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The Lottery

Translated from Arabic by Alice Guthrie

DARWISH HAD WON THE LOTTERY.

The news spread like wildfire, and people started turning up at his place. Some of them believed the news, and expected Darwish to have bought *helwan* for them all to eat, and some of them couldn't believe it, and wanted to check if it could possibly be true. By sunset almost the entire neighborhood had gathered around at Darwish's little house, and it was now no longer a question of confirming a rumor: Darwish's big win had become cold fact. Even the policeman—who usually sat around on his favorite chair instead of standing up to direct the traffic—got up and hurried over to Darwish's place to find out whether what he had heard was true.

No one knew the source of the news. Nobody asked who'd been the first to hear that Darwish had won the lottery, and where that person had got it from—it was as if the news had fallen out of the sky, or had been revealed to the people of the neighborhood by a divine messenger. Things had reached the point where one might even hear someone claim to have woken up that morning having seen it in a dream, or have heard someone (an angel, perhaps) whispering it in their ear during morning prayers. But it didn't actually matter to the neighbors how they had become convinced of it—all that mattered was that Darwish, one of their own, had won the lottery.

And if anyone did start to question anyone else about the source of the news they would both end up even more sure of what they'd heard than they were before. "Where did you hear the news, then?"

"Mate, haven't you heard? Everyone's talking about it."

"I know, I heard about it too."

"Why'd you come over here?"

"I told you, I heard people saying that Darwish'd won the lottery."

"Yep, I heard that too."

So eventually everyone was convinced that Darwish had won the lottery. Imagine, a normal person from an ordinary neighborhood winning

the lottery—it was major, it was big news, and big news didn't break around here every day. This neighborhood wasn't always celebrating such grand occasions. The news was a shock wave, and no one could really take it in: Darwish had won the lottery! With a mixture of astonishment, disgust, envy, greed, and joy, people were exchanging all manner of views on the subject. "God gives nuts to those who have no teeth," an elderly man said to himself. Darwish had won the lottery! Why couldn't it have been he who had won, or his son?

Darwish was by nature a pacifist. He never got into any fights or even argued with anyone, and he'd never sought to do any of his neighbors any harm, ever. He didn't talk much, and he didn't move much. Except for the evenings he sat outside his front door smoking his battered old narghile he wasn't even seen out in the street much. But he'd never moved away from the neighborhood, and he never missed any of his neighbors' special occasions, whether it meant offering his condolences at a wake or his congratulations at a wedding. He would pay a visit to the family of anyone in the neighborhood who graduated from university, or who even successfully completed high school. As his neighbors said about him, he was "Mr. Duty," and it was true: he always did the right thing. He never shirked his social duties, not only within his own extended family but across his whole community of neighbors.

Darwish lived in the neighborhood where he had been born five decades earlier, in the middle of the refugee camp. The neighborhood was overcrowded and the houses were small, crammed in next to each other unsystematically, with a huge spiderweb of angular little alleys and corridors running between them. The different parts of the neighborhood were connected by a single arterial main street, the alleys and narrow streets branching off from it and feeding back into it like capillaries. And given that Darwish lived in Big Street, as it was known in the neighborhood, the crowds pouring toward Darwish's place caused a crisis right across the camp, as Big Street had intersections with other big streets leading to other neighborhoods. In under an hour traffic in Big Street was at a standstill, and in another hour the gridlock had spread to streets elsewhere in the camp.

Thousands of people from the other neighborhoods of the camp were flocking over to Darwish's neighborhood to find out what was going on. Before any of them had even reached Big Street they were utterly convinced that Darwish had won the jackpot, the main prize, not just some little one. After a few hours the audience had expanded and diversified to

the extent that the whole camp and even the surrounding suburbs were represented there.

A reporter sent to the scene by one of the local stations forgot the reason for the crowds and told the anchor in the studio about the huge demonstration that was happening, and the resulting chaos spreading through the camp.

“People are massing in the street in the thousands!”

“Really?” The anchor asked sardonically, in mock amazement, “Are there even enough streets over there to hold that many people?”

With a slightly bitter laugh the reporter replied, “There are lots of streets here, yeah—and *everyone* should be out marching, filling them up.”

The issue kept the chief of police from getting a proper nap all day, as he was inundated with calls from politicians and officials asking why demonstrations were raging across the camp. After some considerable effort he managed to make radio contact with the policeman on duty in Big Street, who told him there was no demonstration taking place whatsoever: all that was going on was that one of the blokes from that neighborhood had won the lottery.

At this the chief of police bellowed that the policeman had no place denying an event that was the subject of discussions at a senior political level. Hesitantly, the policeman replied: “But Sir . . . I’m telling the truth.”

Without much enthusiasm the chief of police asked, “And did he really win the lottery?”

“You haven’t seen the crowds outside his house, sir,” the policeman answered cheerfully. “He’s definitely won it, he must’ve.”

Starting to sound hesitant himself, the chief of police asked, “But how do they all know about it?”

This time the officer felt his boss was neither holding him accountable nor telling him off, but rather, astonished at the numbers of people making their way to Darwish’s house, he was actually seeking information. So he answered with satisfaction, “You don’t know Darwish’s luck, sir: things just land at his feet.” And with that he turned his radio off and went back to join the crowds and carry on waiting for Darwish like everyone else.

The policeman had grown up in the neighborhood, but he didn’t actually know whether Darwish was particularly lucky or not—it was just something he’d said off the top of his head to stop his boss asking him any more pointless questions. His boss sat there in his office year round, with the air conditioning on in summer and the heating on in winter, questioning him over the radio about whatever was going on out in the

street. He, on the other hand, was obliged to be on his feet day in and day out, getting fried by the sun's burning rays in summer and lashed by the driving rain in winter.

In reality things didn't generally land at Darwish's feet. On the contrary, it could be said that he didn't really have very much luck in life at all. So if it was true about Darwish winning the lottery, what the officer had said to the chief of police would be completely accurate. Here he was winning the lottery, and finally reaching out his arms to embrace the luck that'd been hidden by such dark clouds and had come to him so late, but no matter—it had finally come. The policeman said to himself that Darwish's life had certainly been tough, no doubt about it, but luck had smiled on him in the end—whereas other people's lives carried on being tough all the way through, without luck's frowning face ever so much as twitching a muscle. Some people died having known only misery and pain. Pain was an eternal companion to the inhabitants of the camp. But luck hadn't just smiled on Darwish, it'd thrown its head back and laughed. As the policeman allowed his attention to get drawn back into the crowd surrounding him, he chuckled to himself at the vicissitudes of that weird old creature, fate. Then there was another influx of reporters and journalists into Big Street. People's mobiles started to ring out of the blue, and when they answered they'd find a news agency on the line looking for an eyewitness report from the scene. The reporters surpassed themselves at presenting the situation in the camp as a game-changer. Suddenly this small neighborhood had become the center of the universe, the heart of the action in the hottest item on the news.

In the middle of all this were the men who lived closest to Darwish. They stood around his front door as if they had convened a committee to settle on a definitive position about what was happening. All of this took place before Darwish got back; his son and daughter were at home, and they were alarmed by the size of the crowd. The boy stood at the window peeping out at the street through the slats of the shutter, and the girl sat with a group of women from the neighborhood who'd been drawn there, like the men, by the news they'd heard. They were all here because they suddenly wanted her as a bride for their sons. Each one talked about how her son had been infatuated with the girl since she was a child, and then they all began to tell stories of their sons' abiding love for her over all these years. Then they each went on to describe their son and the shining future that lay ahead of him. Darwish's daughter had never heard such incredible love stories before, and she'd never had the

slightest inkling of all this passion and longing for her—but suddenly these young men were all coming out of the woodwork, and according to their mothers their infatuation with her was self-evident. She hadn't finished her second year at university, so it was still early for her to be thinking about getting married. She wanted to continue her studies: that had been her mother's dream. The women smiled at her, and made a long engagement sound perfectly easy. One of them told her, "My boy'd wait a million years for you," and they all laughed at each other for exaggerating as they vied to convince the young woman that their son was Mr. Right.

Out in the street things were getting increasingly complicated as the crowds bearing down on the neighborhood, the street, and the house continued to swell. Hours passed in this way, with everyone in the neighborhood chewing over the news and debating the various aspects of it. In many parallel discussions people came up with conditions Darwish would have to fulfill—for the neighborhood that Darwish had been born and raised in and still lived in was entitled to its share of the huge sum of money that he would be receiving. The neighborhood had been good to him, and he owed it a favor. And the sum, as one of the young men said knowingly, was "very very big, to be honest with you"—it wouldn't be fair for Darwish to keep it all to himself. The neighborhood sheikh stipulated that Darwish contribute to the cost of adding another story to the local mosque: after all this money was God's money, not his. And then a big argument broke out about how Darwish's financial contribution to the neighborhood could best be used. A young man's voice suddenly cut through the cacophony:

"And what if Darwish refuses?"

"Refuses what?"

"Refuses to share it."

"How can he refuse?"

"Just like you'd refuse if it was your money."

"But it's not his money."

"If it's not his money, then whose is it, yours?"

The young man fell under suspicion, as what he said seemed to imply that Darwish had sent him in to break the news that he wouldn't be donating a penny to the neighborhood. The very word "donate" hurt people's ears, as this wasn't a question of generosity or altruism, but of Darwish's commitment to the neighborhood. And as the young man had opted to stay put and suffer the arrows of doubt and suspicion rather than flee the scene, the rumors that he was Darwish's emissary gained traction:

surely, people said to each other, Darwish would have sent someone to tell the neighborhood that he would not be giving them any money. After a little while an elderly man turned to the lad and asked him outright:

“Did Darwish tell you that?”

“He didn’t tell me anything.”

“He didn’t tell you . . . All right, so is that what you understood from what he was saying? Tell us the truth.”

“I haven’t even seen him, people! I was just thinking out loud.”

One of them objected angrily to this answer: “And you reckon you’re the only one who thinks, do you? We’re all thinking! What do you think we’re doing here? We’re all here because we think about community issues, we care about them. This is our neighborhood. And anyone who doesn’t care what goes on around here isn’t part of the neighborhood. Right, sheikh?”

“That’s right,” the sheikh replied. He carried on fiddling with his floor-length prayer beads for a moment, before adding: “Come on, everyone, let’s go and pray at the mosque. We can come back here when Darwish gets home.”

So the crowd split into those who went off with the sheikh to pray and those who preferred to wait where they were, worried that Darwish would come back while they were gone and they would miss him. When the sheikh stood to give a sermon after prayers, as he usually did, he talked about how the Earth and everything on it belonged to God, and as mortals everything we owned was in fact God’s property. He said that money possessed by someone who didn’t give alms and offer part of it to the house of God was not true wealth and would bring no good, because all riches were God’s riches. He took out his prayer beads and gazed into the faces of the people gathered before him, scanning the crowd as if he expected Darwish to have turned up and joined the prayers. A bearded young man sitting in the front row spoke up, “He’s not here yet, sheikh.”

Darwish still hadn’t come home. His absence only served to reinforce the news, as everyone assumed he was busy claiming his lottery winnings, or stashing them at a relative’s place outside of the neighborhood, or something—whatever he was doing, they were all sure of one thing: his absence had to do with his lottery win. Soon this update on the original news spread across the neighborhood, and now anyone with a fertile imagination could easily invent all sorts of stories about Darwish’s non-appearance. Even his daughter and his little son didn’t know why their father was home late! Not that anyone thought to ask them where he

was: the mere fact of his absence was enough to generate a whole new crop of rumors. If any of them had taken it upon themselves to ask that simple question they would have found out that Darwish was out at sea and hadn't yet come in to shore.

And because some things just have to happen in a certain way, coincidence had it that Darwish was spending his longest-ever day out fishing. He was supposed to have headed straight home when he got back to dry land at sunset, as he usually did, but he ended up staying out all evening without calling his daughter and son to tell them he was all right.

He'd been out fishing since dawn. Fishing was his hobby, and he liked to say he had inherited it from his father, but that was in fact quite an exaggeration, as his father had been a skilled fisherman and fishing had been his livelihood, whereas Darwish had only ever done it as a hobby. And it was a hobby he'd discovered late in life, after his father's death. Perhaps it was really just something he did out of nostalgia, a way to remind himself of his father. In any case, whatever the main reason, Darwish had started spending every Thursday out at sea. He would pack up the net he'd inherited from his father—once he'd mended any holes in it, tightened up any loose threads, and replaced any of the little lead weights around the edges that had fallen off—and set off on his bicycle with the net in the basket before the sun rose from behind the orange groves to the east of the camp. He would spend the day with a group of his fishermen friends, then once the sun had plunged into the sea like a ripe orange he would head home, always carrying plenty of fresh sardines, mullet, and sea bream. Then he would light the charcoal in the big clay brazier he'd had for years and grill the fish, the aroma filling the air and drifting into his neighbors' homes.

Tonight, though, Darwish was so delayed that he didn't get back until late at night. There was no particular reason—there isn't always a specific reason for such things. After a long fishing trip one of the fishermen suggested playing a few games of cards in a café on the beach. Darwish looked at his watch and said, "Yeah, all right," knowing his two children would be happy enough watching TV for now. Time passed, as it always does. Darwish's mobile was on silent, so he didn't hear any of the calls his daughter made to tell him about the massive crowd outside his house.

It was quite simply an exquisite set of coincidences that conspired to increase everyone's obsession with Darwish winning the lottery and heighten their suspicion that he had already accepted his winnings and wouldn't be coming back to the neighborhood. "And his children? What

about them?” The question was easy, and the answer even easier: he’d send for them and take them with him. Thus Darwish, the sweet and kind neighborhood bloke they were all so familiar with, was now becoming a larger-than-life fictional character in his neighbors’ imaginations, taking on ever more fanciful characteristics. They didn’t wait to ask him, and not one of them took it upon himself to investigate the supposedly definite news that had made them all gather there in such certainty.

Had anyone from the neighborhood ever won the lottery before?

Of course no one from the neighborhood had ever won the lottery before. None of them had ever been given a medal or won an award. No senior official or politician had ever visited their neighborhood. They didn’t even see their candidate for the Legislative Council once he’d reaped their votes—except on TV.

It came to the government’s attention that the opposition parties were planning to take advantage of the huge crowd already in the street and rally them to march against the government and demand the equitable distribution of wealth. Informers told the government that the opposition claimed Darwish was one of their members and that their task would therefore be an easy one. Thousands of citizens were out in the streets and Darwish could lead them in whichever direction he wanted—all they would need was a megaphone, a few banners, and some big pictures, and it would turn into a demonstration against the government. And once there was a big protest against the government under way, it would ratchet up until it was calling for overthrow of the whole regime.

A government advisor insisted that the ruling party should exploit the situation and direct the crowd to cheer and chant in support of the government. “It’s so convenient for us,” he said eagerly, “people are already in the street—we don’t even have to get them out there!” His excitement mounted when he opened his Facebook account and read a message from one of the party faithful saying that Darwish was a fervent supporter of the party and would therefore be very happy if the day he won the lottery became an occasion for people to show their support for the party and the government. “All we have to do is direct them,” the advisor said, rubbing his hands.

On further consideration, however, betting on people to behave as they were ordered to seemed like an unquantifiable risk, so the government decided to disperse the crowd instead, even if it required the use of force. A crowd of people should not be allowed to gather in the street just because someone had won the lottery. Both the nature of the crowd

and the fact that it was still growing were causes for concern.

Initially the chief of police got the officer on duty in Big Street on the radio and asked him to get people to disperse. The officer thought he had to be joking—or maybe sitting in isolation in an office made one lose track of reality.

“Who do you want me to disperse, sorry?” the police officer asked sarcastically.

“This is a government order: the crowd is to be dispersed,” said the chief.

The officer answered scornfully, “Then get the government to come and disperse them itself.”

At this the chief yelled at the officer, “You are the government!”

The officer took note of the chief’s resolute tone of voice. He turned into a side street away from the thick of the crowd and, almost whispering into his radio, tried to explain: “Sir, there are thousands of people here. I think we’d need a special force to disperse them.”

Within half an hour the riot-dispersal force had arrived at the scene and hemmed the crowd in on all sides. They began to break up the gathering and disperse people, but without using very much force—a persistent voice over the megaphone urging people to go home in order to preserve public order was enough. A few people resisted, but most of them reluctantly started to move on. One man said that the government was in cahoots with Darwish, that he’d undoubtedly bribed a government official with part of his winnings to get the crowd dispersed. To which a seasoned left-winger added, “Government always sides with capital.” Then he cursed capitalism and the bourgeoisie and launched into a lengthy tirade using such complicated language and so much jargon that no one could follow his argument any longer.

The opposition parties issued statements from the scene declaring that the government had broken up a protest about government policies and the unfair distribution of wealth by their supporters, and that this reflected the government’s weakness and its terror of confronting the masses. This was immediately followed by another statement affirming that the citizens’ right to assembly was enshrined in the constitution, as well as being a venerable tradition, and therefore this right could not be undermined by the government. In a joint statement the parties called for the government to stand down.

One of the parties said that their leader had been beaten up by the police and was now receiving treatment in a secret location out of the government’s reach.

The official news reported that a progovernment demonstration in the camp had ended well after thousands of people came out to cheer the president.

The crowd may have dispersed, but they took the story of the ordinary bloke from the neighborhood who'd won the lottery and would now be made rich back home with them. In their smaller, more intimate family gatherings everyone carried on pondering Darwish's fate and his sudden immense wealth. And yet the basic question about the source of the news was yet to be resolved.

Had one of them heard it on the radio? Had Darwish confided in one of them?

But it was a question that didn't interest anyone very much—all that mattered was that Darwish had won the lottery. The government had even intervened to stop people gathering in front of Darwish's house! Imagine!

When Darwish finally rode back into the neighborhood on his bike he found it shrouded in darkness. The shops were closed, there was no one around in the street, and it was as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened that day at all. Apart from the odd car passing Darwish from time to time, the deserted streets were still and quiet. He didn't notice anything—there was nothing to catch his attention. The fish he'd caught still had the smell of the sea on them. It wasn't very far from the beach to his neighborhood: it only took Darwish about half an hour on his bike. As soon as he got home he felt an instant sensation of comfort settle over his body. His nagging concern at having left his two children at home all day hadn't lifted, but he told himself he'd take them with him next time and they could spend the whole day at the beach. They would enjoy swimming, and hanging out with him, and playing on the sand and shingle at the water's edge.

When he reached the house he got off his bike and propped it up against the wall. He was about take the basket of fish inside when an old man came past. Leaning on his walking stick he asked Darwish if it was true he'd won the lottery like people were saying.

Without looking up from the basket of fish, Darwish asked him, "What lottery?"

"They're saying you've won the lottery," the man replied.

At this Darwish looked at the man. Sounding bemused, he said, "There isn't a lottery in Gaza, so how can anyone win it?"

The man thought about this for a moment, in silence. Then he walked off, saying as he went, "It's them lot that're saying it, not me . . ."

There really was no lottery in Gaza, so how could Darwish have won it? He laughed when his daughter told him what had been going on; then he lit the charcoal and started grilling the fish he'd caught. The mouth-watering aroma wafted out into the street, making the neighbors whisper to each other, "See how wealthy Darwish is now? He can eat as much fish as he likes, whenever he likes!"

The next morning things were back to normal in the neighborhood. With the first chirps of the dawn chorus, the shopkeepers drew the dewy bolts on their shop doors. Council workers were busy cleaning the street. The heavily laden UNRWA refuse truck growled its way past little knots of sleepy-eyed schoolchildren making their way to class with a dreamy alacrity. The street was waking up as it always did, despite the sun turning up late for its usual appointment because of a thick bank of clouds in the eastern sky. There was nothing new about the day except for the fatigue Darwish felt as he put his chair out in front of his door that evening. While he wearily set up his narghile the sun took leave of the street and snuggled down into the sea's arms.

People hadn't forgotten about what had been going on. There were still murmurs about how Darwish had in fact won the lottery, but that there had then been a cover-up by the government and an order to disperse the crowds. The look in Darwish's neighbors' eyes as they watched him take a deep drag on his narghile was loaded. Even the greetings they threw his way as they passed were different now, with a new undertone to them.

As Darwish gazed at the charcoal glowing under the lump of tobacco in the narghile bowl his little boy came and stood at his side. After a moment he asked, "Dad, what does 'lottery' mean?"

The twin plumes of smoke from Darwish's nostrils formed gently shifting shapes in the night air. Some of them looked like question marks. Darwish stroked his son's hair and planted a kiss on his cheek. It seemed the child had found the answer he was looking for, and he ran off to play. He started throwing a little ball against the wall and catching it.

Sometimes he caught it, sometimes it got away, and either way he laughed at his luck.