shoulders relaxed. My guard gave way to contemplation. My sudden acceptance birthed melancholy, like a vine slithering and piercing my heart with thorns of sadness.

"How was I as a person?" Zahra noticed my sudden tone of defeat. She called my name weakly to herself. She stopped in her tracks.

"Ombun, you are a really good friend. You are intelligent. You are disciplined. You never lose the spirit of seeking knowledge. You want to know something clearly before you have the confidence to tell it to others. But behind the strict discipline regarding knowledge and the high standards, especially in the fields you know, sometimes you are a merciless judge. Really. You judge people and their understanding more than they want you to. Many people respect honesty—like myself, because I know you are honest and careful with your words. But I've encountered one or two people who were offended. But if I told you that you had offended someone, you would drown in guilt. You would think about it for days until you made up your mind and baked them cookies to apologize. Not an ordinary apology, though. You don't tell them you're sorry. You become extraordinarily kind and help them, even if it means joining in mischief. Deep down, you are soft and fragile. Even insecure. You want to be a perfect person, Ombun. And you have this perception that everyone around you expects you to be perfect. As much as you've judged my delicate and slow-living brain, I believe you judge yourself far more often. I don't really know what happened, but since last week, you never came out of your house except for school. You haven't been as happy or talkative as before. And your presentation and this... were you depressed? Or taking some drugs?"

I did not understand or remember the person she described. Yet my chest tightened. My throat felt wounded as I tried to stop my eyes from revealing tears. The words she spoke felt true in a way that memory did not—as if my body recognized itself in her description even when my mind could not.

"What was my presentation?"

"The story of the prophet," she said with defeat and disbelief, her eyes gleaming.

"What story?"

Zahra gulped her sadness. "It's on your paper in class. Read it later."

The bright rows of lights above us flickered. The stinging electric sound could be heard. There was no wind, but I felt coldness on my shoulder—like in my dream. I took Zahra's hand and walked faster, passing the aisle into the empty space before the cashier. Then came the sound of explosions, as if the electricity had shattered the lamps. All at once, the lights went off. Zahra screamed and clutched my shoulder. The room was chaotic with the screams of children and the murmuring of adults. We stood silent in the dark, expecting the lights to return.

Then a man's voice rose—deep, warrior-like, a cry from the far east:

"We know what you are planning, Ombunvald!"

He shouted it like a battle cry, like a Viking before a slaughter. When my name was shouted that way, it felt like death gripping me. The person must be powerful. Giant. I had a feeling—fragmented, uncertain, like the memory of a dream within a dream—that I had once lost a fight with a girl. Such weakness. *Such disgrace*. There was no way I could defeat what was coming. The memory, if it was a memory, surfaced without context: a face I could not name, a moment of failure I could not place, only the feeling of it—smallness, humiliation, the certainty that I had already lost before the fight began. Perhaps that feeling had always been there, long before any specific loss.

The crowd, initially silenced by the cry, responded with collective whispers and urgent footsteps out of the store.

"You cannot escape from us!" His voice echoed, followed by the sound of large iron striking the floor. Then, calm as a speech: "Let alone escape from yourself." He walked in my direction. Each step felt like an earthquake.

Zahra fixed her eyes on me, still holding my arm in fear. *O Zahra, how can I protect you?* I said to myself.

"Who is that?" Zahra whispered.

"I wish I knew, Zahra. But I am nothingness."

People ran to the back, to the corners. Some dared to cross outside the supermarket's door. The sound of falling metal accompanied the earthquake. Store employees began pulling down the wide aluminum shutters—sheet after sheet of metal descending from the top, each panel locking into place with a sharp metallic snap. The gate was wide, and the shutters came down in sections, sealing the entrance piece by piece. We ran toward the back, toward the large empty spaces behind the aisles. I let Zahra run in front of me, leading the way.

"Why would they do that?" she whispered loudly.

"This is a dream. If you find a knife around here, please stab me."

"Ombun, your words!" she shouted through a whisper.

"Turn left. Yeah... No, I'm serious."

Earthquake. Earthquake. Earthquake.

"You will see if the feelings are the multiplication of reverse soon!" the cold voice continued. Then a shelf was thrown, crashing to the floor. Zahra turned her exhausted head to me. I shook mine. I did not understand what the voice meant either.

In front of us, three people ran toward the west like us. Behind us, others had cornered themselves against the back wall, frozen in place.

Earthquake. Earthquake. Earthquake. Items flew and dropped.

"Hurry, hurry!" I screamed to the three people still holding their carts. One of them—a fat man whose shirt failed to cover his belly—was exhausted, breathing in great gasps. He blocked the passageway. We passed him in the last five aisles before the west exit, and he screamed: "Here is Ombunvald!"

How did he know me?

The stomping grew closer. Faster. The two people in front of us turned at the fat man's cue, looking at us like prey.

The stomping was now running.

Zahra screamed and turned left at the last three aisles. The front gate was nearly closed—the aluminum shutters had almost reached the floor, only a sliver of light still visible beneath the last descending panel. I ran past her and took her hand, as fast as I had run in my dream, my body as light as before. She managed to keep pace.

Another shelf was thrown, followed by a woman's scream.

Then came a peculiar silence. Our pace slowed. And suddenly, the person arrived behind us in a single leap. I did not catch the full image—only a glimpse—and I saw him as something darker than shadow.

"Ombunvaaald!" The man screamed with his whole chest. Zahra had passed me now. I felt my entire body weaken. It felt inescapable.

"Hurry!" Zahra cried, taking my hand. I felt her grip, her pull.

I just wished I could die at the hands of the person behind me—to see if this was dream or reality. The darkness slowly shifted. The shimmering plastic packages merged into the darkness like quiet meteors in the night. I felt a slight stumble, a change in floor texture, and the snapping sound of metal.

"Where do we go now?" Zahra cried.

Many people were running. Most hid in stores inside the mall, closing their booths like the supermarket behind us. The aluminum shutters had fully descended now, sealing the entrance. I was so slow that Zahra pulled me to the left corner of the mall, toward the basement elevator. Despite all the lamps being extinguished, the elevator was active. When the doors opened, the space was empty. *How fortunate.*

Zahra pressed the button for the second floor—the one marked with the ground floor inscription, the way outside. The doors closed. But as the elevator rose past the second floor, I pressed the highest floor—the seventh—and pressed number two again until the button's light went out.

"Why did you press seven? Ombun, we missed the ground floor. We need to get out of this mall to be safe!"

She pressed number two and seven repeatedly. But the light for the seventh button, the initial destination, persisted.

"I need to go to the highest floor and jump, so I can get out of this dream." Zahra looked at me with rage. She pushed my chest with her pointing finger.

"You are not dreaming, idiot! This is real! You're going to kill yourself for no reason."

Zahra put both hands on her forehead. "Unbelievable!" She threw her head forward.

The elevator rang with a bell. The doors opened. Soon, the man's voice echoed from the bottom of the mall. He was now on the ground floor.

"To the back there. Let's go to the classroom. I cannot let you near a window or the banister."

The classroom door was not locked. It opened easily. The teacher and students greeted us with confusion; we were the first strange thing they had encountered. Zahra immediately closed the door and locked it with the embedded key. Suddenly, all outside noise was gone. The lecturer put down the long stick he had been pointing at the whiteboard. He rested it on the podium in front of his desk. The whiteboard was scrubbed clean except for neat typography, very similar to newspaper print: *Reimagine Historical Event and Literary Piece into Personal Experience.*

The man bowed his head to the watch on his hovering hand.

"You are late. Twenty minutes. Ali has already presented." His eyes were unforgiving as he saw Zahra breathing heavily with her shoulders, drenched in sweat.

"Mr. Lukman, we were chased by someone—no, something dark and terrifying..."

"I'm not going to listen to fantasy. You can wait until it's your turn to present. Now sit." Lukman adjusted his tilting eyeglass and turned around.

"But sir... he wanted to kill him." When she said kill him, her voice was hoarse with desperation.

Lukman turned again, looking us up and down with a cold stare. A long silence.

"Sit down, please. I request you for the last time." Lukman stretched his hand toward two adjacent empty seats at a table in the front on the left. The chairs were the same as the rest of the students'—wooden, with attached desks that folded down from the side, the kind that forced you to sit in a specific posture, your papers balanced on the small surface.

I walked first to ease the tension. Zahra still stared at Lukman's back with contempt until I poked her hand. I stood in front of the two seats, waiting until she was near, and whispered:

"Which one is my seat?"

She withdrew her ear and looked at my eyes for a long moment. I saw them slowly gleam with tears. She made an artificial cough and pointed to the right.

"There is yours." She coughed again.

I sat and watched her. She rotated her shoulder to reach for her pink bag with flowery embroidery and placed it on her lap. I followed the motion. My bag was plain black. She took out a white paper. I rummaged through my bag as well. My paper was folded and slipped inside my large plain gray notebook. I unfolded the paper and placed it on the small desk surface. Then the floor began to shake. I looked around. Everyone turned their heads, sensing something wrong.

"Everybody, please calm down. It's just an ordinary earthquake. This building was built as a tsunami escape. Don't worry. I call Farhan for presentation, and then prepare yourself, Ombun, afterwards."

I looked at Zahra. She was watching me in silence. Her lips were pale. Her face had begun to lose its color. I bent my head toward her and whispered:

"Don't worry. If it happens, then it's a dream."

"No, it's not." Her voice was hoarse again.

A water droplet fell onto the small desk. I raised my head to look at her, but she had turned her face toward the wall. I tapped her shoulder three times and returned to my seat. I read what was supposed to be my writing: *Reimagine The Story of Prophet Muhammad Upon Accepting Revelation into Personal Experience*.

"Farhan, what are you waiting for? To the podium, please."

The earthquake rumbled again, then fell silent. Then another rumble. Some students pressed themselves against the walls. Others crouched behind their tables, arms over their heads. A few simply covered their faces with their hands, as if not seeing would make it stop.

Farhan, who sat at the back of the class flipping through pages, stood. His face was pale and distressed. He walked to the front carrying a folder. He must have forgotten where his homework was. When he arrived at the podium, he was still flipping pages. I read my story again: *"...After being embraced by the angel, he ran from the cave of Hira to his wife. He entered his house, pale, thinking he was insane. 'Khadija, come cover me, cover me,' he pleaded, and sheltered on her lap. He told her about the angel, and Khadija calmed him. 'O Muhammad, you have lived your life in honesty and kindness. You feed the poor and orphan. God would never disgrace you....'"*

The earthquake grew stronger. The walls groaned. Students now looked at each other with concern, some still pressed to the walls, others half-risen from their seats.

"Hurry up, Farhan, damn it!" a girl behind me shouted.

Farhan looked at Lukman in surrender. "Find your homework and present."

Farhan flipped the pages faster, one page at a time. He murmured, hummed, knocked the floor with his foot. He was panicked, and it showed on his face. The shaking intensified. Desks rattled. A student near the window dropped to the floor and crawled toward the wall. Another pulled their bag over their head. Lukman came to Farhan's back, looking at the pages he endlessly flipped.

"...After the first revelation, after being consoled by Khadija's nephew about prophethood, Muhammad did not believe himself to be. Then he came to Hira again with intention: if the revelation was not real, he would rather jump from the hill and kill himself than live disgraced as a madman. But upon walking to the hill, he found the same angel who had previously embraced him, standing on the horizon. The angel was there in every direction he looked. The angel said, 'O Muhammad, indeed you are the messenger of God.' The prophet's distress was relieved. But the distress came again—maybe he was crazy after all. He went to the same spot with the same intention. The angel appeared again, in the same place, with the same message. The prophet did this three times, and each time the angel was there to comfort him and confirm his prophethood..."

The earthquake was now violent. Pens on the podium fell to the ground. A book slid from a desk and landed with a crack. Students who had been pressed to the walls were now crouching, some covering their heads with their arms. Farhan looked at Lukman in regret, tearful. Others began throwing pencils and balled-up paper at the podium. Farhan threw his folder to the floor.

Everyone went silent in the earthquake.

Then he bowed behind the podium for a long time. After a moment of realization, Lukman stepped back toward the wall in fear. Farhan rose from his bow and emerged from behind the podium with a large sword in his hand. He raised it above his head, arms stretched. Everyone screamed and scrambled—some pressed themselves against the walls, others dove behind tables, a few simply froze where they sat, hands raised as if to ward off a blow. I did not move. Farhan placed both hands on the handle of the sword, turned it around, and in an instant, stabbed his own chest.

Blood gushed everywhere.

Screams. Earthquake. People running around the classroom, climbing over desks, knocking chairs aside. My name was being called somewhere. Pure chaos.

I looked at the small desk surface where my index finger rested and read: *"...if a person like a prophet, whose heart had been cleansed since childhood, could be suicidal when life became dishonorable, why can't an ordinary human do the same?..."*

The earthquake stopped.

"Ombun!" Zahra grabbed my left arm, her grip tight. Her face was streaked with tears. She wept.

"Look," she said, weeping again, pointing toward the door. The door was open. Beyond it was complete darkness. But he was darker than all of it. Standing. Muscular. My head began to spin. Time seemed to stop. Everything slowed down.

"Ombun..." an echoing voice called, weeping.

"Zahra..." I replied. My voice echoed too.

In the blurring vision and slow movement, I turned my face to her. I thought it would be the last time I saw her. Her face was shining. So beautiful. River on milk. She cried, but I smiled. She raised both hands like Farhan had—a large sword with Arabic calligraphy written across it—and stabbed me in the chest.

There was a white light—overwhelming radiance that slowly, slowly receded into a light above me, maybe a lamp. But I could not see it properly. It was heavily blurred. I felt suffocated.

Where was I? Was I still dreaming?

I tried to move, but I could not. I was in a narrow place, so narrow that it felt like it was crushing my ribs. I could not move any part of my body, including my own eyes. They were open, still.

My chest tightened. It pressed inward.

"Zahra..." The words could not be uttered by my tongue. Only I could hear my voice. I felt my diaphragm push upward, pressing my heart and lungs. My breathing became short and shallow.

"Zahra, my beloved," I pleaded.

Then from the lightness above me, someone appeared walking. Still heavily blurred, I saw only darkness. My heart beat so fast, like a sewing machine, from pressure everywhere. I screamed—or appeared to scream. I felt the sharpness of it in my head, but only a whistling exhale came from my nose.

This is reality, I thought. Suddenly, I remembered everything. My name. Where I was born. My school. My despairing life.

Zahra. Zahra, whom I loved with my whole life. Zahra, whom I had planned to marry but was too stupid and too poor to do it. I wanted Zahra to be happy in our marriage and never regret her choice. I took too long. I was not progressing. I was outcompeted.

She was now somebody's possession.

O my Zahra, my beloved, you were the last one in my life to disgrace me, and it was enough to complete my humiliation. I could not close my eyes. The shadow was still there. My throat constricted. It was sleep paralysis. It was sleep paralysis. I convinced myself.

Then the memory came again. My depression. My isolation.

Ombunvald, the worthless scum on earth. Who only filth the soil and cannot give back. Who bends his head down in shame—shame of himself. The shame of his family. The shame and reliance. The parasite. Who has big dreams and big hopes but knows only to eat, to consume, and cannot save

himself, just like an animal. Disgusting, disgusting animal. A shame. A disgrace to the living. A disgrace to humanity.

I felt my body stiffen. I screamed. I felt like screaming, but what I felt was only exhale through my nose. And wet on my cheeks. I cried.

I had attempted suicide last week. I had surgery. I might be in the hospital, or they had taken me back home, because the hospital was expensive. There was no way they would be able to pay for it. What had I done to them? How could I repay it? Such a disgrace. Disgrace. I screamed again in my head but was only able to open my mouth. Get this shadow off my eyes. Get away from me.

Would I die? Was this dying or paralysis?

I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger.

My heart was beating in a continuing pressing space. My heart, how strong you are, fighting for me. Everything stiffened. I felt tears flowing again. How could I repay my surgery? How dumb was I to make this decision?

I want to live and work really hard. I want to live.

God, please let me live.

This is sleep paralysis. Nothing more than that. I screamed again in my head, but only let out a whistling exhale. I felt like I could only inhale a centimeter of air through my nose.

No, this was not death. Please. I could not do this. God... I dishonored everything I touched. Please let me fix everything. I screamed and screamed again. I was exhausted. I could no longer control my body at all.

God, this is painful. Have mercy on me.

My tears flowed again. God, let this shadow off from me. God, let this shadow off from me.