

The stolen shirt

Holding back the blasphemous swearing that nearly slipped off of his tongue, he raised his head to the dark sky. He could feel the black clouds gather like pieces of basalt, overlapping and then dissipating.

This rain will not stop tonight – this means that he will not sleep – but instead he'll stay hunched over his shovel, digging a path to divert the muddy water away from the tent poles. His back has become virtually impervious to the beating of the cold rain upon it. The cold gives him a pleasant feeling of numbness.

He smells the smoke. His wife has started a fire to bake the flour into bread. How he wants to be finished with this trench, to go inside the tent and shove his cold hands into the fire until they burn. If he could he would just grab the flame with his fingers, and move it from one hand to the other until the frost disappeared from both. But he's afraid to enter this tent. For in his wife's eyes there is a terrifying question.

القَمِيصُ الْمَسْرُوقُ

رَفَعَ رَأْسَهُ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ الْمُظْلِمَةِ وَهُوَ يُقَاوِمُ سَتِيمَةَ كُفْرِ صَغِيرَةٍ
أَوْشَكْتَ أَنْ تَنْزِلَ عَن لِسَانِهِ، وَاسْتَطَاعَ أَنْ يَحْسَنَ الْغُيُومَ السُّودَاءَ
تَتْرَاحِمُ كَقِطْعِ الْبَازِلْتِ، وَتَنْدِمِجُ ثُمَّ تَتَمَزِقُ.

إِنَّ هَذَا الْمَطَرَ لَنْ يَنْتَهِيَ اللَّيْلَةَ، هَذَا يَعْنِي أَنَّهُ لَنْ يَنَامَ، بَلْ سَيَظَلُّ
مُنْكَبًّا عَلَى رَفْشِهِ، يَحْفَرُ طَرِيقًا تَجْرُ الْمِيَاهُ الْمُوَجِلَّةَ بَعِيدًا عَن
أَوْتَادِ الْخَيْمَةِ، لَقَدْ أَوْشَكَ ظَهْرُهُ أَنْ يَعْتَادَ ضَرْبَ الْمَطْرِ الْبَارِدِ.. بَلْ
إِنَّ هَذَا الْبَرْدَ يُعْطِيهِ شُعُورًا لَدِيدًا بِالْخَدْرِ.

أَنَّهُ يَشُمُّ رَائِحَةَ الدُّخَانِ، لَقَدْ أَشْعَلَتْ زَوْجُهُ النَّارَ لِتُخْبِزَ الطَّحِينَ،
كَمْ يَوَدُّ لَوْ أَنَّهُ يَنْتَهِي مِنْ هَذَا الْخَنْدَقِ، فَيَدْخُلُ الْخَيْمَةَ وَ يَدُسَّ
كَفَيْهِ الْبَارِدَتَيْنِ فِي النَّارِ حَتَّى الْإِحْتِرَاقِ، لَا شَكَّ أَنَّهُ يَسْتَطِيعُ أَنْ
يَقْبُضَ عَلَى الشُّعْلَةِ بِأَصَابِعِهِ، وَأَنْ يَنْقُلَهَا مِنْ يَدِهِ إِلَى أُخْرَى حَتَّى
يَذْهَبَ هَذَا الْجَلِيدُ عَنْهُمَا.. وَ لَكِنَّهُ يَخَافُ أَنْ يَدْخُلَ هَذِهِ الْخَيْمَةَ،
إِنَّ فِي مَحَاجِرِ زَوْجِهِ سُؤَالَ رَهِيْبًا مَا زَالَ يَقْرَعُ فِيهِمَا مُنْذُ زَمَنِ
بَعِيدٍ، لَا، إِنَّ الْبَرْدَ أَقْلُ قَسْوَةً مِنَ السُّؤَالِ الرَّهِيْبِ.

If he enters she will say to him, planting her palms into the dough and her eyes into his:

“Have you found work? ... What will we eat then? ... How was ‘so and so’ able to get work here and how was ‘so and so’ able to get work there?”

Then she will point to Abd Al-Rahman, curled up in the corner of the tent like a miserable wet cat, and shake her head in a silence harsher than a thousand reproaches. What’ll he have to say to her tonight other than what he says every night:

“Do you want me to steal to solve Abd Al-Rahman’s problems?”

He stood up straight in a second of panting silence, then hunched over the broken shovel again and began to stare at the dark tent, feeling a great panic as he asked himself:

“And what if I stole?”

سَتَقُولُ لَهُ إِذَا مَا دَخَلَ وَهِيَ تَغْرِسُ كَفَيْهَا فِي الْعَجِينِ، وَ
تَغْرِسُ عَيْنَيْهَا فِي عُيُونِهِ: هَلْ وَجَدْتَ عَمَلًا؟ مَاذَا سَنَأْكُلُ
إِذْنَ؟ كَيْفَ اسْتَطَاعَ (أَبُو فَلَانِ) أَنْ يَشْتَغَلَ هُنَا وَ كَيْفَ
اسْتَطَاعَ (أَبُو عَلْتَانِ) أَنْ يَشْتَغَلَ هُنَاكَ؟

ثُمَّ سَتُشِيرُ إِلَى عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ الْمَكْوَرِ فِي زَاوِيَةِ الْخِيْمَةِ كَالْقِطِ
الْمَبْلُولِ، وَ سَتَهْزُرُ رَأْسَهَا بِصَمْتٍ أَبْلَغَ مِنْ أَلْفِ أَلْفِ عِتَابٍ..
مَاذَا عِنْدَهُ اللَّيْلَةَ لِيَقُولَ لَهَا سِوَى مَا يَقُولُهُ فِي كُلِّ لَيْلَةٍ..

هَلْ تُرِيدِيَنِّي أَنْ أَسْرِقَ لِأَجْلِ مَشَاكِلِ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ ؟
وَنَصَبَ قَامَتَهُ بِهُدُوءٍ لَاهِثٍ، ثُمَّ مَا لَبِثَ أَنْ عَادَ، فَاتَكَأَ عَلَى
الرَّفْشِ الْمَكْسُورِ، وَ أَنْشَأَ يُحَدِّقُ بِالْخِيْمَةِ الدَاكِنَةِ مُسْتَشْعِرًا
قَلْقًا عَظِيمًا وَهُوَ يَسْأَلُ نَفْسَهُ:

—وَمَاذَا لَوْ سَرَقْتُ؟

The supply depots of the International Relief Agency are close to the tents, and if he decided to go through with it then he could surely sneak – by means of a hole in the wall he'd find here or there – into where the flour and rice are piled up. The money there does not belong to anybody. It has come from over there, from people whom Abd Al-Rahman's school teacher said are hypocrites, who "kill the victim and march at his funeral".

إِنَّ مَخَازِنَ وَكَالَةَ الْعَوْتِ الدَّوَلِيَّةِ تَقْعُ عَلَى مَقْرِبَةٍ مِنَ الْخِيَامِ، إِنْ قَرَّرَ أَنْ يَبْدَأَ فَهُوَ يَسْتَطِيعُ بِالتَّأَكِيدِ أَنْ يَنْزِلِقَ إِلَى حَيْثُ يَتَكَدَّسُ الطَّحِينُ وَالرُّز، مِنْ ثُقُبٍ مَا سَيَجِدُهُ هُنَا أَوْ هُنَاكَ، ثُمَّ إِنْ الْمَالِ لَيْسَ حَلَالَ أَحَدٍ، لَقَدْ أَتَى مِنْ هُنَاكَ، مِنْ عِنْدِ نَاسٍ قَالِ عَنْهُمْ أَسْتَاذُ الْمَدْرَسَةِ لِعَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ أَنَّهُمْ "يَقْتُلُونَ الْقَتِيلَ وَيَمْشُونَ فِي جَنَازَتِهِ"