

# A SHORT DAWN

By

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Hajji Basheer looks out through one of the windows of the upper floor of his house. He takes a glimpse of the genuinely Damascene courtyard, admiring its oriental features. Then he looks up to the sky examining the colours of infinity, expecting the Call to the Fajr Prayer. A shiver streams through his body as the cold morning breeze and the silence surrounding these active moments of his life combine to touch his soul.

He has been experiencing this sensual feat over many years, yet he is unable to find in the sky a hint of any colour change on which he can depend to ascertain the time of the prayer. Nor is he able to find a star that smiles in his face and says, 'Good morning Hajji!' Nevertheless, whenever he casts his vision deep into space, he always repeats in his mind: 'Glory to the Master of the Dominion'. He is happy with himself because he feels that he is consolidating the holy words, 'And cast your vision unto the Creation of the Heavens and the Earth.' As for the Call to the Prayer, only the voice of the muezzin is the final verdict on the correctness of time. How does the muezzin know the correct time? The Hajji has never disturbed his imagination with this matter. Every dawn, his major concern is to wake up his wife Hajja Sumaya, then descend the stairs into the yard where he performs his ablution using the cold running water from the fountain in the middle of the yard. Hot water is available in the upper floor, but the Hajji is certain that reward is commensurate with hardship. He, therefore, uses natural water even on the coldest of freezing winter days in Damascus.

As he washes, he mumbles verses of thanks, commendation and praise to Allah, the prophets, Mohammed the Last of the Prophets, and to saints, caliphs, and believers dead and alive. Then he raises his head towards the open window of the upper floor calling his wife: 'Um Toufik, Um Toufik, let me know as soon as you have heard the Call to the Fajr Prayer.'

Hajja Sumaya does not need this reminder. She has heard it thousands of times. Her sole task, from the time the Hajji wakes her up until she hears the Call, is capturing the instant the voice of the

muezzin reaches her ears. This is her inescapable duty, that now most of her husband's health is preserved over the years except for a few problems including his inability to hear the distant call coming from the minarets of the Umayyad Mosque. This is not so strange after all. She herself, thirty years his junior, finds it difficult sometimes to hear the Call. She has always waited for the moment of relief patiently, informing the Hajji immediately after receiving the first hint of the sound echoing from the depths of the silent dawn. She then mutters to herself wishing if the Hajji believed in the time that is correctly printed in the calendar. Even the muezzin himself, she thinks, might depend on the same calendar to call to prayer. The Hajji, 'May Allah help me with him,' only believes in that melodious sound of which he can now only hear memories.

When he makes sure that his wife is now out of bed, he walks forward with his tall thin body pulling his feet inside a qubqab made in qabaqbyya, the narrow lane of woodwork shops specializing in making wooden clogs in Old Damascus. He bought this qubqab since he-no-longer-remember years. He walks towards the stairs that take him from the upper floor down to the yard. He starts going down in a repertoire of identical steps. The dawn has grown familiar with his distinctive way since the time the Hajji embarked on old age.

He pulls up the side of his long white gray-striped qunbaz with one hand, and uses the other hand against the railings. He places his right foot on the first step followed by his left foot on the same step. Then he moves his right foot to the next step followed by the left foot, and so on. The wood of the ancient qubqab that is striking against the timber of the steps with every move gives the dawn an exotic rhythm. This beat continues until the Hajji reaches the uncovered yard. Here the feet become faster. The qubqab now strikes against the tiles of the yard, changing the tone, until all the music stops suddenly next to the fountain.

The Hajji rolls up the sleeves of his qunbaz and washes happily. The melody now is that of water splashing ritually over face, arms and feet. Be it not for the routine nature of the ablution, one would think that the Hajji is a child who loves to play with a water fountain. He turns away from the fountain, and lifts his wet hands in the air away from his garment. He raises his head towards the upper floor calling his wife, without seeing her, to open her ears ready for the Call. He moves to a room where he usually attends to his religious duties. In order to reach the room, he has to climb two black-stone steps whilst his arms are still in the air. This requires some effort and time on his

part, particularly that now he is unwilling to touch his qunbaz and raise it with his wet hands, until he reaches his towel and dries himself up. Then he seeks a corner of the room. As he sits on the floor carpet, ninety-six years that witnessed the Ottoman occupation of his country, the two world wars, the French occupation and the fathering of eleven children each of whom in turn fathered or mothered no less than six children, sit with him.

In that day in 1961, and as he was opening the Qur'an to start his daily recitation before the Fajr Prayer, he reflected on the past. He was still bewildered at the introduction of television to his household. His grandchildren insisted that their grandmother who was 'in her prime' at only sixty-six should be entertained. He recalled a heated discussion he had with his grandson Raouf. As usual, it was a discussion between ninety-six years of conservatism and twenty years of liberalism and revolt against tradition. Whenever the Hajji remembered Raouf's words he would raise his head pleading with Allah, requesting His forgiveness for Raouf, hoping that one day Raouf would see the light. But then he remembered the essence of what Raouf had said. He loved Raouf more than any other grandchild, but never expected Raouf 'the clever, the handsome, the polite' to be the one who would revolt against customs and tradition. The Hajji smiled when he remembered what Raouf had told him: 'Grandpa, you are a great man! Despite your ideals, you at least listen to me and argue with me with great intelligence. Others of your generation do not converse with us. They accuse the youth of every ill-behaviour without understanding their psychology and the requirements of their new age.'

'Forgive me Allah,' the Hajji told himself when he felt that his grandson's talk started having the effect of bribery on him. The Hajji was, however, proud that he was renowned for being the only district elder who had an open mind when dealing with the youth. He was always subject to criticism from his peers who waged a raging war against those 'teenagers'. The Hajji knew deep down the clear difference between teenage behavior and genuine need for change. He was always ready for discussion.

'Hajji, Hajji, the Call, the Call for Fajr, aye Hajji aye!'

The Hajji heard with his ears his wife's call that became a daily routine, but his deep thinking stood bar between his ears and his mind. At precisely that moment he was reflecting on Raouf's talks on existence and non-existence. He thought of all those books Raouf used to bring him and say,

'Grandpa, I will read the Qur'an complete once for every one of these books you read.' He remembered how he heard of Marx, Sartre, Hegel, Freud and many others through his grandson Raouf. Their ideas remained very strange to him. His mind, however, became busy now with a new problem. A problem brought on him by 'that little naughty boy' who came talking about the scientific method and about Darwin, about refusing to accept things as they are and the need to think of how they are. Anyway, he was happy that his peers knew nothing of these strange ideas, or those foreign names. But he now knew. What disturbed him, though, was that he learned all these things from his grandson who muddled his life and religion. He, the HAJJI who performed the Hajj to Mecca seven times, was now looking at the many past years knowing that everything could be an illusion. How he wished that he never conversed with Raouf. How he wished that he maintained that 'grand illusion'.

Suddenly he realized that he started thinking of his beliefs and tradition as illusions. His heartbeat accelerated, and he was shivering all over. He asked Allah's forgiveness many times. He rushed to open the Qur'an. He was very surprised to see that some verses were lit by the sunrays that started to spread through the room's large windows. He passed his fingers over his boldness then wiped his face with his palms pressing against his eyes. He looked again at the sunlit pages. He stood frightened and aimed at the room's door barefooted looking at the light that came from the east.

He saw his wife who started baking bread in the yard. He knew that she would not have started baking before saying her Fajr Prayer first. This seemed to him a necessary confirmation that the dawn of that day was gone forever. It was as if the rays of sun were not sufficient to confirm to him with every light particle that he had missed the Fajr Prayer for the first time in his life since he started praying when he was only seven years old under his father's guidance. He had never missed any of the five daily prayers before. This was the first time he had to offer a belated prayer: a much less heavenly rewarded deed!

As stinging tears form in the eyes of his pride and perseverance, twenty despotic giants are drumming hard in his head, and shouting with the voice of one young man: 'It was a very short dawn grandpa!'