Writing Sample

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Includes "A Melancholy Superhero."

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“And how does that make you feel?”

With a stiff and sluggish motion, I curl a strand of my oily hair with my index finger. I am never stiff or sluggish. Today is an exception, as I have been admonished against quick movements.

I ruminate. Then a hapless sigh escapes my mouth and I say, “Undervalued.” My mind fills with voices, pleas, calls, cries. I hear multitudes of humans scattered all over the world calling my name for help. I choose to drown out their words, to ignore them. I close my eyes, focusing on one word: undervalued. The sound of a pen dancing raggedly over paper resonates while everything else lulls. “It makes me feel undervalued,” I repeat, my cheeks flushing with heat and shame.

I am wearing my usual uniform: tights, brightly colored. An iconic symbol clings to my chest. My muscular build almost rips the fabric. My forefathers used to wear loose bishts and abayas, but modern science, especially concerned with velocity and air resistance, dictates that a superhero better wear tights. Modern science needs a lesson from modern fashion.

My uniform is mighty uncomfortable. Itchy. Especially in places one is not supposed to scratch in public. It makes me look weird, more like a backup dancer at a nightclub than a superhero.

I tuck my fashion worries in the recesses of my mind, and remember why I came here. When I could no longer bear my destiny as humanity’s deliverer, I tore through the skies in search for a professional who would listen to my woes. Cerulean letters protruded from a white billboard: Prof. Dawood Abdurahman – Renowned Psychiatrist. His window was open so I swooshed in, unaware that the office was already occupied by a patient. Fright filled the client whose appointment I had crashed—a thirty-something accountant diagnosed with severe paranoia.

But the man was not sick.

He was a Pisces.

They invented paranoia.

I have been reclining on a brown sofa in the middle of the psychiatrist’s office. Prof. Dawood Abdurahman sits behind me, having tossed his suit jacket casually over his chair, undone his top button, loosened his tie, and crossed his right leg over his left.
Clean and orderly, his office showcases academic diplomas as well as family portraits. A bookshelf, which occupies two adjoining walls, is filled with books on leadership skills and various disorders. Brand new. Unopened. They say that Prof. Abdurahman had previously worked with Haifa Wahbi, Ahlam, and Asala. Maybe that should have been my signal. But no. I jumped at the opportunity. I figured he’d see me as a celebrity as well.

He has spent the last ten minutes scribbling on a notepad on his lap. I almost convince myself that Prof. Abdurahman is sketching a mediocre rendition of the symbol on my chest. A for Arabman.

I think with finality: You must not act like a damn Pisces.

When the silence in the room lingers, Prof. Abdurahman asks impassively, “Do you not want to save lives anymore?”

“No, no,” I protest. How would an ordinary human understand? Saving people is not a choice for me. It’s my destiny. I exist for the sole purpose of delivering humanity. Every inch of my muscular body pulsates with predestination. “Of course I do.” I hesitate for a moment before I add, “But people have become rude and lazy.”

“Who has?”

“Everyone.” My tone is somber. “People expect me to be there all the time. They think it’s their right. Not a privilege. They don’t thank me anymore. They just call and expect me to save them. Nobody wants to do anything on their own. It’s Arabman this and Arabman that. If prices go up, they call my name. If a dust storm strikes, they call my name. If they lose their remote controls, they also call my name. And when I don’t show up—when I’m caught up with something bigger—they say I’m worse than Saddam Hussain, or they criticize my citizenship and question my allegiance.”

“What allegiance?”

“National allegiance, religious allegiance, you name it. Some have called me a spy, bidun, a ticking bomb, like I’m going to detonate one day and destroy them.”

“Won’t you?”

I tug on my hair with agitation. “No,” I say as I cross my arms. Maybe I sound pettish. Feelings of pain and loneliness intertwine and course through my body. “Why would I hurt Arabs?”

Prof. Abdurahman clicks the pen once to retract the tip and then slides it into his pocket. He thinks I don’t see him, but I do. Light reflects off a family portrait that
hangs on a wall in front of me. A younger version of the professor stands straight in an impeccable dishdasha next to a brunette with hazel eyes and a vestal smile. His wife is in her wedding dress. Dewdrops glisten on the flower bouquet, capturing eternal happiness.

“Because you have that power.”

His words rush up and silence follows, coalescing with the scent of freshly brewed coffee sitting unattended on the psychiatrist’s desk.

I turn to face him. My movement is too quick for the naked eye and my psychiatrist leaps from his chair; pages from his notebook scatter in slow motion.

“What did I tell you about quick movements?” His shouting goes beyond the walls of his office. It undoes my concentration and allows a cacophony of human voices to flood my mind.

That’s when I hear her: a woman calling my name, demanding my immediate presence. She cries, “Arabman! My nail polish is still wet on my fingernails but I have guests at the door! Don’t embarrass me!” I look in her direction and adjust my laser vision to penetrate thick walls and travel distances.

Next to me, my psychiatrist continues to fume. “Oh, you think you’re so strong, Arabman. You think that because you’re endowed with all these powers we’re supposed to worship you or something. But you’re in the wrong part of the planet. Here, we don’t idolize the powerful. We condemn them. We bite into their egos and nibble on their influence until they’re skin and bones. This is the Gulf! Here, you will always be reminded of your difference. And we don’t like people who are different and powerful. Are you listening to me?”

His words fly like bullets, piercing holes in my subconscious. My laser vision slows down, past the couch potatoes and the philandering teenagers, past yay-sayers and nay-sayers, past the disenfranchised sectors of society and the somniferous men who talk about them. Before I reach the woman with the nail polish crisis, my eyes rest on one particular brunette with hazel eyes and a vestal smile.

His wife.

“We don’t want change, Arabman. And you were not made for that. All your muscles, all your abilities, they were not made for that. You’re a porter, Arabman, created to guard the gates of the kingdom, a mere security guard, a second-class citizen.”

After the porter insult I really zone out. I guess the remainder of his speech: “We used to be perfect, we changed the world, we were united, we had heaven on our side, and everything functioned according to its predestination.”
I wonder if he had told Ahlam the same drivel.

The brunette, his wife, moves to the front door of the psychiatrist’s house. I see her peer through the side windows, smile, then unlock the door and hold it wide open. “Hey,” she tells her guest, who nods and waves a brown envelope. “You can at least come in.”

“What about your husband?”

“He’s in the office. He won’t know. He usually comes home late. I insist. I’ll make you a cup of tea.” She turns around and calls her servant’s name. “Make Uncle Mahmood a tea thermos.”

The brunette ushers the man to the guest area.

As I focus my attention on the psychiatrist’s wife, I hear faint murmurs in the distance. The psychiatrist continues his tirade against my autonomy. I allow my gaze to follow the brunette and her guest.

The psychiatrist’s wife sits on a couch facing her brother-in-law and rips into the brown envelope. “What is this?” she growls abruptly. “I stol—gave you twenty-five thousand dinars. Twenty-five thousand of my husband’s dinars! You give me a notice? Where is the money, Mahmood?”

“The venture lost.”

“You said it was a sure thing! You said you would never jeopardize your brother’s savings! We have kids, you know. And bills! Oh God, the bills! We just took a mortgage on the house.”

“I’m not the bad guy, Sawsan. I’m not the one who stole my spouse’s savings.” Mahmood ignores the tea and stands up. “I’m sorry Sawsan. I hoped and prayed for success. I really did. But the market is suffering all over. You’re a smart woman. You’ll think of some way to repay your loans.”

The brunette remains seated as she watches her brother-in-law depart, mouth agape, shoulders hunched with stress, wondering how she might recount her tale to her husband, how to escape if her husband accused her of a crime. Could she take the kids? Or would they become a burden? Would he care for them if she left them behind? Oh God! Would they hate her? She didn’t mean to hurt anyone.

I zone out again, forgetting the woman with the nail polish crisis. The wall, covered in books and frames, returns. With my laser vision recalled, I see the couple’s picture again from a new perspective. A younger professor, standing next to a woman with a vestal smile, looks at me with unwavering conviction.
“I know it’s hard, Arabman. But it’s what you were born to do.” Prof. Abdurahman says the last two sentences softly, as if he has just expended all his rage. “Are you listening?”

I nod once. Though I’m still shaken, my glance doesn’t waver from the frame on the mantelpiece.

“It’s my wedding picture,” he says.

“Still married?”

“Of course, till death do us part.” The corner of his mouth curves in a dirty smile. “I take it you’re not?”

I shake my head.

“That is because you are an aberration. All life is created in pairs. I’m so thankful to be married. Marriage leads to our one true purpose in life: childbirth. Now,” he pauses to flatten the creases on his shirt, “would you like to resume our session?”

I wonder for a moment if I should tell him about his precious wife, or about his brother for that matter, or maybe I should tell him about the woman who decided her nail polish crisis was as important as children damaged in war, or dying from a tsunami. I wonder if I should lash out because I am in fact sick of humans and their petty conflicts, worst of all, of Arabs. I think about absconding, but my moral compass directs me back to my duty. There is only one way I can overcome my conscience.

“No,” I reply when I decide to initiate my plan. “I think I’ll go home and watch ‘Arabs Got Talent’.”

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