

Ghassan Kanafani
The Stolen Shirt

Translated by Michael Fares

Translator's Reflection

What follows is a translation of a short story written by Ghassan Kanafani in 1958, titled "The Stolen Shirt." Although among his relatively lesser known works, especially compared to his far-reaching novels *Men in the Sun* (1962) and *All That's Left for You* (1966), this short story is no less representative of Kanafani's masterful storytelling. It is also just as representative of the often subliminal, disjointed, and non-linear narrative style that he is known for and through which he vividly captures the harsh and unforgiving realities of refugee life and displacement in which countless Palestinians found themselves after 1948. "The Stolen Shirt" is the first story in a larger posthumous collection of Kanafani's short stories, *The Stolen Shirt and Other Stories*, which was first published in 1982 in Beirut, Lebanon, by *Mu'assasat al-'Abhāth al-'Arabiyyah* (Institute of Arab Research). A second edition was published in 1987 by the same publisher.

The Stolen Shirt¹

Holding back the blasphemous swearing that nearly slipped off 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 that has been there a long time—and even the cold is less unforgiving than the terrible question. 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?”

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

¹ This translation was initially published on the website *Jadaliyya*. It is republished in print by permission.

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."

What harm would it do anyone if he were to steal a bag of flour . . . two bags . . . ten? And what if he were to sell some of this flour to one of those people who have a great ability to sniff stolen goods and a greater ability to bargain their prices?

The idea became more appealing to him. So he pressed on with even stronger determination to finish digging the trench around the tent and began to ask himself again why he shouldn't get started with his scheme tonight. The rain is intense, and the guard is more concerned with the cold than the interests of the International Relief Agency. So why not start now? Why?

"What are you doing, Abu Al-Abd?"

He raised his head in the direction of the voice and made out the shadow of Abu Sameer approaching from the two rows of tents pitched endlessly across the darkness.

"I'm digging flour."

"You're digging what?"

"I'm digging . . . I'm digging a trench."

He heard Abu Sameer's thin laugh that quickly dissipated into his whispering:

"It seems you're thinking of flour. The rationing will be delayed until after the first ten days of next month, about fifteen days from now, so don't think about it now unless you intend to 'borrow' a bag or two from the depot."

He saw Abu Sameer's arm point toward the depots, and he made out the shadow of a perverse smile on his thick lips. He sensed the difficulty of the situation, so he resumed prodding the ground with his broken shovel.

"Take this cigarette . . . Oh wait—no—it won't do you any good in this rain. I forgot it was raining—I have flour for brains."

A feeling of suffocating irritation began to close in on him. He has hated Abu Sameer for a long time—this repulsive chatterbox.

"What brings you out in this rain?"

"I came out . . . I came out to see if you wanted help."

“No thanks . . .”

“Will you dig for a while?”

“Most of the night.”

“Didn’t I tell you to dig your trench during the day? You’re always going who-knows-where and leaving camp . . . do you go looking for the Seal of Solomon?”

“No . . . for work . . .”

Panting, he raised his head from the shovel.

“Why don’t you go to sleep and leave me alone?”

Abu Sameer drew nearer with an ominous silence. He placed his big hand on Abu Al-Abd’s shoulder, shaking it slowly as he said in a raspy voice:

“Listen, Abu Al-Abd, if you see a bag of flour disappear before your eyes in a little while now, don’t let word of it slip out to anyone.”

“What?” Abu Al-Abd said, his heart beating violently. He smelled the stench of tobacco from Abu Sameer’s mouth, who whispered with wide open eyes:

“There are bags of flour that leave at night and go over there.”

“Over where?”

“Over there.”

Abu Al-Abd tried to see where Abu Sameer was pointing, but he found the man’s arms hanging at his sides and heard his voice whisper with a deep rasp:

“You’ll get your cut.”

“Is there a hole that you guys enter through?”

Curling his tongue coyly, Abu Sameer cocked his head upward in denial, then rasped with a whisper:

“The bags of flour leave all by themselves . . . they walk!”

“You’re crazy.”

“No, you’re the unfortunate one . . . Listen. Let’s get right down to business. What we have to do is get the bags of flour out of the depot and take them over there. The guard will prepare everything for us as he always does. The one who will see to the sale isn’t me, and it’s not you—it’s the blond American at the agency . . . No, no, it’ll be fine, everything will make sense after the agreement. The American sells and I profit . . . the guard profits . . . You profit . . . and it’s all by our mutual agreement. So what d’ya say?”

Abu Al-Abd felt the issue far more complicated than stealing a bag, two, or ten of flour, and a feeling full of disgust came over him at the thought of dealing with this human being, obnoxious and insufferable like the whole camp had come to know him.

But at the same time he drew great comfort from the thought of being able to return to his tent one day with a new shirt for Abd Al-Rahman and some small provisions for his wife after this long spate of deprivation. How beautiful their two smiles would be. The chance to see Abd Al-Rahman's smile alone would undoubtedly merit going through with the proposed scheme.

But what if he failed? . . . What miserable fate would await his wife and son . . . that would be the day Abd Al-Rahman carries around a shoe-shining box to hunch over it in the streets, shaking his small head over the customers' fine shoes. Miserable fate be damned.

But if he succeeded, then Abd Al-Rahman would seem like a new person, and he would rid that terrifying question from his wife's eyes. If he succeeded, then the misery of the trench every rainy night would end, and he'd live somewhere he can't even imagine right now.

"Why don't you leave this damned trench so we can start before the sun rises?" Abu Sameer said.

Yes, why not leave the trench? Abd Al-Rahman is in the corner of the tent panting from the cold, and he can almost feel his son's breaths brushing across his own cold forehead. How he wishes he could save Abd Al-Rahman from his misery and emaciation.

The rain has almost ceased, and the moon has started to tear a rugged path in the sky.

And Abu Sameer still stands there in front of him like a black ghost, planting his two huge feet in the mud, raising the collar of his old coat above his ears, standing and waiting. This person standing in front of him, proffering with him a vague new fortune, entreating him to help remove the bags from the depot, to some place, where the American would come every month and stand in front of the piles of flour, rubbing his clean palms together while laughing with blue eyes like those of a cat waiting to pounce upon some poor unsuspecting mouse.

“Since when have you dealt with this guard and that employee?”

“Do you want to do this with me, or just take the price of the flour to go and bribe the bastards? Listen. The American is my friend, and he’s a person who likes tidy work. He always asks me to prioritize time, and he doesn’t like lateness to jobs. We have to start now. Hurry.”

He again pictured the American standing in front of the flour bags, laughing with narrow blue eyes and rubbing his clean palms together in delight and self-assuredness, and he felt a strange agitation. It occurred to him that that American was selling the flour all the while telling the women and children of the camp that rations would be delayed until after the tenth day of the month. At this he felt a raging flood of resentment, itself the echo of his feelings one day when he had been returning from the depots to tell his wife in a broken voice that they postponed the flour distribution ten days. How painful was the letdown that was drawn across her toil-ridden brown face. He had felt a thousand-pound lump in his throat as she looked in terrifying silence at the empty flour sack swinging from his arm like a hangman from a noose. In that glance of hers she meant that ten days would pass before they came across any flour for food. It also seemed that Abd Al-Rahman fully understood the situation, for he had long ceased his incessant demands to be fed.

In every tent of the refugee camp, eager eyes were sinking with that very same letdown. Each child in the camp had to wait ten days just to eat bread.

This, then, is the cause of the delays—Abu Sameer—standing in front of him like a black ghost, planting his feet in the mud anxious over the outcome of his dealings, him and the American who rubs his clean palms together in front of the flour piles while laughing with narrow blue eyes.

He didn’t know how he lifted the shovel high above his head, or how he smashed it with an awesome violence into Abu Sameer’s head. Nor did he know how his wife managed to pull him away from Abu Sameer’s body, as he screamed in her face that the flour distribution would not be delayed this month . . .

All that he knows is that when he finally found himself back in

his tent, drenched in water and mud, he embraced his son Abd Al-Rahman as he looked into his yellow emaciated face . . .

He still wanted to see him smile at the sight of a new shirt . . .

So he began to cry . . .