

The Eusocial Messenger

By Omar Yousof

Her oval-shaped face was exactly half-covered by her glossy black hair, giving the illusion that half her face was missing against the dark tile-designed vinyl flooring. Directly from above, her head looked like the shape of an avocado sliced in half. Her face was adorned with scattered drops of sweat, resting defiantly, with a higher concentration on her bright forehead. Visible on her face was a mystifying expression of calm melancholy. Her tears were haphazardly trickling down to her cheekbones, and then unceremoniously on to the hard floor, in the process leaving a glowing trail that revealed an unusual passage caused by her lying position with her head tilted slightly upwards. She possessed less than the willpower required to swallow the pills that she had secretly ordered, and was now clasping in her left hand.

She closed her eyes which were tired and itchy but possessed a gazelle-like grace. As soon as her vision faded, sunlight rays hit her face through her half-opened bedroom window. The off-white venetian blinds were open just enough to allow the light to enter at the correct angle, and her face was the only target. The brightness and warmth of the rays to her face made her tense the muscles around her eyes, and she squeezed her eyelids lightly. 'I do not need this, right now!' she mumbled, through clenched teeth.

Her soft and slender fingers which were meticulously maintained with manicured nails, tightened their grip on the bottle, as if to express her resolve to follow through. She had held the bottle in her hand tightly for several minutes, and it had marked her clammy palm and fingers. The very moment that she removed her moist and sticky hair from her face, she felt something land on her right shoulder. Her determination to turn her head fell short of triggering the movement. She heard some buzzing, and sensed delicate, tickling movements around the centre of her shoulder.

When the bee persevered with her buzzing presence for another few moments, at 19 past noon, Maryam felt a curiosity that she had not experienced for months. Wiping her eyes with her left hand, she kept her right arm still, and tilted her head slowly towards her right shoulder, as if offering her post-worship salutation to celestial beings. As her chin approached her shoulder, she slowly opened her moist but penetrating eyes to what she hoped would be her departing sight. Oh boy, was she wrong.

Could the bee really be so naïvely intrigued by the sunflower tattoo on her shoulder? Granted, the tattoo was hyper-realistic with bright yellow florets filling the roundness of the shoulder, and a multi-shaded core with a black hole-like density in the centre, which Maryam recently had felt swallowing her existence in a time dilation fashion. A *bee*, of all beings, should know how fake it was. How fake *she* was. ‘What an ill-advised bee’, she thought. The bee seemed spellbound by the masterly artwork, and in turn enchanted Maryam with its majestic steadiness and presence of mind,

something that she had missed having since her fresher's year at Cambridge. The bee's buzz did not seem to diminish after what by now should have been the disappointing realisation that the sunflower, and its owner, was phony and devoid of nectar, fragrance, and any other quality that would have made the bee's swinging by worthwhile. 'Bees are not supposed to be wasting their time on sightseeing, when they have hundreds of real flowers to visit every day', thought Maryam.

A split second later, the out-of-the-blue breeze pushed open the window, instantaneously saturating the room with bright sunlight, leaving nothing or no one unilluminated. She felt startlingly overwhelmed by an almost dissociative experience, and covered her face with her hands which had become energised, as if solar powered in a flash. In the process, she had to let go of the bottle which had by now felt like part of her limb. She suddenly felt a wave of warmth from her toes to her forehead, which had a peculiar analgesic and disorienting effect on her psyche. She peeked falteringly through her concert pianist-like fingers which appeared like prison gates on her face, and her gaze fell on her buoyant peace lily which patiently stood distinguished in the window sill. 'What did it do to deserve what is coming?' was the surprising thought that came to her, as if planted there by someone.

Seven minutes earlier, at exactly 12 past noon, Joe was approaching Cambridge on the delayed train from London. He regrettably planned his departure tightly, not allowing for much leeway for any delays. He usually conscientiously takes the train before the one that will get him back just in time for his supervisions, but

somehow today was different. Across him on the partly ripped and faded train seat, sat an old, elegantly dressed woman of eighty whose curious gaze would keep returning to him every few minutes. Her wrinkled, wise eyes were shifting almost unintentionally between her eye-level held book and Joe's face. She was middle-eastern-looking, with wavy, well-conditioned grey hair that scarcely reached her dropped shoulders which, due to her tall neck, seemed distant from her head. Her dignified posture suggested a commitment to yoga, and her radiant skin hinted a disciplined life-style. She was reading verse 40 of chapter 16 in the Holy Book, and her divided attention prevented her from proceeding to the next verse. Over the years, Joe had become accustomed to the attention-eliciting effects of his magnetic allure. While his dazzling face consistently wore a relaxed expression of innocence and thoughtfulness, his eyes were often engaged in deep reflection. He smiled generously but enquiringly to the old woman who seemed unable to reciprocate the heart-felt gesture of acknowledgment. She appeared to be in a trance. Then, abruptly, her look transformed from one of relaxed intrigue into one of trepidation, as her gaze moved to his left shoulder. Some buzzing ensued, which nobody else noticed.

At 19 past noon, the second he arrived at the platform, Joe's eyes moved ceaselessly over a poster that had been visible on top of the platform stairs for months, but he had never processed it consciously. Neither did he do so today. It was a creased, black-and-white poster of the Yin and Yang symbol with an almost illegible text underneath it saying: 'Be! And it is'. In the right-hand corner there was an Arabic

calligraphic image but only half visible because of the ripped edge. Joe, without realising why, remembered that he needed to return Maryam's annotated copy of *Fear and Trembling* to her before her viva next week. As his right foot lifted from the last step of the stairs, and he lifted his gaze towards the ticket barriers, he received an e-mail from his supervisor asking to postpone the supervision to tomorrow. Joe was relieved, now that he wouldn't have to rush, and could spend the day polishing his critique of post-Schopenhauerian pessimism. He pulled out his phone from his velvet blazer pocket to plan his day, but automatically started messaging Maryam first. 'Hi Maryam. You probably need your book ASAP to prepare for you viva. I can bring it over now if you're in?'

Epilogue

Over the coming months, numerous human queen bees experienced a salvation, none of them fully realising its superlative execution. They did, however, have an inkling that they were touched by an inexplicably powerful presence. Some of them had a fleeting appreciation of the magical process that underlay their survival, sometimes misattributing it to mundane events through post-hoc rationalisation, as humans often do. Others, who were intuitively more gifted, underwent a spiritual renewal that instinctively drove them to share the acquired sweetness with those whose lives had become embittered through the human experience. That night, during her sleep, the old lady's soul peacefully departed from her body. She was the most

prolific queen breeder in town, and left in her garden several colonies, all of which subsequently suffered from colony collapse disorder.

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