

## The Awakening

The *Awakening* is a short story written by Yousef A. Mustafa. The main idea and title of this work is inspired by Kate Chopin's novel of the same name. This work is based on actual events. The names have been changed to protect the innocent. For more information regarding this text or any other works of art published by "Kuwait Book", please send an email to [q8bkman@gmail.com](mailto:q8bkman@gmail.com). Comments sent might be added on the front of back cover as a quotation after asking permission. Kuwait Book is licensed under a creative commons attribution-noncommercial-no derivative works 3.0 unported license. Some rights reserved. For more information regarding the terms of the Creative Commons license, please visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>.

Written in Kuwait, Hiteen, 2011.

It was a hot afternoon when I came back from school. My idea for spending the rest was to waste it by eating a watermelon and relaxing till supper, but my schoolmaster had other plans. We were given an assignment of writing a paper on a living person who could be called exceptional. The trick was that we had to know that person on a personal level, and not someone we watched on a movie or saw in a magazine. My first selection was to go to my parents, but both of them led ordinary lives, and so was the case with most of my neighbors.

'There is one guy you could interview.' replied one of my neighborhood friends.

'Who?' I replied eagerly. I found myself desperate on getting anyone to write about.

'Nah. You wouldn't want to ask him.'

'Stop goofing around, Malcolm. Who?'

'Well, there's this old guy that lives down the block. You know, the only one who we never see at neighborhood parties.'

'Yeah. Mr. Sunjeev, I think. He's not an old guy! He's around thirty or something.'

'Whatever. He's weird. He lives alone.'

Malcolm had an excellent point. Mr. Sunjeev would be perfect for my paper. I don't know him on a personal level, but I have met him once or twice. It was when I was heading to school in the morning and caught him jogging around the block. In fact, I believe most of the times I've encountered him was during one of his jogs.

I didn't waste time. I made my way to his house and, as odd as it may sound, knocked his door-knocker. He didn't have a doorbell like normal people.

'Yes.'

He answered rather quickly, I thought. I projected a smile, mirroring the genuine one on his face. At least, it appeared genuine. This was the first time I got a good look on his sweat-less face. He had a trim beard, long hair, and the strangest look in his eyes. I couldn't put my finger on it, but his eyes seemed to talk to me. I couldn't understand what it was about them or what they were trying to convey, but I knew that they held something, as if they knew something I didn't.

'Mr. Sunjeev?'

'Yes?'

'Hi. My name is Adam Blaughrell. I live up the street. Um, I was wondering if you could help me with something. You see, I have this

homework assignment that I should write, and it has to be about someone I know and is considered unique. I know I don't know you that well, but to me you're the only one who seems different from the everyone else around here.'

At the time I was young and foolish. I had no idea that what I said could be taken as an insult. Fortunately, he really wasn't like anyone else. In fact, he appeared to have taken what I said as a compliment.

'Sure. Come in. I'll get some refreshments.'

That was the first shock I received that day, one out of many to come. He said that he himself would get refreshments, and not anyone else. I knew even before I came that he wasn't married – which was beyond strange as everyone had a wife – but he doesn't have a maid either? What the heck is wrong with him?

We sat in the veranda and drank strawberry juice which he prepared himself. The more I looked around the more I realized how much different he was from us. For starters, he was wearing a robe. Another weird thing I couldn't help noticing was that I had failed to spot any televisions sets in the house. Instead, I noticed several shelves scattered around the house, filled with books. The simple thought of anyone reading (especially if it were for pleasure) was illogical to me, so I decided not to look around anymore and just overlook his strangeness.

'So, what is it that you wish to know?' He asked smilingly.

'Um, I don't know. Just tell me a little about yourself.'

He smiled and leaned back, then said: 'If I start I'll bore you to death. My life's a very long and complicated story, one that you're probably not ready to hear yet. So, let me make it easier for you: you ask the questions, and I'll try to keep my answers short.'

'Okay.' I replied, then asked a question that happened to cross my mind at the moment: 'Tell me what you think of this neighborhood. I know that you only moved here recently.'

'It really is no different from where I come from.'

'Which is?'

'Oh, you don't want to hear about that. It will only open your mind to a different perspective about life. You don't need that.'

'But .. isn't that supposed to be a good thing?'

'Not where I come from.'

I didn't understand what he meant, but ignored it. I started asking him direct questions about what he did for a living and what his interests were. Surprisingly enough, they were short answers and very straight to the point. From our talk I discovered that he was an expressionist as he put it. That is, he wrote prose, composed poems, painted paintings, and criticized creative works. To my astonishment he really wasn't like us. He dealt with books and papers for pleasure while we only held pens to get on with our academic lives. The conversation shifted from one topic to another faster than he had realized or desired. The more he talked, the more he felt comfortable. Then, it happened. He forgot I was there, and unleashed his long-held tongue.

'Where I come from materialism runs in every one's blood. It is as

natural as boys being aggressive players and girls knowing better. Without exception, everyone in the block had let go of what is intangible and grabbed that which they can. Especially if it was glossy. Spending money on unnecessary items was a necessity to their lifestyles so much that they have not only lost sight of what is important, but could not comprehend the concept anymore. To my grave misfortune, I did. By seeing what they could not see, I became a freak, socially exiled by my peers from a mindless society: their perfect society.

'Unlike them, I never took interest in handheld gadgets or fast cars. I only used what I had to use in order to go on living. However, the day I crossed the line into exposing myself and hence became an outcast was the day I ceased to use any more of what they held so dearly and sacred. I stopped using inessential technology.

'I won't lie and say it hit me all at once that I did not have to use such devices, but it came gradually. Cellular phones were the first to go. It was back in 2008 when I was a sophomore in college. At that time I used a mobile like any other. Where I come from everyone has a phone, even kids. A toddler is given a phone and taught how to use it even before learning his or her ABCs. So, needless to say, it came as a shock to everyone, especially my family, when I decided not to take a phone with me wherever I went anymore. What would you do in case of emergencies, everyone kept shouting, how would you go on living? It was more like scolding rather than asking worriedly, and that kind of treatment lead me to a more rebellious attitude. I had just began to realize then that my life wasn't really mine, but society's; I wasn't living it as I wanted to, but merely doing what was expected of me. This lead to an internal revolt, one which made me despised the so-called social norms. I was, subconsciously, aware that a war within me had begun.

'I started to rid myself more and more of what is expected of me to do. I started to read books – a major taboo in my hometown, one which attracted many demented looks upon me. In a way, it encouraged me to read more. The more I read, the less time I had to share my society's eating rituals. I shifted my eating hour from lunch to dinner time when I ate alone so I could read while eating. I started wearing cloth I like instead of what is expected of me to put on. That spited everyone a lot. I could tell by the simple looks I received. So basically, I defied society. However, a part of me knew that whatever I did wasn't enough. It earned me a few odd stares here and there, and a number of lectures from pops and my older brothers, but it wasn't enough. What I was doing was merely challenging life, not living it. I wanted more. That's when I realized my potential: what amazing strength I had in me yet overlooked.

'By the time fall had arrived – the fall of 2009, that is – I had started exercising. Working out and exhausting myself was inconceivable to my folks and friends ... I lost many friendships by doing so ... At first I only walked in afternoons, but later, by the time I was a junior and schoolwork started getting challenging, I failed to find time to walk, so I ran instead. What took about an hour of walking took

twenty minutes instead. The first few months were especially difficult, but as time flew by, it became easier. I took small laps around the block for the usual reasons: to stay in shape, defy social norms, and rid my head of accumulated stress of the week. In time, the twenty minutes became thirty; the weekly jog became daily, and, most important of all, the motivation underwent a radical change.

'It was a schoolday when I had the most sensational idea my mind had ever cooked up. I was running late that day: I barely had enough time to finish my schoolwork, and, as a result, I had no time to jog. That fact upset me. A whole year and a half had passed since I started jogging on a daily basis, and not once had I messed up that arrangement. But I couldn't skip any of my classes as they were too beneficial for me so I went to get the car keys and miss out on a day of jogging. That's when it hit me: why should I take the car to campus? It was only a ten minutes drive from home anyway, so it shouldn't take me more than an hour of jogging. The more I thought about it, the wider my smile grew; the more excited I became; the more intriguing and captivating the idea became. My heart began to beat in a way I've never felt before. Needless to say, a shock was painted clearly on all the faces of my family when I left without the car keys. I had, however, a map in my mind. I had studied the map of the area to see which route would take me to campus. It was more simpler than I thought: I got there in less than half an hour. Once I arrived at campus, I have to say, I was shocked. I immediately stopped running and just walked bypass the students and faculty despite the fact that I was in need of a shower followed by a little R&R. I was over-swept completely by a sudden realization, an epiphany, if you will.'

He stopped talking and leaned closer towards me. He looked straight at me; I looked back. His eyes seemed to sparkle, as if what he was about to tell me was a truth he kept to himself for a long time. Then, he started:

'What I had came to realize was my own strength. I had the power to arrive at my destination, my university, without using a car. I didn't need the car, which I had always believed to be my only means of transportation. I tell you, I was overwhelmed by the mere fact that I was there walking in college. One minute I was at home, the other I was at school. I didn't need anything or anyone; I was independent, I was free.'

He leaned back, then smiled.

'To be able to come and go as you please. If that's not freedom, I don't know what is.'

'But don't you find it exhausting?'

'Jogging? No. Well, at first. But once you start to run, you don't want to stop. When I'm sitting I fell .. like a corpse, just waiting to whither away. But when I'm running, I feel as I'm living life. I don't suppose anyone who hadn't tried it will understand what I'm saying. I used to run for health or to defy social norms, which I still hold as secondary motives, but my main cause is to go places, to feel the air coming against my face and body as I do so, to feel my heart beating

fast, to be alive. Of course as I cross streets I notice people staring at me as if I was nuts. But I can't blame them. I was once just as closed-minded. Pops and my older brothers still harass me on the matter. Sometimes even people I don't know stop me and ask me why I'm running and whether I need help or not. When I reply by telling them that I'm jogging and not running, they get more confused and puzzled. The most hilarious questions I find myself being asked is whether I am a native or not, or if I had a car. I laugh to keep from being angry.'

He stopped after that, looking into the distance. The moment I saw his lips move, I excused myself and took my leave. I decided to do my research paper on someone sane. I didn't understand what he was going on about. This society isn't flawed: it's perfect. It's his head that needs examining.

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