

***Delusion*: Short Story by Ibrahim N. Al-Huraiyes**
Translated from the Arabic by Essam M. Al-Jassim



National Translation Month continues today with the intriguing short story ***Delusion* by Ibrahim N. Al-Huraiyes, translated from the Arabic by Essam M. Al-Jassim.** We love its surreal atmosphere and the interaction between a writer and a little girl who didn't have enough money to pay for a carousel ride.

We'd love to hear what you think! National Translation Month is a community of 6,000+ fans across all social media, and growing. Find us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us using [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. And celebrate your favorite writers in translation from all over the world in September and beyond.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Delusion

By Ibrahim N. Al-Huraiyes

Translated from the Arabic by Essam M. Al-Jassim

He threw the pen aside and collapsed on the lumpy chair, resting his aching body. In a daze, he silently stared into the distance. Last Monday, a strange ethereal shadow had come out of nowhere, come to settle over his head, and had loomed over him ever since. He was able to bat it away, sometimes, but still it peeked out at him from time to time, and it felt as though it could engulf him, all of him, at any moment. Strangely enough, he could neither discern what it was nor fathom its nature; he didn't know why this specter had invaded his body and soul. He winced at its presence, his face contorting with both misery and dread. Every time the shadow overtook him, he felt overwhelmed by deep confusion and dejection.

Was this the harbinger of age, systematically invading his body, declaring the imminent end of his mission? Was it related to the recent decrease in his literary output? Had his creative genius run dry at last, with nothing left to offer? Over the last two weeks, he'd hardly been able to write even a page of his new novel.

Perhaps it was connected to the immense grief he felt – still – over his wife's death, though she'd left him five years ago. Was it his recurring sense of deathly loneliness? Verses from a poem he'd read many years ago had been weighing his heart down.

Who will finally get my arm?

To whom will my ribs and heart go?

To whom will my steps go... rambling?

To whom will my blood turn... my shores?

To whom will my long talk go?

To whom shall joy prevail?

Who will laugh more—

Is it the one who strops the butcher's knife?

*Or the one who was butchered?*¹

Whenever these verses crossed his mind, he shuddered. The words moved him into another dimension, almost transformed him into a different entity. They had a great impact on his spirit, sailing as it was through uncharted waters.

He thought a stroll might help him forget. He swayed to his feet, dragging his coat behind him, and wandered out onto the narrow gloomy street, suddenly realizing he wasn't sure where to go.

As he ambled restlessly, alleys absorbed him, passageways drove him, and junctions spat him out until he found himself sitting in a crowded café. He wanted to talk with the other patrons about their feelings, to meditate on their problems, penetrate their souls. This was what he'd always loved about writing writing—creating characters from all walks of life, etched from those he observed coming and going before him. He had perfected the art of creating personas, brilliantly interweaving events. But now he was unable to delineate even his own personality, incapable of understanding his intrinsic nature or comprehending what he sought.

He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pants, fumbled in the other for a lighter, and blew out pale white clouds that framed his craggy face.

He sipped his coffee as he idly watched employees running and hurrying to work, and the tourists dragging their whining children through the city. Staring reservedly into the distance toward nothing in particular, he became absorbed in thought as if nothing else was around him.

Tales have always walked before me. Dozens of them, with or without purpose. Do these people perceive that we're sucked into a giant swirl willy-nilly? Or are they just deaf and dumb puppets, being moved and ordered to talk because there is a power manipulating them? Our actions are not our own but are carried out through us on behalf of another's will. We are completely helpless, powerless, and weak-willed, simple playthings. All that's important is what needs to be said and done through us as human

tools. Maybe we utter the opposite of what we think, and do what we don't want to achieve. Even our facial expressions and physical movements are but a mask that we hide behind so we don't expose what is inside of us.

We are afraid of being shamed over simple private behavior. These traits must be entombed deep in the soul, so it may hurt here or feel good there, just to satisfy those who are like us. However, what if we don't recognize our inner selves? What if we can discern no difference between the mask and the real face? As if we pass our days wandering in a labyrinth—we may not know where we started, where to go, or what truth we seek. We are never really lost, but we can never quite see where we're going. Liable to fail and go astray, life is simply a delusion in nothing other than a state of limbo.

He gathered up his shattered soul and left the café with anxiety ripping through him. He walked for a long time, no doubt giving those who encountered him the impression he was weighed down. His steps led him to a public park where he stood peering through the metal fence at the human masses that scattered in every direction. The rattling of playground equipment nearly drowned out the children's hustle and bustle as they rushed to and from the different rides. Women calling to their kids to remain in sight distracted him. The rustling of the trees, the soothing babble of trickling water, the abundant verdant vegetation—it all captured his senses. A momentary sense of peace encouraged him as he sat on one of the adjacent wooden benches. He sat still like some stone statue, barely moving his eyes and silently contemplating the buzzing world around him.

Because life has disciplined me through its days and years, as it has against the will of everyone, I chose to discipline it through the pages of my books; people called me a man of letters. But am I actually, still? Am I still able to fill up—with fountain pen ink—time, people, and things and confine them between two covers? Or has life triumphed in the end, as is its perpetual habit?

Life kills those who grasp its tactics and tire it out by fleeing. Life is aware of its abilities to do this, from the first thread of light that disturbs every newborn's face. It deceives and continues this game till some people think they are outside of its reach. In their moments of carelessness, life seeks retribution from them. Does life possess us, or are we the ones who control it? Do we breathe it, or is it life that breathes us? It confounds me.

While his mind wandered, he turned his head, suddenly realizing someone was close. A child sat beside him. He studied her thoughtfully, reminiscing faintly upon the giddy days of a childhood fallen into oblivion.

Pointing toward the carousel ride, where the child's attention was fixed, he asked, "Why don't you play with the other kids?"

"The ticket man at the entrance refused to let me in," she said innocently.

"Why?"

"He asked for a ticket, and I told him I don't have one. He wouldn't let me in." The child's voice broke as the words stumbled out of her mouth.

The bitter words, wet with tears, came from her heart and fell into his.

"Why didn't you buy a ticket?"

"I don't have any money." She merely sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

The child's poverty manifested itself through her tattered dress and worn-out shoes. Spontaneously, he grabbed the girl's hand and led her to the carousel. He bought the ticket and helped her onto the ride. The ride spun and turned, carrying her into another world. Her smile, laughter, and lively, bright eyes snuck into his aching heart.

Her joyfulness delighted him. He viewed her as a magical seed that had just been planted, sprouting at a supernatural speed, becoming a fruitful tree, basking in the glow of the sun. They rushed from one ride to another with an eagerness he hadn't known before. At that moment, he forgot everything—even himself. No longer did he feel the pain and grief, not even the bitterness of disorientation and alienation. Light suddenly filled his world. The sea of sadness and delusion that had clouded his eyes dwindled to a tiny puddle, which he trampled underfoot as he made his way to another ride with the girl.

Was it only a coincidence that this happened? Or was it his courageous maneuver against life as he instinctively took advantage of the moment without hesitation? He didn't give those absurd and fatalistic thoughts the chance to permeate and tamper with

the remaining fragments of his exhausted body and soul. All that mattered was that the girl was a saving grace, the buoy that helped salvage what was left of him.

At sunset, he left her with a firm promise to come to the park tomorrow at eight o'clock in the morning. On the main street outside the park, he hailed a cab to get home. On the way, he stopped at a restaurant to buy dinner. He entered his apartment and asked the doorman to wake him at seven in the morning.

Lately, the rhythm of his life had become hectic and fast-paced. He no longer had enough time to achieve what he wanted. The most important thing now was to wake up early so he could go to the park to see the light flowing from the eyes of that little girl, filling the whole world with new hope.

After he had finished his dinner, the overwhelming desire to write overtook him. He headed for his office and wrote nonstop until he finished a whole chapter of his new novel. Then he went to bed, happy with what he had achieved. Peacefully, he set the alarm for seven o'clock then put his head on the pillow.

At half past ten in the morning, the doorman knocked on the apartment door for the fourth time.

No answer.

The doorman had been away all morning from the main entrance of the building, watching and waiting for the tenant. But the writer hadn't appeared, hadn't left his room. More worryingly, that morning's daily paper still lay by his door. The alarm clock in his apartment had also screamed for several minutes until it stopped automatically. The doorman knew it wasn't the writer's habit to stay in his apartment so late.

Some neighbors came outside as the doorman's knocking became louder and more urgent. They gathered at the apartment door, and when the doorman told them what was happening, they insisted on breaking it down.

On the other side of the bustling city, a little girl on a wooden bench... waiting.

About the writer



Ibrahim N. Al-Huraiyes is a Saudi short story writer who received his bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages and Education from King Faisal University, Hofuf. Mr Al-Huraiyes is a big fan of Arabic comic books and graphic novels.

About the translator



Essam M. Al-Jassim is a Saudi translator. He taught English for many years at Royal Commission schools in Jubail, Saudi Arabia. He received his bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages and Education from King Faisal University, Hofuf. His translations appear in a variety of online and print Arabic and English literary journals.