

THE SHORT STORIES OF ZAKARIA TAMER

The carriage passed through a number of streets, eventually coming to a wide street lined with stone buildings on both sides. Before it could get part way down the street, a policeman blocked its way. Abu Mustafa yelled a long-drawn-out “hish” at the horse.

The policeman said: “Don’t you know that carriages are not allowed on this street?”

Abu Mustafa replied: “I know.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“My horse, look at him. My horse is worn out. If I took the other street, then I would be asking too much from him.”

The horse felt deep sympathy. The policeman said: “Carriages are not allowed on this street. Only cars and pedestrians.”

Abu Mustafa said: “I know.” He licked his lips and continued, saying: “The horse is tired. If he dies, my livelihood is stopped. I will starve to death, and so will my children. I have four children.”

“Go back, and I won’t punish you for breaking the system and the law.”

“I have four sons who eat rocks,” Abu Mustafa said, getting down from the carriage. He let out a short, dry laugh that was like a small, violent knife. He said: “I’m telling you the truth. I don’t fear for my children, I fear for their mother.”

Curious, the policeman asked: “Why do you fear for her?”

The trees were green along the sides of the street. Blue vastness stretched across the sky. And Abu Mustafa replied: “I fear that my children will eat their mother if they are starving. Their teeth are monsters.”

A car passed at high speed so the policeman blew his whistle, but the car did not stop. The policeman was able to read the license plate number before it disappeared, he wrote it on a page in his notebook, and then – his face swollen with anger – he turned to Abu Mustafa and said: “Now, go back.”

“Please let me pass, just this once.”

The policeman said sternly: “Did you hear me? Go back.”

“Just this once.”

“Go back. The law is the law. No use in pleading.”

“My horse is tired.”

“Go back now.”

“May God keep you, for your mother’s sake.”

“God, do not keep me! I do not make the law. I do what I am com-