

The Iron Ball

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The iron ball scraped against the stones with every step.

Scrrrape...

Scrrrape...

Scrrrape...

The sound was familiar in this city, but this time it was louder than usual.

A man in his mid-thirties, dragging behind him a massive black iron ball tied to a thick chain around his ankle.

It was bigger than any ball seen on the street that day.

Sweat poured from his forehead despite the cold weather, and his torn clothes clung to his thin body.

He finally stopped at the edge of the sidewalk.

He threw his exhausted body to the ground, then pulled an empty pack from his pocket, stared at it for a few seconds, and tossed it away.

He raised his head toward the gray sky.

As usual.

Nothing new.

No job.

No home.

No one waiting for him.

People passed by without looking at him.

Some turned their faces away.

Some looked at him with contempt.

And some acted as if he didn't exist at all.

He smiled a mocking smile.

He'd gotten used to it years ago.

At that moment a woman passed, holding a small child's hand.
The child stared at the homeless man in wonder.
Then looked at the huge iron ball he was dragging.
He stopped for a moment.
"Mom... why is his ball so big?"
The mother pulled his hand quickly, as if wanting to get away.
Then said, without looking at the man:
"If you keep misbehaving and don't listen to me... you'll end up like him."
The child looked at the man one last time.
Then kept walking with his mother.
The man stayed silent.
He didn't get angry.
He didn't get sad.
He laughed a short, quiet laugh instead.
Then the laugh died out quickly.
And his eyes dropped to the ground.
Because he remembered something he hadn't thought of in years.
The same scene.
A different street.
A different time.
But the same scene.
He had been a small child that day.
Standing, holding his mother's hand.
And there had been a homeless man sitting at the corner of the road.
Dragging an iron ball behind him.
He'd asked the same question.
And gotten the same answer.
"If you don't behave... you'll end up like him."
The man closed his eyes slowly.
Then muttered to himself:
"The funny thing is, I was never a troublemaker..."

He went silent for a moment.

"And yet here I ended up."

A cold wind blew through the alleys.

And the chain wound around his foot shook.

It let out a faint metallic ring.

Clink...

Clink...

Clink...

That sound alone was enough to remind him that a new day of carrying the ball had begun.

He raised his head again and looked at the crowded street.

Life kept moving as if it didn't know how to stop.

But for him, life had stopped long ago.

It was no longer about hunger or poverty.

Even if he found work.

Even if he got a home.

Even if his iron ball vanished tomorrow.

He no longer had the strength to start over.

He felt as if something inside him had broken years ago, and could no longer be fixed.

He lit a crumpled cigarette and took a long drag.

Then watched the people.

A well-dressed businessman walked lightly along the sidewalk.

Behind him, three poor men dragged a massive iron ball tied with his name.

A wealthy woman sat inside a luxurious carriage, while two exhausted workers pulled her ball for her.

A familiar sight.

In this world, no one escaped the ball.

The rich simply paid others to carry it for them.

And the poor sold their backs and their years for a few extra coins.

His eyes wandered further.

The bread seller.

The policeman.

The laborer.

The teacher.

The beggar.

Everyone dragged their balls behind them.

Some small.

Some large.

And some so enormous their owners could barely stand.

Everyone...

Without exception.

Except children.

And animals.

He had never once seen a child carrying a ball.

Nor a dog, a cat, or a bird dragging a chain behind it.

It was so normal that no one ever questioned it.

Just as people never ask why the sun rises every morning.

The man sighed and slowly exhaled the smoke.

Then muttered sarcastically:

"Enjoy it while you're still young..."

He looked at a group of children running freely in the street.

"Because it's coming for all of you."

A shadow fell over him.

He raised his head slowly.

Another homeless man was walking past him.

His beard was unkempt, his clothes filthy, his eyes carrying the same exhaustion he saw every day in the faces of the street's people.

But one thing was different.

The massive iron ball tied by a chain to his foot wasn't touching the ground.

It floated behind him at a low height, moving lightly as if it had no weight at all.

No scraping sound.

No dragging on the stones.

No heaviness.

The man smiled and said:

"Bad day?"

The seated homeless man looked at him and said with quiet sarcasm:

"Is there any other kind?"

His eyes landed on the floating ball.

"Looks like your ball's having an easier time than I am today."

The man laughed, then patted his pocket.

"I've got a few bubbles."

He pulled out a small glass orb, about the size of a grape. Inside it, a faint silver mist swirled slowly.

The seated man's eyes narrowed.

"Back on the bubbles?"

The man shrugged.

"Never really left them."

He raised the glass orb between his fingers.

"If you've got some money, I'll share one with you."

The seated man gave a short laugh.

"Do I look like someone with money?"

The man studied him for a moment, then smiled.

"Fair enough."

He put the bubble back in his pocket.

"Just one bubble makes the ball float for hours. You walk like you're a child again."

The seated man kept staring at the floating iron ball behind the other man.

"And after that?"

The man's smile faded a little.

"After that..."

He paused for a moment.

"It gets a little heavier."

The seated man said:

"A little?"

The man turned his face away.

"A little."

Neither of them believed it.

They both knew the truth.

The bubble doesn't remove the ball.

Doesn't break the chain.

Doesn't free anyone.

All it does is wrap the ball for a while, make it float, make its owner forget its weight, forget its sound, forget it even exists.

Then the bubble pops.

And the ball returns.

Bigger.

Heavier.

Closer to the ground.

And still, people bought them.

Workers.

Beggars.

The elderly.

Even some owners of small balls used them, afraid their balls would grow one day.

The man said as he prepared to leave:

"Still... it's worth trying."

He smiled a tired smile.

The smile of someone who knows he's losing but can't stop playing.

Then he continued on his way through the crowd, his floating ball following silently.

The seated homeless man kept watching him until he vanished into the crowd.

For a brief moment, he imagined himself walking without a sound.

Without dragging.

Without weight.

Without that ball reminding him with every step that he could no longer escape his life.

He was about to look away from the street when he caught a familiar face among the passersby.

He stopped for a moment.

A young woman was walking along the sidewalk with calm steps.

Behind her rolled a medium-sized iron ball tied by a chain around her foot, but it didn't seem to weigh on her the way it weighed on most people.

She wasn't poor.

And she wasn't homeless.

She looked like an ordinary person living a normal life.

Clean clothes.

Neat hair.

And a face that still held something rare in this city.

Kindness.

When she saw him, she smiled and waved.

Then approached, carrying a small paper bag.

"Hi."

He answered with a slight nod.

She sat beside him and pulled a piece of bread and some simple food from the bag.

"I bought more than I needed."

She said it the same way she always did.

And they both knew it was a small lie.

She was buying the food for him.

But he never commented on it.

He ate in silence.

While she talked about ordinary things.

A new shop that had opened in the neighborhood.

A vendor who'd tried to cheat her on the price.

A lost dog that had followed her the whole way.

Trivial things.

Things with no real value.

And yet he listened to her attentively.

Because she was one of the few people who still talked to him like a human being.

Not as a warning for children.

Not as a burden on society.

Not as an image of what others might one day become.

But as a person.

And that alone was enough sometimes.

When she stood to leave, he thanked her in a low voice.

She smiled at him.

Then continued on her way among the people.

He kept watching her until she disappeared into the crowd.

Then sighed slowly.

He knew the truth.

He knew they weren't friends.

He knew she didn't think about him when she went home.

He knew she probably helped dozens of other people besides him.

She was just a kind girl.

As for him...

He was an extremely lonely man.

And when a person sits alone for too long, his mind starts inventing stories that don't exist.

Sometimes he imagined they were friends.

Sometimes he imagined he had finally found someone who cared about him.

And sometimes he imagined an entire life that existed only inside his head.

Then he'd return to reality.

To the cold sidewalk.

To his torn clothes.

And to the massive iron ball tied around his foot.

And still...

Seeing her was one of the few things that made his day a little less bad.

One of the few things that gave him a reason to wake up in the morning.

And for very brief moments...

He'd feel his ball had become a little lighter.

After finishing the last piece of bread, he rose slowly.

What he was thinking about now mattered more than food.

A cigarette.

He looked around the street.

He saw a man smoking in front of a shop.

He approached him.

"Got a spare cigarette?"

The man looked at his dirty clothes and turned his face away.

"No."

He kept walking.

A few minutes later he saw another young man smoking near the bus stop.

He repeated the same question.

The young man snapped back:

"Get a job."

His friends laughed.

And went on with their conversation as if he weren't there.

The third time, he didn't even get an answer.

The man just cursed at him before walking off.

He was used to it.

He didn't expect anything different.

As he walked, he noticed something on the ground.

Half a cigarette.

Someone had just thrown it away.

He stopped.

Looked right.

Then left.

Then bent down quickly and picked it up.
He looked around again.
As if he'd committed a crime.
Then lit it.
Took a long drag.
And closed his eyes.
He felt a brief comfort.
A small comfort that wasn't worth all this trouble.
And yet he was grateful for it.
When the cold started to bite harder, he decided to look for a place to sleep.
On warm days he slept wherever he happened to be.
On cold nights he headed to the train stations.
The guards sometimes chased him off.
And sometimes pretended not to see him.
He reached the station.
Wandered among the benches until he found a nearly empty row.
He laid his head on one of the benches and lay down.
The chain tied to his foot rattled.
And the iron ball settled beside him.
He raised his eyes toward the ceiling.
And began to think.
Is this freedom?
He smiled a mocking smile.
People always talked about freedom as if it were a lost treasure.
But what was it, really?
Were cavemen free?
They had no boss.
No rent.
No bills.
No work hours.
All they had to do was find their food.

And look for a place to sleep.
Isn't that exactly what he was doing now?
Looking for food.
Looking for a place to sleep.
So...
Why didn't he feel free?
He stayed silent for a moment.
Then muttered to himself:
"Maybe because we're no longer slaves to one person..."
He turned his head toward the iron ball.
"We've become slaves to more things."
Slaves to money.
Slaves to status.
Slaves to laws we made ourselves.
Slaves to other people's opinions.
Slaves to an image we try to paint of ourselves.
I'm an important person.
I'm a successful person.
I'm better than others.
He closed his eyes.
And for the first time in hours he felt something like relief.
Maybe because he no longer had anything left to lose.
Maybe because his mind was trying to deceive him.
Convincing him that the absence of responsibility was a kind of freedom.
He smiled a small smile.
Then gave in to sleep.
While the iron ball stayed still beside him in the dark.
His sleep didn't last long.
He felt a hand shaking him violently.
He opened his eyes groggily.
A security guard was standing over him.

"Come on. Get up."

He rubbed his eyes.

"What time is it?"

"Doesn't matter. Get out."

He sat up slowly.

His body still exhausted.

He looked around.

It felt as if he'd slept only moments.

Maybe two hours.

Three at most.

He got up, dragging his iron ball behind him.

He didn't try to argue.

He didn't have the energy for it.

He left the station.

The cold air hit him directly in the face.

He shivered.

And pulled the collar of his worn coat tight around his neck.

Across the street, near the river, he caught the glow of a small fire.

He approached.

A group of homeless people sat around it.

Familiar faces.

Faces he'd seen dozens of times before.

Some laughing.

Some arguing.

And some staring silently at the fire as if watching their own lives burn with it.

When they saw him, one of them waved.

"Come."

He sat near the fire.

He finally felt some warmth.

The man next to him pulled a bubble from his pocket and held it out to him.

"Take it."

He looked at it.

"I don't have any money."

The man laughed.

"I found some money today."

Then added, smiling:

"Consider it a gift."

He kept staring at the bubble.

He'd tried it before.

Once or twice.

But he hadn't reached the point of addiction yet.

He hadn't been homeless for years like most of those sitting around the fire.

He hadn't gotten used to this life yet.

Or maybe he just refused to admit he was starting to.

He looked at his hands.

Then at his iron ball.

Then at the cold eating into his bones.

He was exhausted.

Angry.

Angry at the cold.

Angry at people.

Angry at himself.

And above all...

He wanted to escape.

Even if just for a few hours.

He took the bubble.

And popped it.

Silver mist spread around his iron ball.

And within seconds the ball began to rise.

Slowly.

Then more.

Then more.

His eyes widened.
It was higher than everyone else's balls.
Much higher.
He looked around.
Their balls were floating too.
But barely lifting off the ground.
His, though, hung in the air above him as if it had completely lost its weight.
He felt a strange lightness.
As if something had been crushing his chest the whole time and suddenly
vanished.
He stood.
Then took a few steps.
Light steps.
No resistance.
No dragging.
No that metallic sound that had haunted him for months.
And finally...
He smiled.
A real smile.
The men around him laughed.
"Look at him!"
"The bubble's still new to him!"
They laughed more.
He didn't care.
In that moment he felt like he was flying.
As if the ground itself had become lighter.
Behind him two homeless men started arguing.
"You stole my money!"
"I didn't!"
"Liar!"
Voices rose.

Then turned into shouting.
But all of it felt distant.
Very distant.
As he looked across the river at the street on the other side.
And suddenly...
He froze.
A fancy black car drove by on the road.
And for one second he caught a face behind the window.
A face he recognized.
Or thought he recognized.
His heart raced.
He stood up unsteadily.
And stared at the car.
Thoughts began tangling in his head.
Images overlapping.
Memories stirring.
"You..."
He muttered angrily.
Then his voice rose.
He started cursing at her.
Shouting toward the car.
The woman turned toward him.
She looked at him for just one second.
A short look.
Cold.
Full of disgust.
Then she turned her face away.
And the car continued on.
The lights vanished at the end of the street.
He stayed standing there.
Breathing hard.

Not sure if the woman had been real...
Or if the bubble had started messing with his mind.
He woke with the first threads of morning light.
The fire had gone out hours ago, leaving only cold ash scattering in the wind.
He raised his head slowly.
Some of the homeless were still asleep.
Others had left before sunrise.
He sat in place for a few moments.
Then put his hands over his face.
He felt disgusted with himself.
That feeling visited him every morning.
Without exception.
As if his conscience woke up before he did.
How did he end up here?
When did this become his life?
When did he start accepting all of this?
He looked at the river in silence.
Then remembered the girl he'd met the night before.
And for some reason...
It brought back everything he'd been trying to ignore.
She wasn't the only reason he'd ended up where he was.
But she was one of the things that made his collapse look clearer in his own eyes.
She reminded him of what he'd lost.
And of the huge distance between him and everyone else.
And of the man he could have been if his life had gone differently.
Thoughts began crowding his head.
Anger.
Regret.
Self-hatred.
And an overwhelming urge to get revenge on everything.
On people.

On society.
On fate.
And on the man he had become.
He stood up.
And clenched his fists.
"I'll change."
The words came out of his mouth in a low voice.
But he meant them.
This time he really meant them.
He would look for work.
He would clean himself up.
He would stop sitting in the streets.
He would start over.
He took a step.
Then another.
And began dragging the iron ball behind him.
Scrrrape...
Scrrrape...
Scrrrape...
And with every meter he covered, his thoughts began to fade.
Little by little.
He started thinking about hunger.
Then about the cold.
Then about the cigarette he wanted.
Then about a place to sit.
And by the time he reached the city...
He had nearly forgotten everything he'd told himself an hour before.
As usual.
This always happened.
Every morning.
He'd wake up hating his life.

And decide to change.
Then the day would swallow him.
And the wheel would start turning again.
He reached the usual street.
The usual sidewalk.
The usual noise.
And sat.
But this time he didn't sit because he had nowhere else to go.
He didn't sit because he was tired.
He sat because he was waiting.
Waiting for the kind girl.
The girl who brought him food from time to time.
He watched the road she usually came from.
His eyes scanning every approaching face.
And every time he felt disappointment when he realized it wasn't her.
She was different from the woman he'd seen the night before.
That woman was part of a past he was trying to forget.
But this girl...
Was part of the present.
A small part of his gray days.
He didn't know much about her.
Didn't know why she helped him.
But he found himself waiting for her to come.
Waiting for her smile.
And her simple words.
And that paper bag she carried with her every time.
He never admitted it to anyone.
Not even to himself.
But he knew the truth.
He was no longer just waiting for the food.
He was waiting for the feeling that came with her presence.

The feeling that at least one person in this world still saw him.
Still noticed he existed.
And that was enough sometimes.
Enough to make him endure one more day.
And enough to convince himself tomorrow might be a little less bad than today.
Even if he knew deep down...
That this small hope might only live inside his head.
He stayed sitting, watching the road.
And as time passed he started to believe she wouldn't come today.
Like every good thing in his life.
It appeared a little.
Then vanished.
But just as he was getting ready to stand, he finally spotted her.
She was walking fast this time.
Faster than usual.
As if she were late for something important.
When she reached him, she didn't sit like she usually did.
And wasn't carrying any paper bag.
She looked a little tense.
She said, catching her breath:
"I'm sorry, I'm in a rush today."
Then held out her hand to him.
She was holding some money.
He looked at her, puzzled.
"I couldn't buy food."
She put the money in his hand.
"Buy yourself something."
He looked at the money for a moment.
Then raised his head toward her.
His heart was beating faster than usual.
He felt this was his chance to look different.

To look less miserable.
Less of a failure.
Less like the man who sat in the same spot every day.
So he said in a low voice:
"I'm looking for work."
The words came out faster than he expected.
She stopped.
And looked at him.
For a brief moment he felt like a normal person again.
Someone with a future.
Someone still able to stand on his own feet.
He raised his head further and said with forced confidence:
"Yes... I'm looking for work."
As if he were doing society a favor.
As if he hadn't spent the past months on the sidewalks.
She kept looking at him for a few seconds.
Then smiled.
A genuine smile this time.
A rare thing.
She said:
"Are you serious?"
He answered immediately:
"Yes."
He didn't hesitate.
Even he almost believed himself.
She smiled more.
Then said:
"I think I can help you."
His heartbeat quickened.
"Really?"
She nodded.

"Yes."

Then she glanced at the watch on her wrist.

And looked rushed again.

"But not now."

She took a step back.

"Let's talk about it tomorrow."

He felt as if the world stopped for a moment.

Tomorrow.

For the first time in a long while he had a real reason to wait for tomorrow.

He watched her move away among the people.

Then looked at the money in his hand.

And without realizing it...

A small smile began forming on his face.

As for the iron ball behind him...

It looked lighter than it had in months.

The moment she disappeared among the people, his heart started racing.

Tomorrow.

It was a simple word.

But it was enough to ignite something inside him.

He stood there for a few moments.

Then started walking aimlessly.

A foolish smile never leaving his face.

He knew it was just a job opportunity.

Just a passing conversation.

But his mind wasn't interested in the truth.

His mind was occupied with something else entirely.

He began weaving possibilities.

Silly possibilities.

Unrealistic ones.

But he couldn't stop them.

What if he got the job?

What if he kept it?

What if she started seeing him differently?

What if...

He laughed to himself.

Then kept walking.

And his imagination drifted further and further from reality.

He pictured himself in clean clothes.

Talking to her every day.

Eating together.

Then he began thinking of even crazier things.

Names of children who hadn't even been born.

A life that hadn't happened.

And a future that existed only inside his head.

But he didn't care.

When was the last time he felt excited about something?

When was the last time he waited for tomorrow?

When was the last time he smiled this way?

He looked at his iron ball.

It was still massive.

But it looked lighter than usual.

Much lighter.

As if hope itself was lightening its weight.

He reached a small shop.

Looked at the money she'd given him.

It was enough to buy decent food.

Maybe even two meals.

He hesitated for just one second.

Then went in.

And a few minutes later he came out carrying a pack of cigarettes.

No food.

No water.

Just cigarettes.

He smiled as he looked at it.

Like a child who'd finally gotten the candy he'd been dreaming of.

He knew it was a bad decision.

He knew he'd be hungry later.

But he couldn't resist the thought.

In the end...

Hunger was part of his life.

As for cigarettes...

They were one of the few things that still gave him a temporary feeling of happiness.

He lit one right away.

Took a long drag.

Then exhaled the smoke slowly.

And closed his eyes.

Savoring that small moment.

Unaware that his mind had already begun building dreams far bigger than reality.

Dreams that might hurt him more than the iron ball itself.

That night he sat near the river smoking a cigarette.

One of the homeless men approached him.

A thin man with a tired face and eyes red from lack of sleep.

He pointed at the cigarette.

"Give me one."

The hero looked at the pack.

Then looked back at him.

"This is the last one."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"You bought a whole pack yesterday."

The hero took a long drag of smoke.

"Found it off someone in the street."

Then raised the cigarette.

"And this is all that's left."

He was lying.

In his pocket there were still several cigarettes.

But he didn't want to give him one.

The man shrugged and walked off.

He stayed sitting until the cigarette was completely finished.

Then pulled out another a few minutes later and lit it.

He kept smoking in silence, watching the river water.

Then fell asleep.

He woke before sunrise.

For the first time in a long while he had something waiting for him.

Something that made him get up immediately.

He headed to the river.

Took off his clothes.

Then began washing his body with the cold water.

He shivered from the cold.

But it didn't stop him.

He washed his face.

His hair.

His hands.

Then stood for a moment, catching his breath.

After that he started searching through nearby bins.

He wasn't looking for food this time.

He was looking for clothes.

After a long search he found some old clothing.

Not new.

But not torn either.

He took it to the river.

Washed it as best he could.

Then put it on.

It was still damp.

But that didn't matter.
What mattered was looking clean.
What mattered was looking ready.
What mattered was not being seen the way people saw him every day.
He sat in his usual spot.
Waiting.
And waiting.
And waiting.
Until she finally appeared.
He felt his heart pound.
But he quickly noticed she wasn't alone.
An elderly man was walking beside her.
White hair.
A thick mustache.
And old work clothes.
She carried the usual food bag.
And in her hand a cup of coffee.
They approached him.
The girl smiled.
"Good morning."
Then handed him the food and coffee.
After that she gestured to the old man.
"This is Mr. Hassan."
The old man extended his hand to him.
Then looked him up and down.
And paused at his damp clothes.
"Looks like you took a bath."
Then added, smiling:
"Either that... or you fell in the river."
The girl laughed.
He just gave a small smile in return.

The old man sat beside him.
And kept making comments.
"Your hair's neat."
"Your clothes are clean."
"Add a tie and you might pass for a company manager."
The girl laughed again.
He understood exactly what the man meant.
It was mockery wrapped in a joke.
But he ignored it.
For her sake.
And for the sake of the chance waiting for him.
After a few minutes the smile faded from the old man's face.
And he became more serious.
He looked at him directly.
"Alright."
Then pointed a finger at him.
"Tell me."
"What do I get out of hiring you?"
Silence fell.
The hero looked at the ground.
Then at his hands.
Then at the girl.
For the first time in a long while he felt the gap between their two worlds.
She stood here.
In her clean clothes.
With her normal life.
And her dreams.
As for him...
He was a homeless man sitting on the sidewalk.
And even though he'd spent years telling himself all people were equal...
That money didn't define a person's worth...

That the whole of society was chasing illusions...
The old man's words still struck him somewhere painful.
Because he suddenly felt lesser.
Not lesser as a human being.
But lesser in the world's eyes.
And lesser in her eyes.
He always used to say he'd chosen this life himself.
Tired of jobs.
Tired of responsibilities.
Tired of betrayal.
And treachery.
And the endless race.
He wanted to be free.
For no one to have power over him.
For no one to tell him what to do.
But sitting in front of her now...
He discovered he wanted something else too.
He wanted her to see him differently.
He wanted to impress her.
He wanted to prove he was capable of being something more than just a man
dragging an iron ball through the streets.
And for that reason...
He was willing to pretend that work was the most important thing in the world.
The old man kept looking at him for several seconds.
Then said:
"Have you ever worked a day in your life?"
The hero felt a slight tightness in his chest.
Worked?
Of course he had.
In fact, he'd been good at what he did.
Good enough that people once praised him.

He'd had a name.

A place.

A future.

But all of that belonged to someone else now.

Someone he no longer wanted to remember.

So he answered without hesitation:

"No."

The old man raised his eyebrow.

"Never?"

He shook his head.

"Never."

He was lying.

But he didn't feel guilty.

The truth was too heavy to carry with him.

The old man looked at him for a moment.

Then laughed.

"That makes it easier."

He leaned back.

And took a sip of his coffee.

Then said:

"Because I don't have a respectable job to give to someone with no experience."

He gave a small smile.

A smile he didn't like.

"I can have you clean the bathrooms at my company."

Silence fell.

The hero understood the meaning immediately.

It wasn't about the job.

It was a test.

Or maybe an insult wrapped in a job offer.

As if the man wanted to see how low he could bend.

He looked at the ground for a moment.

Then smiled sarcastically to himself.
The rich.
They always thought they were different.
But if the roles were reversed...
Wouldn't they do the same thing?
Wouldn't they sit on sidewalks too?
Wouldn't they drag their balls like everyone else?
He raised his head.
And looked at the girl.
She was watching him with interest.
In fact he caught something else in her eyes.
Excitement.
As if she were hoping he'd accept.
As if she were happy she'd found him an opportunity.
In that moment...
If they'd offered him street cleaning.
Or dishwashing.
Or anything else.
He would have accepted.
Not for the job itself.
But for the look in her eyes.
So he said:
"I accept."
The girl's smile widened.
The old man laughed.
"Good."
Then pointed at the massive iron ball behind him.
"Actually I was going to have you carry my ball."
He said it as if joking.
Then added:
"But your ball's already big enough."

In this world, the rich had many kinds of luxuries.
Among them, a special powder.
A powder that transferred the weight of a ball from its owner to someone else willing to carry it for money.
That's why some of the poor walked around dragging two balls.
Sometimes three.
While their owners walked lightly, as if carrying nothing at all.
The old man looked at the hero again.
Then sniffed the air in front of him.
And wrinkled his nose.
"And on top of that..."
He said, smiling.
"You don't smell pleasant enough for me to spend the whole day with you."
The girl laughed.
The hero gave a forced smile.
While something inside him cracked a little.
But he hid it.
As usual.
And buried the insult somewhere deep.
A place full of many things he'd never spoken of to anyone.

Chapter Two

The old man kept staring at him for a few seconds.
Then pulled a card from his pocket and tossed it on the small metal table in front of them.
"Seven a.m."
He pointed to an address written on it.
"If you're even one minute late, don't bother coming."
The hero took the card.
The company's name was printed in elegant gold letters.
Something he hadn't touched in years.

He raised his head.
The girl was smiling.
A simple smile.
But it was enough.
Enough to convince him everything was about to change.

That night he didn't sleep.
Every time he closed his eyes, he imagined tomorrow.
How he'd walk into the company.
How he'd work.
How she'd see him weeks from now.
And how she'd tell her friends:
"He's changed."
He laughed to himself.
Then lay back near the river.
His dreams were far bigger than his life.
And far bigger than his reality.
But he didn't care.

He arrived a full hour before the appointment.
He stood in front of the building.
It was bigger than any place he'd entered in years.
Glass.
Metal.
Guards.
Employees in elegant clothes.
He looked at his reflection on the glass facade.
Used clothes.
Torn shoes.
An unkempt beard.
For a moment he thought about running.
Then he remembered the girl.

And went in.

The old man greeted him with the same provocative smile.

"Excellent."

He checked his watch.

"You're not late."

Then added:

"You can still leave if you want."

The hero answered:

"I'm not leaving."

The old man laughed.

"We'll see."

Ten minutes later he was holding a brush, a mop, and a bucket.

He stood in front of a door marked:

Restrooms.

He kept staring at the door in silence.

Then heard the old man's voice behind him.

"Were you expecting an office?"

He didn't answer.

"Or a company car?"

He remained silent.

The old man smiled.

Then left.

He closed the door behind him.

And looked at himself in the mirror.

For a long time.

A very long time.

Then said in a low voice:

"Just for the start."

He wasn't sure who he was saying it to.

Himself?

The girl?

Or the man he used to be?

Work began.

An hour.

Two hours.

Three.

His knees ached.

His back ached.

His hands ached.

And every time an employee walked past him, he felt their stares.

Or maybe he just imagined them.

He no longer knew.

During his break he went out back.

Sat near the wall.

And lit a cigarette.

It was his first cigarette in hours.

And yet it felt better than anything else that day.

He raised his head toward the sky.

And wondered:

Is this the life they wanted for me?

Trading one ball for another?

Dragging a different chain, that's all?

A nearby employee's phone rang.

The man started complaining about work pressure.

About his manager.

About his installment payments.

About his wife.

About his kids.

The hero watched him silently.

Then looked at his ball.

It was much smaller than his own.

And yet the man looked more exhausted than he was.

He smiled for the first time that day.

A small smile.

Dangerous.

Because an old idea was starting to wake up again inside his head.

An idea he'd been trying to bury.

Maybe...

Maybe he wasn't the only failure.

Maybe they were all like him.

They just hadn't realized it yet.

And as he went back inside...

He didn't know this small idea would grow day after day.

Until it swallowed his entire life.

Months passed.

He came to have a room.

And a job.

And a salary.

And identical days.

He'd wake up before sunrise.

Go to the company.

Clean the bathrooms.

Return to his room.

Sleep.

Then do it all over again.

At first he thought he was getting closer to a normal life.

Then he started noticing something strange.

The more he worked...

The bigger his ball got.

Rent.

Bills.

Food.

Transportation.

Money disappeared faster than it came.

And a question began to haunt him every night:

If I'm doing everything society wants...

Then why am I still dragging this ball?

But one thing kept him going.

Her.

The girl who had brought him back to life.

Or so he thought.

That evening they left the company together.

She was laughing, talking about something trivial he hadn't paid attention to.

As for him...

All he could hear was his own heartbeat.

This was his chance.

If he didn't say it today, he never would.

He stopped suddenly.

So she stopped too.

She looked at him, puzzled.

"What is it?"

He swallowed.

Then said it.

"I think I love you."

Silence fell.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three.

Then...

She laughed.

A short laugh that slipped out of her without meaning to.

As if she'd heard something completely unexpected.

He felt the blood freeze in his veins.

She stopped laughing when she saw his face.

"Wait..."

She said, trying to process it.

"Are you serious?"

He didn't answer.

His answer was written on his face.

She looked at him for a few moments.

Then said calmly:

"I'm married."

He felt like the words hadn't reached him.

Or maybe they had, but he refused to understand them.

"What?"

"I'm married."

And she pointed to a ring on her finger.

A ring he hadn't noticed through all those months.

Or maybe he hadn't wanted to notice it.

He felt something collapse inside him.

"Who?"

Why did he ask?

He didn't want the answer.

But he asked anyway.

She gave a small smile.

"Mr. Hassan."

Everything vanished.

The street.

The sounds.

The people.

Even the air.

He didn't go to work the next day.

Or the day after.
Or the day after that.
At first they called.
Then they stopped.
And eventually, no one asked about him anymore.
He went back to the streets.
Back to the sidewalks.
Back to the bubbles.
This time more than before.
Much more.
He wanted to silence his mind, that's all.
To stop thinking.
To stop remembering.
But every bubble made the ball lighter for hours...
Then it would come back heavier.
Bigger.
And harsher.

Weeks later..
He was sitting near a wall.
His eyes red.
His clothes filthy.
His ball floating above him from the bubbles.
He no longer cared.
No longer counted the days.
No longer knew if he even wanted to live.
Then he heard a familiar voice.
He raised his head.
Mr. Hassan.
He was crossing the street.
The old man stopped when he recognized him.
He looked at him.

Then at the bubble in his hand.
Then at his filthy clothes.
He shook his head slowly.
And looked at the floating ball behind him.
And a strange smile began forming on his face.
"Just another failed addict."
Then he continued on his way.
One step.
Two steps.
Three.
As for the hero...
He stayed seated.
He didn't get angry.
Didn't shout.
Didn't react.
He just watched the man's back as he walked away.

Silence fell.
A strange silence.
As if the entire city had suddenly vanished.
He could no longer hear the cars.
Or the people.
Or the wind.
Or even his own breathing.
Just that sentence.
Repeating inside his head.
"Just another failed addict."
Once.
Again.
And again.

Then he remembered.

The room.

The job.

Waking before dawn.

The floors he'd washed.

The bathrooms he'd cleaned.

The money he'd saved.

The girl.

Her smile.

Her laugh.

Mr. Hassan.

Everything passed before his eyes in a single moment.

Then he heard screaming.

In the distance.

At first he thought it was part of a hallucination.

But it continued.

And grew louder.

Louder.

And louder.

He raised his head slowly.

Then blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

People were running.

Some screaming.

Some backing away.

Some staring at the ground.

He looked at the ground.

Then froze.

Mr. Hassan was no longer standing there.

A large red stain spread across the asphalt.
And pieces of his body were scattered around it.

As for the iron ball...

It sat resting on what remained of him.

He kept staring at the scene.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three.

He didn't remember moving it.

Didn't remember standing up.

Didn't remember anything.

Then he started laughing.

A small laugh.

Confused.

Disbelieving.

And he looked at the ball.

For the first time in years...

He didn't feel its weight.

For the first time in years...

He didn't feel its weight.

He looked at the ball.

Then at what remained of Mr. Hassan.

Then back at the ball.

It sat still.

As if it hadn't done anything at all.

As if it hadn't just crushed a human being seconds ago.

People started screaming.
Someone pulled out their phone.
A woman put her hand over her mouth.
A man threw up on the sidewalk.
But all of it felt distant.
Very distant.

There was something else that caught his attention.
Something stranger than the body.

He raised his eyes toward where Mr. Hassan's ball had been.

And couldn't find it.

It was gone.

He blinked once.

Then twice.

Then three times.

Nothing.

No chain.

No ball.

No trace of it.

Gone.

His heart started pounding fast.

He looked around frantically.

Maybe he was wrong.

Maybe he hadn't seen it.

Maybe...

Then he froze.

Because something else was vanishing.

He looked at his foot.

At his chain.

At his ball.

And slowly...

The iron began to crack.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Then the cracks turned into black lines.

And the ball began to crumble.

Piece.

After piece.

After piece.

Until it turned into black dust.

And vanished.

The chain fell from around his foot.

For the first time since childhood...

There was nothing tied to his leg.

He stood up.

Unsteady.

Then took a step.

Just one step.

And stopped.

Nothing.

No resistance.

No dragging.

No sound.

No weight.

He felt a frightening lightness.

An unnatural lightness.

Then he began to laugh.

Quietly at first.

Then louder.

Then louder still.

Until everyone was staring at him.

"It's gone..."

He whispered it.

Then looked up at the sky.

"It's really gone..."

One of the bystanders pulled out his phone and filmed him.

Then another.

Then another.

As for him...

He no longer cared.

He started laughing again.

Suddenly he realized something.

Or thought he did.

All those years.

All that exhaustion.

All those jobs.

All those laws.

All that fear.

It had all been a lie.

A huge lie.

He looked at the corpse.

Then at the people.

Then raised his arms.

"Look!"

He shouted it.

"Look closely!"

Silence fell.

Even the ones filming paused for a moment.

He pointed at his foot.

"It's gone!"

"Do you see?!"

"It's gone!"

His eyes were wide.

Like someone who'd just seen a miracle.

Or lost his mind.

"You don't understand!"

"They lied to us!"

"All of them!"

He pointed at the buildings.

At the banks.

At the corporations.

At the police cars in the distance.

"They made us drag it out our whole lives!"

"And made us think it was normal!"

Some people started backing away.

Others kept filming.

As for him...

He was smiling.

A smile he'd never known before.

The smile of someone who'd finally found meaning in everything.

Or imagined he had.

And somewhere in the distance...

Police sirens began approaching.

Police sirens began approaching.

Distant.

But getting closer.

He looked at the corpse.

Then at his foot.

Then at the spot where his ball used to be.

Nothing.

He started laughing.

Then stopped.

And suddenly...

He ran.

He wasn't running from the police.

Or at least he didn't feel that way.

He was just running.

Running without direction.

For the first time in his life, there was nothing dragging him back.

The alleys.

The streets.

The bridges.

All passed by him like a dream.

He didn't know how much time had passed.

An hour?

Two hours?

More?

Then he started slowing his steps.

He raised his head.

And felt something strange.

This street...

He recognized it.

He stopped.

Looked around.

He recognized this street too.

And this building.

And this shop.

A chill ran through his body.

The past.

He was standing in the heart of the past.

He didn't remember how he got there.

Or why he'd come.

But his feet had brought him here.

He raised his eyes.

Toward the house.

The same house.

He froze in place.

Then approached slowly.

The lights were still on.

He got close to the window.

And looked inside.

His eyes widened.

A step back.

Then another step.

Blood.

Everywhere.

On the walls.

On the floor.

On the table.

Even on the ceiling.

He felt his stomach turn.

"No..."

He whispered it.

"No..."

He didn't understand what he was seeing.

He went in through the broken window.

And silence filled the place.

Heavy silence.

As if the house had died.

He looked around.

Then at his hands.

They were stained with blood.

He froze.

He stared at them for a long time.

Then started breathing fast.

"Did..."

"Did I do this?"

He didn't remember.

He didn't remember anything.

All he remembered was Mr. Hassan.

And the street.

And the ball that had vanished.

Then emptiness.

Complete emptiness.

Sounds began returning to his head.

Many sounds.

Overlapping.

Incomprehensible.

He covered his ears.

But they didn't stop.

Then he looked at the blood on his hands.

And dipped his finger in it.

And approached the wall.

And slowly...

He wrote two words.

"Oath Breaker"

He stared at them for seconds.

Then turned.

And ran.

Ran like he'd never run before.

Until the darkness of the night swallowed him whole.

A month passed.

The man vanished.

Vanished as if he'd never existed.

The police found no trace.

No witness.

Not a single thread leading to him.

But his pictures were everywhere.

On walls.

In train stations.

And on news screens.

The anchorwoman appeared on screen.

"Authorities are still searching for the primary suspect in the murder of businessman Hassan."

His photo appeared.

Then another photo appeared.

A picture of a large house surrounded by police cars.

"Authorities are also investigating the murder of a well-known businessman and father-in-law in an incident that occurred the same night."

The image changed again.

A familiar face.

The woman he'd seen from the car window near the river.

The same woman.

She was crying in front of the cameras.

"And authorities have not ruled out a connection between the two incidents."

The news cut off.

As for him...

He wasn't watching.

He was in a different city.

A city bigger than his previous one.

And filthier.

And more dangerous.

A city not ruled by the police alone.

But by gangs too.

Crime there wasn't chaos.

It was organized.

Every street had its owner.

Every neighborhood had its men.

And that's exactly why he'd chosen it.

In a place like this...

Criminals could disappear.

And he needed to disappear.

He shaved his head.

Bought cheap glasses.

And put a small metal bracelet around his ankle.

From a distance...

He looked as if he had a small ball.

Like any ordinary person.

But the truth was different.

There was no ball anymore.

No weight anymore.

He sometimes woke at night.

And looked at his foot.

Just to make sure.

That it was really gone.

Then he'd smile.

He started stealing.

Food at first.

Then wallets.

Then bags.

Then anything he could sell.

And he enjoyed it more than he should have.

Every successful theft...

He felt like he was defeating the world.

Or that's what he convinced himself.

He saw himself like Robin Hood.

Even though he never gave anything to anyone.

He stole only for himself.

But he always had a ready explanation.

"I'm not stealing."

"I'm taking back what they stole from me."

And one day...

He made a mistake.

A small mistake.

But it was enough.

He stole a bag.

Then sold what was inside it.

Not knowing it belonged to one of the gang's men.

In this city...

Some things weren't meant to be stolen.

And the bag was one of them.

He was walking through a narrow alley at sunset.

When he felt someone bump into him.

Then another.

Then a third.

He stopped.

Looked around.

Four men.

Then five.

Then more.

He smiled.

"Looks like I made a mistake."

No one laughed.

The first punch landed straight on his face.

He hit the wall.

Then the second.

Then the third.

He tasted blood in his mouth.

But he...

Laughed.

The men looked at each other, puzzled.

"Is he drunk?"

"No."

"He's insane."

They grabbed him by the arms.

And dragged him through the alleys.

Until they reached an abandoned warehouse.

They threw him to the ground.

Blood dripping from his nose.

But the smile didn't fade.

One of the men approached him.

And grabbed his hair roughly.

"Do you know who you were stealing from?"

The hero raised his head slowly.

And spat blood on the ground.

"No."

Then smiled.

"Am I supposed to care?"

Silence fell.

Then the next blow came, stronger than anything before.

The next blow came, stronger than anything before.

He hit the ground.

He felt something shatter inside his mouth.

But he kept laughing.

A short laugh.

Then longer.

Then longer still.

Until the men started getting more irritated by it than by his theft.

"What's so funny, you bastard?"

He didn't answer.

He just raised his head.

And looked at the man who'd hit him.

Then at his iron ball.

"How much did you pay to carry it?"

The man scowled.

"What?"

"How much did you pay to become a slave?"

Silence fell.

Then another punch came.

"Hold his tongue before I kill him."

He fell on his side.

Blood dripping from his nose.

But he kept smiling.

One of the gang members approached.

And grabbed his foot.

He only meant to pin him down.

Then stopped.

He looked at the metal bracelet.

And narrowed his eyes.

"Wait..."

He grabbed the bracelet.

And yanked it hard.

It fell to the ground.

Silence fell.

The man looked at his foot.

Then looked again.

Then froze.

"Where's your ball?"

The hero didn't answer.

He just smiled.

The rest of the men started looking at him.

Then at his foot.

Then at each other.

One of them pulled out his phone.

He started scrolling through photos.

Then stopped.

His eyes widened.

"No way."

He grabbed the phone.

And brought it close to the hero's face.

It was an old news photo.

A dirty face.

Longer hair.

But the eyes...

The same eyes.

The man raised his head slowly.

"You bastard..."

"It's him."

Silence fell over the warehouse.

Even the laughter stopped.

Everyone stared at him.

The wanted man.

The killer the news had been talking about for a month.

The man with a huge bounty on his head.

The hero smiled.

"That famous, huh?"

No one laughed.

The warehouse door opened.

A huge man approached from among the gang members.

Silence fell the moment he appeared.

He was the boss.

He looked at the hero for several long seconds, then said:

"I could make a good deal with the police because of you."

The hero didn't answer.

The boss sat down in front of him and lit a cigarette.

"Give me one reason not to hand you over."

The hero slowly raised his head.

He looked at him with disdain.

A look that angered the boss more than any insult could.

Silence fell.

Then the boss stood up suddenly.

"Keep hitting him."

He turned toward the door.

"But don't kill him."

He left the warehouse to contact one of the officers he dealt with.

He wanted to know how much he'd make from turning him in.

The beating continued.

But he kept laughing.

Then suddenly shouted:

"You slaves!"

One of the men stopped.

"What did you say?"

The hero smiled.

"You're slaves."

The men looked at each other, puzzled.

"He's gone insane."

The hero pointed at one of them.

"Is this scum above you in rank?"

"What?"

"That boss."

Silence fell.

"Why should one human being have power over another just like him?"

A new punch came.

But his words kept going.

"Money..."

He spat blood on the ground.

"Power..."

He smiled.

"All illusions."

One of the men approached him angrily.

So the hero said:

"You're the ones who gave money its value."

"You're the ones who made the powerful powerful, by submitting to them."

His words bothered them more than the theft had.

But they kept beating him.

An hour later the boss came back.

He was smiling.

"The deal's done."

The hero raised his head.

"With the police?"

"Yes."

The boss exhaled his cigarette smoke.

"There's heavy pressure from the men of money."

"And a big reward on your head."

Then he gestured to his men.

"Stop."

"The police want him alive."

The men dropped what was in their hands.

The hero's body was covered in bruises.

But the smile was still there.

He looked at them and said:

"Obey your leader, slaves."

Curses rose.

The boss just shook his head.

"What a child you are."

Then added:

"Anyway... your head's worth tens of thousands."

The hero smiled.

"Slaves of money."

The boss laughed.

"You really are insane."

After a while the police arrived.

Officers entered the warehouse.

One of them looked at his condition and said:

"You didn't leave us anything to do."

The boss laughed.

"Saved you some work."

He was put in a police car.

Along the way the officers kept glancing at his foot.

No ball.

No chain.

Something they'd never seen before.

One of them said:

"So the reports were true."

The other stayed silent.

At the police station he was taken to a lineup room.

A number of people stood behind the glass.

Among them, the kind girl.

Tears on her cheeks.

Her gaze fixed on him.

The investigator asked her:

"Is this the man who killed your husband?"

She closed her eyes for a moment.

Then nodded.

"Yes."

The hero noticed something strange.

Her iron ball had grown much bigger than he remembered.

Afterward he was taken to the prison doctor to check his injuries.

She was a beautiful young woman.

She entered the office carrying his file.

He sat in front of her, shackled.

He looked at her for a long time.

Longer than necessary.

She felt uncomfortable.

He said, smiling:

"What a beautiful face."

Then tried to touch her hand.

A quick strike came from the officer standing behind him.

He laughed.

"You still think these restraints work?"

Throughout the exam he kept looking into her eyes.

As if she were something he was studying.

Not a human being.

In the interrogation room they bombarded him with questions.

His name.

His past.

His victims.

His motives.

But he didn't answer.

He stayed silent.

Then suddenly said:

"I want a lawyer."

The investigator looked at his colleague.

Then they both burst out laughing.

"A lawyer?"

"What's a lawyer going to do for you?"

He pointed at a screen showing security camera footage.

"We have witnesses."

"We have recordings."

"We have bodies."

Several blows came.

But he started singing:

"I want a lawyer..."

Then burst out laughing.

In the end they grew tired of him.

And threw him into a shared cell.

There was another inmate there, a large man, sitting on his bed.

He looked at him.

Then at his foot.

And froze.

"Where's your ball?"

The hero smiled.

"That thing?"

He pointed at the ground.

"That's for fools only."

The inmate frowned.

"Who do you mean by fools?"

The hero laughed.

"Anyone who still believes in this world."

The inmate kept watching him in silence.

While the hero sat in the corner of the cell.

Smiling.

As if he hadn't been imprisoned.

But had finally arrived at the place he'd been searching for.

The large inmate sat on his bed.

And kept staring at the hero's foot.

As if seeing a ghost.

Or a miracle.

Or a disaster.

He wasn't sure which.

"Where's your ball?"

He asked again.

The hero smiled.

"That thing?"

He pointed at the ground.

"For fools."

The inmate frowned.

"Who do you mean by fools?"

"Anyone who's still dragging one."

Silence fell.

"Anyway."

Said the inmate, stretching out on his bed.

"I'm getting out tomorrow."

"I won't be stuck here long because of you."

The hero burst out laughing.

A hysterical laugh.

It made the inmate turn toward him angrily.

"What's so funny?"

"That you think you're free."

The inmate sighed.

"You're crazy."

"Maybe."

The hero answered.

"But I'm crazy without a ball."

The inmate shook his head.

He didn't want to argue.

But curiosity started eating at him.

"What's your story, anyway?"

The hero smiled.

"I got free."

"From what?"

"From the slavery of this world."

The inmate laughed.

"This is the first time I've heard a homeless killer talk like a philosopher."

The hero pointed at his ball.

"Look at it."

"What about it?"

"How much of your life have you wasted because of it?"

The inmate didn't answer.

"How many times have you done things you didn't want because of it?"

"Everyone does that."

"Exactly."

The hero leaned in a little.

"And that's the problem."

The inmate laughed.

"So what's the solution?"

"Freedom."

"Nice word."

"It's real."

"And are you free now?"

The hero looked at his foot.

Then smiled.

"For the first time."

The inmate shook his head.

"Alright, wise man."

"If everyone got free like you say."

"Who'll grow the food?"

"Who'll build the houses?"

"Who'll generate the electricity?"

"Who'll protect people?"

Silence fell.

Then the hero said:

"That's because you're thinking with a slave's mind."

The inmate frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"You think humans don't move unless they're forced to."

"Because that's what you were taught."

"By the state."

"By money."

"By those in power."

The inmate laughed.

"Even if you brought everything down."

"New groups will appear."

"New gangs."

"New leaders."

"And everything starts over."

The hero thought for a moment.

Then said:

"Then the idea of leaders itself has to be destroyed."

The inmate looked at him like he was listening to a child talk.

"And how will you do that?"

"I'll make people see the truth."

"What truth?"

The hero raised his foot.

"That this isn't natural."

The inmate looked at his ball.

Then at the hero's foot.

For the first time since the conversation began...

He didn't find a quick answer.

The hero took advantage of his silence.

"Join me."

The inmate burst out laughing.

"Join what?"

"The revolution."

"What revolution?"

"The revolution of freedom."

"How many people are in it?"

The hero smiled.

"A lot."

"How many?"

"Every person who takes a step toward their own freedom."

The inmate stared at him.

Then said:

"So you have no one."

The hero smiled.

"Not yet."

Silence filled the cell.

The inmate was convinced he was insane.

But something in his words was bothersome.

Bothersome because it made him think.

And that's the worst thing one person can do to another.

Make him doubt the things he's considered normal his whole life.

And outside...

The prison sounds were gradually quieting down.

As for inside the cell...

A man without a ball was building the first followers of his revolution.

Even if neither of them realized it yet.

Morning came.

The large inmate woke first.

He looked at the bed across from him.

He expected to find the madman asleep.

But he found him sitting.

In the same spot.

Staring into empty space.

As if he hadn't moved all night.

"Didn't you sleep?"

The hero looked at him.

"I slept."

"When?"

"I don't know."

The inmate shook his head.

"You're strange."

The hero smiled.

"And you're a slave."

The inmate sighed.

"Back to this again."

The cell door opened.

The guard stood there.

"You."

He pointed at the large inmate.

"Out."

The inmate smiled.

"Told you."

He grabbed his few belongings.

Then looked at the hero.

"I hope I never see you again."

The hero laughed.

"You will."

"No way."

"You will."

He repeated it with a strange confidence.

The inmate shrugged.

And left.

The door closed behind him.

Silence returned.

About an hour later..

The door opened again.

A well-dressed man walked in carrying a leather briefcase.

He looked around uneasily.

Then sat in front of the hero.

"I'm the lawyer the state appointed for you."

The hero smiled.

"So finally they brought me a dog."

The lawyer's smile froze.

"What?"

"Don't you do whatever your masters tell you to?"

"I'm here to help you."

The hero burst out laughing.

"Who are you to help me?"

"If you cooperate with me we might be able to—"

"Might be able to what?"

The hero cut him off.

"Prove I didn't kill them?"

"Or that I'm insane?"

"Or that I'm society's victim?"

The lawyer fell silent.

"Listen."

He said quietly.

"If you don't cooperate, you'll destroy yourself."

The hero answered immediately.

"I destroyed myself a long time ago."

Silence fell.

For the first time...

The lawyer felt he wasn't talking to an ordinary criminal.

But to someone who no longer cared about the outcome at all.

And that was more dangerous.

"At least tell me."

Said the lawyer.

"Why did you do it?"

The hero raised his head.

Then smiled.

"Because I'm free."

The lawyer kept looking at him.

For several seconds.

Then closed his file.

Stood up.

And headed toward the door.

Before leaving...

He turned toward the guard.

And said in a low voice:

"He needs to be seen by a psychiatrist."

"As soon as possible."

He closed the door.

Silence returned.

As for the hero...

He started laughing.

A quiet laugh.

Then louder.

Then louder.

Until it filled the entire cell.

Elsewhere in the prison...

The large inmate was signing his release papers.

He raised his head suddenly.

As if he'd heard the laughter from far away.

He remembered the conversation from the night before.

And remembered the foot without a ball.

And for the first time...

He felt uneasy.

Not about the man.

But about one idea.

What if that madman...

Actually believed every word he said?

The next day...

The cell door opened.

Two guards walked in.

"Get up."

The hero smiled.

"Is it execution time?"

"Shut up and move."

He stood up slowly.

Then let them cuff his hands.

He walked through the corridors as if on a stroll.

While the two guards were more nervous than he was.

They stopped in front of a wooden door.

The guard opened it.

"Go in."

The hero entered.

It was a simple room.

A desk.

Two chairs.

A small window.

Behind the desk sat a man in his fifties.

Gray hair.

Glasses.

A thick file in front of him.

The doctor sat behind his desk.

Opened the file.

Then looked at the hero.

"How do you feel today?"

The hero looked at him.

Then burst out laughing.

"That's your opening line?"

The doctor didn't answer.

"How do you feel?"

He repeated it calmly.

The hero tilted his head.

"And how do you feel?"

The doctor fell silent.

Then said:

"I'm the one who asks the questions."

The hero laughed again.

"Of course."

"Because you're wearing the white coat."

"That makes you an expert on humans."

The doctor started writing something.

"Do you feel regret?"

"Do you feel fear?"

"Do you feel anger?"

The hero was looking at the ceiling.

As if he weren't listening at all.

"Can you hear me?"

He answered without looking at him:

"Do you know why you have a chain?"

The doctor's pen stopped.

"What?"

The hero looked at the doctor's foot.

At the small iron ball tied to it.

Then smiled.

"Do you know why it's still there?"

The doctor didn't answer.

"Because you still feel."

Silence fell.

"You feel fear."

"You feel anxiety."

"You feel the need for approval."

"You feel the need to succeed."

"You feel the need to matter."

He smiled.

"That's why it's still there."

The doctor closed the file.

"And you?"

"Are you saying you don't feel anything?"

The hero finally looked at him.

Then laughed.

A short laugh.

Quiet.

Unsettling.

"I feel."

The doctor raised his eyebrow.

"What?"

The hero leaned forward.

And looked straight into his eyes.

"I feel your enslavement."

Silence fell in the room.

Even the guard by the door turned toward him.

As for the doctor...

He kept looking at him.

"My enslavement?"

The hero nodded.

"You sit here."

"Every day."

"Listening to people's problems."

"Then you go home."

"Then you come back tomorrow."

"Then the day after."

"Then after that."

"And you think you're free."

The doctor smiled.

"And you're free?"

The hero burst out laughing.

Until tears came to his eyes.

"No."

He stopped suddenly.

Then smiled.

"I'm done."

The doctor frowned.

"Done?"

"Yes."

He looked at the cuffs on his hands.

Then at his bare foot.

"And that's the difference between us."

"You still have things you're afraid of losing."

"As for me..."

He shrugged.

"I have nothing left."

For several seconds the doctor didn't write anything.

And for the first time since the interview began...

He felt that the man in front of him wasn't trying to justify his actions.

Or defend them.

Or even convince him of anything.

He was speaking like someone who had fallen out of the world...

And was now looking at everyone from outside it.

After the psychiatric report...

A trial date was set.

But this time a detailed report on his mental state was attached to the file.

The report said:

"After several evaluation sessions and direct observation of the defendant, there is insufficient evidence to indicate he suffers from a psychotic disorder or complete loss of awareness."

"The defendant is capable of distinguishing right from wrong."

"He is also aware of the nature of his actions and their legal and social consequences."

"His answers are coherent and logical, and show no signs of hallucination or delusional belief."

But the report didn't stop there.

"However, a severe emotional numbness was observed."

"The defendant does not show normal emotional responses to events that would typically provoke sadness, regret, or fear."

"When discussing the murders attributed to him, he showed no signs of the

usual pangs of conscience."

"He also appeared emotionally detached from others and their suffering."

The doctor added:

"The defendant cannot be described as insane by medical or legal standards."

"But he suffers from a clear loss or erosion of normal human feeling."

"In other words, he understands what he's doing, but no longer feels about it the way ordinary people do."

After the report was published...

The controversy grew even more.

Some saw the report as proof he was a conscious criminal.

Others saw the loss of feeling as another kind of madness.

As for the court...

It decided to proceed with the trial.

But the case was no longer an ordinary murder case.

It had become the case of the entire country.

The newspapers talked about him.

The channels talked about him.

Social media talked about nothing else.

Some saw him as insane.

Some saw him as a killer.

And some saw him as the first person to free himself from his ball.

People were divided.

As they had never been divided before.

And in the end...

The court agreed to an exceptional request.

One televised interview.

Preceding the trial.

Under police supervision.

The country's most famous anchor sat across from him.

And behind the glass, dozens of people watched.

The hero sat, cuffed.

The anchor was more nervous than he was.

"Thank you for agreeing to this interview."

The hero looked at the cuffs on his hands.

Then said:

"I don't remember anyone asking me."

Some of those behind the glass laughed.

The anchor's tension increased.

"The whole country is watching you right now."

"Poor them."

The anchor blinked.

"Why?"

The hero shrugged.

"Because they have time to watch this."

A quiet laugh rippled through the room.

The anchor tried to regain control.

"Some consider you the most dangerous man in the country."

The hero looked around.

"And I'm sitting in a chair, handcuffed."

Then added:

"Looks like the danger's under control."

Muffled laughter rose from behind the glass.

The anchor bit his lip.

"Let's be serious."

"I'm very serious."

"Doesn't seem like it."

"That's your problem."

A brief silence followed.

Then the anchor said:

"Are you afraid of the verdict you'll receive?"

The hero looked at the ceiling for a moment.

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid they'll drag out the sessions."

One of the guards burst out laughing before catching himself.

The anchor stared at him, not believing it.

"So how do you feel right now?"

The hero thought for a moment.

Then smiled.

"Freedom."

Silence fell.

"You're in prison."

"I know."

"And shackled."

"I know."

"And awaiting trial."

"I know that too."

The anchor leaned forward.

"Then how do you feel free?"

The hero looked at his iron ball placed beside the chair.

Then said:

"Because it doesn't drag me anymore."

The anchor couldn't find a reply.

So the hero continued in the same calm tone:

"For the first time since my childhood, I don't wake up thinking about work."

"Or debts."

"Or pleasing anyone."

"Or the future."

"Or status."

"Or the fear of losing everything."

Then he smiled.

"It's strange that I needed a prison cell to feel that."

Silence fell again.

"Do you consider yourself innocent?"

The hero laughed.

"No."

"So you're guilty?"

"Of course."

The anchor froze.

But the hero continued:

"We're all guilty."

"The difference is, I stopped pretending."

Then he looked directly at the camera.

"You wake up every day."

"You drag your balls."

"You come home exhausted."

"Then you sleep to do the same thing tomorrow."

"And you call that life."

The studio erupted into noise.

As for the homes...

People split as usual.

Some got angry.

Some mocked.

But one person stayed silent.

The inmate who had shared his cell before.

He'd been released weeks earlier.

He'd gone back to his house.

Back to his wife.

Back to his kids.

Back to his job.

And the bills came back with him.

And the appointments.

And the demands.

And the responsibilities.

At first he thought he'd gotten his life back.
But while he watched the interview...
He looked at the iron ball tied to his leg.
Then remembered the days in the cell.
Remembered how he used to wake up with no orders.
No appointments.
No race.
No fear of losing anything.
He remembered the hero's talk about freedom.
He laughed at first.
Then stopped.
And without realizing it...
That old feeling came back.
The feeling of slavery.
So he lowered his eyes toward his ball.
And kept staring at it for a long time.

The day after the interview...
No one talked about anything else.
Every channel replayed the interview.
Every newspaper put his picture on the front page.
And everyone had an opinion.
In the city center...
Hundreds gathered in front of the courthouse.
Some carried photos of the victims.
Some raised banners.
"Execute him."
"No mercy for killers."
"Justice for the victims."
The chants rose every hour.
The closer the trial date came.
The bigger the crowd grew.

And news cameras broadcast everything live.

One anchorwoman said:

"Public anger is growing day by day."

"Many are demanding the harshest possible punishment."

Right behind her...

An elderly man was shouting in front of the camera.

"This is not a human being."

"He's a monster."

"He must be executed."

Some applauded.

Others cheered.

As for the other side of the city...

A different battle was raging.

Online.

There was no shouting here.

Just words.

And thousands of comments.

Someone wrote:

"He's an insane killer."

Another replied:

"Then why can't I stop thinking about what he said?"

"Because you're crazy like him."

"Or because what he said has a grain of truth in it?"

The debates began spreading.

In forums.

In chat rooms.

On video platforms.

Everyone explained the vanishing ball differently.

Some said it was a trick.

Some said it was a legend.

Some said the government was hiding the truth.

Others...

Didn't care about the ball at all.

They were talking about something else.

About the idea.

About the lives they were living.

About work.

About debt.

About responsibility.

About a feeling they couldn't name before they heard him speak.

Someone wrote:

"I hate him."

"But I hate that I understand what he means."

The comment got thousands of likes.

Then thousands of insults.

Then thousands of replies.

And people grew more divided.

Even within families.

Even in workplaces.

Even in prisons.

In one factory...

A worker was watching the assembly line.

Then suddenly looked at his ball.

In a fancy office...

A company manager stared at his picture on the computer screen.

Then looked at his own small ball.

In a small house...

A man turned off the TV.

Then sat in silence.

And for the first time in years...

He asked himself a question he didn't want to hear.

"Am I really happy..."

"Or just used to the chain?"

Trial day came.

The courtroom filled to capacity.

Journalists, cameras, victims' families, lawyers, and guards dragging their iron balls behind them with a muffled sound.

Outside the courthouse the streets were packed with protesters.

And inside homes, cafes, and factories, millions followed the live broadcast.

This was no longer the trial of one man.

It had become the trial of an idea everyone feared.

The door opened.

The hero walked in, hands bound.

But the first thing people noticed wasn't his face.

It was the silence.

No ball sound.

No scraping iron.

No chain dragging behind him.

He walked with a strange lightness, while the guards around him dragged their heavy balls.

He stood inside the defendant's cage.

And slowly raised his head toward the judge's bench.

It wasn't a look of submission.

Nor a look of fear.

It was a killing look.

Cold, steady, and stripped of any respect for the man sitting on the high bench.

He stared straight into the judge's eyes.

Then said in a low, blade-sharp voice:

"Who gave you power over your fellow man?"

An electric silence fell over the room.

The court-appointed lawyer rushed over, tension clear on his face.

He whispered to him:

"You're destroying yourself. Don't provoke him."

But the judge had heard.

His face flushed with anger, and he pounded his wooden gavel so hard the bench shook.

"Silence, defendant! Or I'll double your sentence before we even begin!"

The hero looked at the judge.

Then at the trembling lawyer.

Then at the rows of cameras broadcasting every detail.

The killing look vanished suddenly.

And a small smile formed on his lips.

Wicked.

"Fine..."

He said it in a completely different voice.

"I'll play along with this performance of yours."

Then he raised his cuffed hands to his chest, and his expression changed instantly, as if he'd put on a new face.

"I'm innocent."

He didn't shout it.

He said it with calm brokenness.

In the voice of a wronged man who knows the whole world is against him.

The trial began.

The prosecutor stood.

He presented the crimes.

The videos.

The witness testimonies.

The psychiatric report.

And the words written in blood on the wall:

"Oath Breaker."

The case seemed settled.

But the hero wasn't trying to win the case.

He was trying to win the audience.

Every question asked of him, he answered as if performing on a stage.

When the judge asked him about the charges, he lowered his head and said in a broken voice:

"I'm just a man who fell... and everyone decided to run me over."

And when the prosecutor asked him about his vanished ball, he raised his eyes to the camera and said:

"Maybe because I lost the last thing tying me to your world."

The judge grew angry.

"Answer yes or no!"

The hero turned to him with mock gentleness.

"Yes... I'm a victim."

Mocking whispers rose in the courtroom.

But somewhere behind the screens, there was someone who wasn't laughing.

The judge ordered the witnesses brought in.

The kind girl entered first.

Her steps were heavy, her eyes full of betrayal and anger.

But what caught the hero's attention most was her ball.

It was no longer the medium-sized ball he remembered.

It had grown bigger.

Heavier.

Blacker.

She dragged it with difficulty, as if every step of hers was saying something she couldn't say herself.

The prosecutor stood and asked her:

"Tell the court, how did you come to know the defendant?"

She took a deep breath.

"When I met him he was homeless."

"I felt sorry for him."

"I'd give him food sometimes."

"Then I convinced my husband to give him a chance."

Silence fell.

She continued, her voice trembling between pain and anger:

"My husband helped him."

"Gave him a job."

"Tried to get him off the street."

Then she looked at the hero.

"And that was the biggest mistake we ever made."

The prosecutor asked her:

"How did the crime affect you?"

She gave a short, bitter laugh.

"It destroyed my life."

She pointed to the iron ball at her feet.

"Every day I wake up and drag this... and remember my husband died because of the person I tried to help."

Then she said, staring at the hero:

"I don't feel sorry for him."

"I despise him."

"And I will, for the rest of my life."

The defense's turn came.

The lawyer stood hesitantly.

"Did you witness the defendant commit the crime with your own eyes?"

"No."

"Then your testimony is based on what happened afterward?"

She looked at him sharply.

"My testimony is based on my husband's grave."

Silence filled the courtroom.

And between each question, the hero watched her calmly.

No regret.

No pain.

Nothing.

As if he were studying what the disaster had done to another human being.

Then the second woman entered.

The former lover.

The woman he'd seen in the car near the river.

The whole room whispered when she walked in.

The prosecutor stood.

"What was the nature of your previous relationship with the defendant?"

She took a long breath.

"We loved each other."

She paused for a moment.

"But that ended a long time ago."

"I built a new life."

"I got married."

"I was happy."

Her voice trembled.

"Then he came back into my life like a nightmare."

The prosecutor asked her:

"What did he do?"

She closed her eyes.

"He killed my husband."

"And killed my father."

A heavy silence fell.

She looked at him.

"He's not the person I knew anymore."

"Maybe that person never existed at all."

The defense's turn came.

"Was there an old dispute between you?"

She answered bitterly:

"Every person has a past."

"But not every person comes back to kill theirs."

Then she turned toward him.

"I will never forgive you."

He didn't answer.

And this time he didn't look away.

He just gave a small, cold smile, as if hearing a line from a play whose ending he already knew.

After the witnesses...

His turn came.

The judge stood and said:

"Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

The hero stood.

Complete silence fell.

He looked at the judge.

Then at the kind girl.

Then at his former lover.

Then slowly, he turned his face toward the camera lenses.

Toward the millions behind the screens.

And here his voice changed.

It was no longer sarcastic.

No longer provocative.

It became warm.

Sad.

Deep.

The voice of a man who knows exactly where to press on the wound.

"I'm not here to defend myself."

Silence fell.

"You're not trying me because I killed."

"You're trying me because I fell."

"Because I was the man who slept in the street, and you used him to scare your children."

"Because I was the image that let you say: we're better off."

He looked at the camera.

"But the truth is, the difference between you and me is smaller than you think."

He gestured with his cuffed hand toward the floor.

"Look at your feet."

Whispers rose in the courtroom.

"Look at the chains."

"At the iron."

"At the balls that grow bigger every time your fear grows."

"You call me a criminal."

"Maybe."

He smiled.

"But you call your normal life honor, when it's just organized slavery."

The judge pounded his gavel.

"Stick to the case!"

The hero ignored him.

He was speaking to the screens now.

Not the court.

"Every morning you wake up to go to a job you don't love."

"You smile at people you hate."

"You pay debts you never chose."

"You stay silent so you don't lose your salary."

"And you drag your balls while saying: this is life."

He lowered his voice.

"But it's not life."

"It's an open-air prison cell."

Silence fell.

Even the judge paused for a moment before pounding his gavel again.

As for the hero, he lifted his chainless foot slightly, so the cameras could see.

"I'm not saying I'm good."

"And I'm not saying I'm innocent."

"I'm saying I'm no longer afraid."

"And when a person is no longer afraid..."

He looked at the judge.

Then at the courtroom.

Then at the camera.

"His ball falls."

A chill ran through the room.

"You're not afraid of death."

He said it slowly.

"You're afraid of letting go of your balls."

Then he leaned toward the microphone.

And his voice became a whisper heard across the entire country:

"Break them."

A terrifying silence fell.

There was no crying.

No screaming.

No repentance.

Just a man without a ball, standing in the defendant's cage, telling millions that their locks might never have been locks at all.

The judge pounded his gavel violently.

"Cut the broadcast!"

But it was too late.

In homes...

In cafes...

In factories...

And in small rooms the light never reached...

Some cursed him.

Some turned off the screen.

Some called him a monster.

But there were also those who slowly lowered their eyes.

And looked at their own feet.

At the iron ball tied to them.

And for the first time...

The idea began to grow in their heads.

The first session ended.

But the case wasn't over.

After hours of deliberation...

The judges returned to the courtroom.

Everyone stood.

Then the verdict was announced.

"Sentenced to death."

Silence fell for a few seconds.

Then the courtroom erupted.

Crying.

Applause.

Chants.

And anger.

As for the hero...

He remained standing.

As if hearing a weather report that didn't concern him.

He looked at the judge.

Then smiled.

A small smile.

"Is that all?"

The judge pounded his gavel in anger.

But his lawyer stood up immediately.

"We object to the verdict."

"And we demand a review."

"The case has sparked widespread controversy."

"And there are points that need to be re-discussed."

After a long debate...

A new session was scheduled.

A final session to review the verdict before it was carried out.

And while the court prepared for the next session...

The whole country was boiling.

Clips of the trial spread like wildfire.

His speech was replayed thousands of times.

Excerpts were cut from it.

And republished everywhere.

Someone wrote online:

"They want to silence him."

The sentence got tens of thousands of shares.

Another wrote:

"All his victims were wealthy and powerful."

Then added:

"Think about it."

Theories began spreading.

Faster than anyone could stop them.

"He's fighting the system."

"He avenged the poor."

"He's the first person to refuse to submit."

In response...

Others replied:

"He's a killer."

"And deranged."

"This has nothing to do with justice."

But every attempt to silence him...

Just made people talk about him more.

In poor neighborhoods...

His image began appearing on walls.

In some alleys...

Someone drew a foot without a ball.

And beneath it, the words:

"Freedom starts here."

And in factories...

And in offices...

And in prisons...

People started debating.

Not about his crimes.

But about his idea.

And that's what frightened those in power more than the crimes themselves.

As for inside the prison...

The hero sat alone in his cell.

When the guard opened the door.

"A letter arrived."

The hero raised his eyebrow in surprise.

"A letter?"

"More like dozens of letters."

The guard threw a stack of papers on the bed.

Then closed the door.

The hero approached slowly.

Looked at the first letter.

Written in a shaky hand.

"I don't know if I'm crazy or not."

"But for the first time I'm looking at my life and asking myself if I'm really living."

He opened the second.

"I've been a worker for twenty years."

"I hate my job."

"And I hate myself for never admitting it before."

The third.

"You're a murderer."

"But I can't forget what you said."

The fourth.

"My brother killed himself because of debt."

"I wish he'd heard your speech."

He kept reading.

Letter after letter.

Until the bed was covered in papers.

Some were insults.

Some were threats.

And some were admiration.

But one thing united them all.

People were thinking about him.

More than they should.

He picked up one of the letters.

And read a final line:

"If they execute you..."

"The idea won't die."

Silence fell in the cell.

Then the hero smiled.

For the first time in a long while...

He felt his imaginary revolution starting to leave his head...

And enter the heads of others.

After the death sentence...

The hero was no longer just a prisoner.

He had become a symbol.

Or at least...

That's how some began to see him.

At first the letters were few.

Then they became dozens.

Then hundreds.

Most were insults.

Some were threats.

But some were different.

Letters from people who felt his speech was directed at them.

Workers.

Debtors.

The homeless.

And young people angry at their lives.

And one day...

A strange visit request arrived.

The prison administration approved it after reviewing procedures.

A young woman was brought into the visitation room.

She looked nervous.

Her eyes gleaming with a strange enthusiasm.

She sat in front of the glass.

And the moment she saw him...

She smiled.

A smile that made him raise his eyebrow in surprise.

"I'm a fan of yours."

She said it directly.

He laughed.

"That's a bad start."

She shook her head quickly.

"No, you don't understand."

"Everyone attacks you."

"But I understand you."

He stayed silent.

Then she continued:

"You took revenge on those who looked down on people like you."

"On those who thought money made them better."

He watched her for a few moments.

Then looked at her foot.

Her ball was lighter than normal.

Almost floating slightly above the ground.

He smiled.

"How old are you?"

She told him.

Then kept talking.

As if she'd been waiting for this moment for years.

The hero understood something quickly.

She wasn't a fan of him.

She was a fan of the idea she'd built about him in her own head.

And that was more dangerous.

He leaned toward the glass.

And said in a low voice:

"Do you know why they want to kill me?"

She shook her head.

"Because they're afraid."

Her eyes widened.

"Of who?"

"Of you."

Silence fell.

"The rich aren't afraid of me."

"I'm just a man in a cell."

"They're afraid of what might happen if people start asking questions."

She listened as if hearing a prophet.

"Why does one percent own everything?"

"And why does everyone else work for them?"

"And why do some people get to decide who's the criminal and who's the victim?"

"Isn't that a disguised dictatorship?"

She absorbed his words without hesitation.

Then he said:

"If you want to help me..."

"Spread the questions."

"Don't spread my name."

"Spread the questions."

The visit ended.

But she didn't stop.

She came back once.

Then twice.

Then more times.

And every time...

She left carrying new words.

Weeks later...

Small groups began to appear.

In forums.

In the streets.

In universities.

People discussing his ideas.

People quoting his speeches.

And people who hadn't read anything of his at all...

But loved the image they'd built of him.

Authorities began monitoring the situation.

Then the decision came.

"All visits banned."

The news reached the outside quickly.

And fueled the fire further.

Protests broke out.

Small at first.

Then they grew.

Protesters raised signs reading:

"Where are human rights?"

"Don't be afraid of questions."

"Let him speak."

And among the crowds...

A new word began to appear.

"Freedom."

Then it turned into a chant.

"Freedom!"

"Freedom!"

"Freedom!"

Not everyone understood the same meaning.

But everyone shouted the same word.

And one day...

The hero looked out from the small window of his cell.

And heard the distant chants.

He couldn't see the protesters.

But the sound reached him.

He smiled.

A quiet smile.

Because he realized something.

The idea was no longer his.

It had left the cell.

And started walking on its own.

After weeks of protests...

The final session was held.

But it wasn't like past trials.

No press was allowed in.

No public was allowed in.

No live broadcast was allowed.

The doors were closed.

Security was doubled.

As if they were trying a plague, not a man.

The hero entered the courtroom.
He sat in his usual place.
Then looked around.
He smiled.

"Where's the audience?"

No one answered him.

The judge stood.
He looked more exhausted than at the previous session.
A lot of papers in front of him.
And more pressure behind him.

"Before we begin..."
The judge said.

"New charges have been filed against you."

The hero raised his eyebrow.

"Excellent."

"You're charged with incitement to hatred."

"And instigating riots."

"And contributing to the unrest the country is experiencing."

Silence fell.

Then the hero burst out laughing.

"Me?"

He looked around.

"I've been in a cell for months."

"If a locked-up man can scare you this much..."

"Then the problem isn't me."

The judge slammed the table.

"Be serious."

The hero sighed.

Then said:

"You're wasting my time."

He looked at the guards.

Then back at the judge.

"Where's the electric chair?"

"Isn't that why we're here?"

"Let me rest from your talk."

A stunned silence followed.

Even the lawyer closed his eyes for a moment.

As for the judge, he seemed to be fighting to stay calm.

After hours of arguing...

The judge requested a recess.

Then returned with an offer.

An unofficial offer.

It wouldn't be recorded anywhere.

It wouldn't appear in any document.

He looked at him directly.

"If you announce before the public that everything you said was nonsense."

"And that your ideas were just the delusions of a disturbed man."

"And that the current protests have nothing to do with you."

"Then we'll replace the execution with twenty years in prison."

Silence fell.

The hero looked at the judge.

Then at the lawyers.

Then at the state representatives sitting in the back.

Then he smiled.

A smile full of contempt.

"Slaves of money."

Faces froze.

"This is your offer?"

"That I sell my words for a few extra years in a cage?"

He laughed.

"And you talk about justice."

The negotiation ended.

He didn't back down.

And after long deliberations...

The final decision was issued.

Not death.

Not twenty years.

But life imprisonment.

Until the end of his life.

The decision was simple.

Death might turn him into a martyr.

As for being forgotten...

That was more effective.

So they believed.

One of the powerful men said during a closed meeting:

"The public's memory is three days."

"They'll protest a little."

"Then forget."

"Everyone forgets."

And the campaign began.

His news vanished from the screens.

His photos vanished from the papers.

And programs stopped discussing him.

Instead...

New topics appeared every day.

A new crisis.

A new dispute.

A new scandal.

Then voices in the media began repeating the same message.

"The cause of poverty is immigrants."

"The cause of unemployment is foreigners."

"The cause of the crisis is others."

People were pushed to look at each other.

Instead of looking up.

An old policy.

Divide and rule.

But the problem...

Was that the idea had already gotten out.

It had left the prison.

And the courtroom.

And the television.

And become part of the streets.

In one alley...

A group of young people were writing on a worn-out wall:

"Freedom is coming."

And elsewhere...

Dozens of protesters were chanting:

"Freedom!"

"Freedom!"

"Freedom!"

As for the hero...

He sat alone in his cell.

When he heard the guard tell his colleague:

"It's over for him."

He smiled.

Then looked at the wall in front of him.

And whispered to himself:

"It's only just begun."

A month passed.

The protests quieted.

They didn't vanish.

But they no longer filled the streets as they had at first.

The news started talking about other things.

And people started going back to their jobs.

Exactly as the state had anticipated.

As for the hero...

He remained in his cell.

At the end of the first month...

News reached him.

"You have a visitor."

He raised his head.

For the first time in weeks.

He smiled.

He thought it was the girl.

The girl who had been carrying his words to the outside.

He stood.

And walked toward the visitation room.

He went in.

Then stopped.

It wasn't the girl.

It was the large man.

His first cellmate.

The man who had once asked him:

"Where's your ball?"

They stared at each other.

Then the hero burst out laughing.

"My first freedom fighter."

The man sat down.

And shook his head.

"Still crazy."

"Thank God."

The hero laughed more.

As for the man, he looked hesitant.

As if he didn't know where to start.

Then he said:

"Your ideas got out, madman."

"A lot of people heard what you said."

"A lot of them were convinced."

"But..."

He paused.

"A lot of them are starting to forget too."

Silence fell.

"You're going to vanish."

"And your ideas will vanish with you."

"And life will go back to the way it was."

The hero stayed silent.

Then smiled.

A calm smile.

"It doesn't matter."

The man was puzzled.

"It doesn't matter?"

"No."

He pointed to his foot.

To the empty spot.

"As long as there's no ball tied here."

"Then I'm on the right path."

The man looked at his own foot.

At his own ball.

He suddenly felt its weight.

So the hero continued:

"I see it growing."

"Every time I see you."

"And I see you moving slower."

"And heavier."

"And closer to what you used to be."

The man frowned.

"I'm trying."

The hero laughed.

"Most of you are like that."

"You believe in the idea."

"But you want someone else to carry it out."

"Someone else to sacrifice."

"Someone else to pay the price."

"Even freedom..."

He smiled sarcastically.

"You've turned it into something to exploit."

Silence fell.

Then the man said:

"And what do you want me to do?"

The hero laughed.

A long laugh.

Then stood up from his seat.

And opened his arms.

As if the walls had vanished.

And as if the prison had vanished.

And as if the whole world had become a stage.

"Join me."

The man smiled mockingly.

"Still trying to recruit me?"

"Always."

The hero got closer to the glass.

"Look around you."

"Since you were born..."

"They tell you where to sleep."

"And where to study."

"And where to work."

"And what to think."

"And whether you're smart or stupid."

"And whether you're successful or a failure."

"And what your life's worth."

He pointed at the ceiling.

"Even your dreams, they classify."

"Even your future, they decide."

"Then they tell you: you're free."

Silence fell.

"Do you want this for your children?"

"Do you want them dragging their balls like you did?"

"Like your father did?"

"Like your grandfather did?"

The hero's voice began rising.

His eyes gleaming with a familiar madness.

"Do you want your grandchildren to live the same way?"

"Born with a chain."

"Growing up with a chain."

"Dying with a chain."

He opened his arms further.

And slapped the glass with his palms.

"Come."

"Come and let's change reality."

"Come and let's break the chain."

"Come and let's see what's behind the fear."

Silence fell.

The man looked at him for a long time.

Then at his foot.

Then at his ball.

And for the first time since entering the room...

He didn't find a quick answer.

The inmate left the prison.

Evening had begun.

The sky covered in clouds.

He walked in silence.

He didn't know where he was going.

But the madman's words kept chasing him.

Words he'd tried to mock for months.

But could no longer ignore.

He reached his house.

His wife opened the door.

His kids ran toward him.

He smiled at them.

Carried the youngest in his arms.

But something felt different.

That night...

He couldn't sleep.

He lay there staring at the ceiling.

And every time he closed his eyes...

He saw the man's bare foot.

No ball.

No chain.

No weight.

He sighed.

Then looked at the ball tied to his foot.

It looked bigger than before.

Heavier.

As if it grew heavier every time he thought about it.

He remembered his words.

"Do you want this for your children?"

He looked toward his children's room.

They were sleeping.

Peacefully.

He felt a sting in his chest.

Did he really want this for them?

To grow up.

Then work.

Then carry bigger balls.

Then pay bigger debts.

Then die.

Only for children after them to carry their own balls.

He thought for a long time.

Then shook his head.

"And what's the alternative?"

He whispered to himself.

The state wouldn't allow a revolution.

The men of money wouldn't allow a revolution.

The police wouldn't allow a revolution.

And the army wouldn't allow a revolution.

Would he put his family at risk?

Would he lose everything?

He kept turning the questions over in his head.

Then remembered something else.

A sentence the madman had said.

"There are people who fight."

"And there are people who watch."

Silence fell.

He thought about it for a long time.

Then felt uneasy.

Because the question that appeared after it was worse.

If those who fight win...

Would I be like those who exploited their sacrifice?

Would I just stand and watch?

And wait for someone else to change the world instead of me?

He sat on the edge of the bed.

Head in his hands.

He'd spent years blaming the rich.

Blaming the merchants.

Blaming the government.

Blaming fate.

But for the first time...

He started questioning himself.

What had he done?

He remembered why he'd gone to prison.

A theft.

Then another.

Then another.

He always said need had driven him.

That prices were rising.

That rents were rising.

That the wealthy kept getting richer.

And all of that was true.

But something else was true too.

That he had given up.

He looked at the ball by his foot.

Then at his children's photo hanging on the wall.

And suddenly a question struck him that stayed with him the rest of the night.

Why doesn't everyone start from the same place?

Why is one child born with a small ball?

And another born with one that nearly crushes him?

Why are some people born among millions?

While others are born amid debt and hunger?

Why do the poor carry the balls of the rich on top of their own?

And why does that seem normal to everyone?

He stood up.

And walked toward the window.

The city was quiet.

But inside, he wasn't.

He looked at his reflection in the glass.

Then at the ball tied to his foot.

And for the first time in years...

He didn't ask himself how to feed his children.

Or how to pay his bills.

He asked a different question.

A question that scared him more than anything else.

"Could I one day..."

"Get rid of it?"

And he kept staring at his iron ball.

As if it were waiting for his answer.

A month later...

Life in the streets had settled down somewhat.

The protests hadn't ended.

But they'd gotten smaller.

And the state had grown more cautious.

Visits had also become harder.

That morning...

The guard stopped in front of his cell.

"You have a visitor."

The hero raised his head.

He smiled.

"Finally."

He walked toward the visitation room.

He expected to see the former inmate.

Or a new lawyer.

Or a desperate journalist.

But when he walked in...

He found her.

The admiring girl.

She looked more tired than last time.

Dark circles under her eyes from a long sleepless stretch.

She sat down quickly.

"I've been trying to visit for weeks."

He raised his eyebrow.

"What stopped you?"

She laughed bitterly.

"I was arrested."

Silence fell.

"For what?"

"For spreading your words."

He smiled.

A small smile.

Then looked at her for a long time.

"So you're more devoted than I expected."

Her face flushed slightly.

Then she started telling him what was happening outside the prison.

About the new groups.

About the slogans.

About the protests.

About the young people quoting his speeches.

About people who'd started calling themselves:

"Children of Freedom."

He listened in silence.

His eyes gleaming more with every piece of news.

Then he suddenly said:

"I finished a book."

She was surprised.

"A book?"

He nodded.

"I wrote it here."

He gestured to his cell.

"But they won't let it out."

She sighed.

"Even visits have become hard."

"Everything's become harder."

Silence fell.

Then he said suddenly:

"Marry me."

She froze in place.

Stared at him.

Not believing what she'd heard.

"What?"

"Marry me."

He said it as if suggesting they buy a cup of coffee.

"If you become my wife..."

"It'll be harder for them to stop you from visiting."

"You could get the book out."

"And deliver messages."

Her eyes widened.

As for him, he stayed calm.

Watching her reaction.

Then...

She smiled.

A wide smile.

As if she'd been waiting for this moment since her first visit.

"I agree."

She said it without hesitation.

So he lowered his head a little.

So she wouldn't see the smile that appeared on his face.

A different smile.

The smile of someone who'd realized something important.

He'd been ready to die.

In fact he'd expected it.

But now...

He was starting to enjoy himself.

He was enjoying the chaos.

Enjoying the effect of his words.

Enjoying watching the world move.

All of this...

While sitting inside a cell.

He raised his head and looked at her.

She was talking excitedly about the future.

About the movement.

About freedom.

As for him...

He was thinking about something else.

For the first time in years.

He felt his life had turned into a game.

A massive game.

And every decision in it opened a new path.

He had lost everything.

Then lost his life itself.

But now...

He no longer wanted an ending.

He wanted to see where the story would go.

And how many people would follow it.

And how many would try to stop it.

And how far the chaos could spread...

Before everything ended.

After the visit ended...

The hero didn't think much about the marriage itself.

He wasn't a romantic man.

And never believed in eternal promises.

But the girl was useful.

Loyal.

And believed in him more than most people believed in themselves.

And in a world like this...

That was a value not to be underestimated.

Before she left...

He stopped her.

"I want something else from you."

She turned toward him immediately.

"Anything."

He smiled.

"Hire me a lawyer."

She was surprised.

"For the wedding?"

He shook his head.

"And for other things too."

He got closer to the glass.

"Tell him I want my rights."

"What rights?"

He laughed.

"The human rights you people talk about all the time."

"I've been in solitary confinement for months."

"They treat me like a plague."

"I want to live among the other prisoners."

"As a regular inmate."

She nodded enthusiastically.

"I'll do it."

And she left.

Days later...

A lawyer arrived.

He was different from the previous one.

Smarter.

And less afraid.

He listened to his requests.

Then began working.

He filed complaints.

Requested a review of his detention conditions.

Objected to the prolonged isolation.

Objected to the visitation ban.

Objected to the exceptional restrictions imposed on him.

But the prison administration wasn't stupid.

They knew well that this prisoner wasn't like the rest.

Every word out of him turned into a slogan.

And every visitor who left carried a new idea with them.

And yet...

The lawyer had legal points that were hard to ignore.

And after weeks of negotiations...

An agreement was reached.

He remained in life imprisonment.

And remained under tight surveillance.

But his wife was allowed to visit once a week.

And he was granted the right to conjugal visits under applicable regulations.
Once every four months.
And that wasn't all.
The administration agreed to ease some restrictions.
Without allowing him to fully mix with the rest of the prisoners.
They feared one thing.
That the prison itself would become the start of a new revolution.
When the lawyer told him the result...
The hero smiled.
"So they're afraid."
The lawyer sighed.
"They're cautious."
The hero laughed.
"Caution is just another name for fear."
The lawyer stood to leave.
Then stopped at the door.
"Are you happy with the outcome?"
The hero thought for a moment.
Then looked at the small window in his cell.
"Happy?"
He smiled strangely.
"No."
"But the game just got more interesting."
The lawyer left.
And the hero stayed alone.
He sat on his bed.
And looked at the stack of papers beside him.
The first draft of his book.
And the letters arriving from outside.
And the reports telling him what was happening in the streets.
Just a year ago...

He'd been homeless, dragging an iron ball across the sidewalks.
Wishing for a cigarette and a place to sleep.
But now...
He was sitting in a life sentence cell.
And the entire country was debating his ideas.
He laughed alone.
Then whispered:
"Who would have believed it?"

The months passed.
And the freedom movement began to grow.
Slowly.
But steadily.
Authorities confiscated publications.
Shut down websites.
Arrested protesters.
But every arrest bred new angry people.
And every ban created new curious ones.
As for the hero...
He was still inside his cell.
But parts of his book began reaching the world.
Page after page.
Sentence after sentence.
His wife memorized it by heart.
Then smuggled it out after every visit.
Until the movement had something like its own holy book.
Something they quoted in their secret meetings.
And wrote on walls.
And one day...
The cell door opened.
And a new inmate walked in.
The hero looked at him with indifference.

As for the inmate...

He looked as if he were seeing a legend.

"Finally."

He said it in a trembling voice.

"What?"

"Finally I see you."

The hero laughed.

"What a terrible opening line."

The inmate sat on his bed.

But he kept staring at him.

As if just being in the room was an honor.

"I'm from the movement."

The hero raised his eyebrow.

"Which movement?"

"The freedom movement."

He burst out laughing.

"Still around, then?"

The inmate was confused.

"Around?"

"You're its leader."

The hero laughed even more.

"That's news to me."

But the inmate didn't laugh.

He was completely serious.

In fact, a true believer.

In a way that scared the hero a little.

He sat close to him.

Then pulled out several folded papers.

"We have a plan."

"A plan for what?"

"To get you out."

Silence fell.

Then the hero burst out laughing.

So hard he had to sit on the floor.

"Get me out?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

The inmate looked at him in astonishment.

"Because the revolution needs you."

"The revolution?"

"The movement is waiting."

"The people are waiting."

"And the whole country is waiting."

The hero laughed again.

But he stopped when he saw the other man wasn't joking.

He truly believed every word.

The inmate began explaining the plan.

Sympathetic guards.

Cooperating staff.

Secret routes.

Vehicles waiting outside.

A whole network of followers.

The plan was full of holes.

And contained details that made no sense.

And parts that relied more on luck than logic.

But the inmate spoke with absolute confidence.

The confidence of a believer.

Not a strategist.

After a full hour..

He finished explaining.

Then looked at the hero.

"What do you think?"

Silence fell.

Any sane person would have refused immediately.

And any professional criminal would have pointed out dozens of mistakes.

But the hero was neither.

He'd moved past fear long ago.

And past calculation.

He was living life as if it were one long game.

A game he no longer cared whether he won or lost.

He smiled.

Then lay back on his bed.

Put his hands behind his head.

And looked at the ceiling.

"Sounds like a bad idea."

The inmate froze.

Then the hero continued:

"That's why I like it."

The inmate's smile widened.

As for the hero...

He was thinking about something entirely different.

If the plan succeeded...

It would be interesting.

And if it failed...

Nothing would change.

Either way...

He wanted to see how this phase of the game would end.

The day before the escape...

Every detail was ready.

The letters had arrived.

The guards who'd turn a blind eye were already arranged.

And the vehicle waiting outside the prison was already in place.

Even his cellmate couldn't talk about anything but tomorrow.

"Twenty-four hours..."

"And you'll be free."

The hero laughed.

"Didn't I already tell you I was free?"

But that night...

His wife came to visit.

From the moment she walked into the room...

He noticed something different.

She was smiling.

A smile he hadn't seen before.

A smile that didn't resemble excitement.

And didn't resemble admiration.

It was calmer.

And warmer.

She sat in front of him.

And stayed silent for several seconds.

Then said:

"I have news."

He raised his eyebrow.

"Bad news?"

She shook her head quickly.

"The best news of my life."

Then she placed her hand on her belly.

And looked at him with shining eyes.

"I'm pregnant."

Silence fell.

For the first time in years...

Everything inside his head stopped.

He didn't laugh.

Didn't mock.

Didn't launch into a speech about freedom.

He just looked at her.
Then at her hand on her belly.
Then back to her eyes.
And she was looking at him...
With love.
Real love.
A love he hadn't seen in a long time.
He felt something strange inside his chest.
Something he'd thought was dead.
His heart pounded hard.
Then harder.
Then harder still.
And suddenly...
He looked down at his foot.
And froze.
There.
For a split second only.
A faint shadow appeared.
A dim circle.
As if something was trying to form.
Then it vanished.
He blinked.
It came back.
Then vanished again.
It wasn't a ball.
And it wasn't iron.
Just a trace.
A ghost.
Or a memory.
But seeing it was enough.
He felt something he hadn't felt since it had disappeared.

Fear.

He lowered his gaze quickly.

And steadied his breathing.

No.

This was impossible.

Everything was over.

Wasn't it?

He raised his head.

His wife was still watching him.

Waiting for his reaction.

Waiting for his happiness.

Waiting for anything.

As for him...

He was hearing another voice inside his head.

A voice he hadn't heard in years.

What if your life isn't over?

What if it's starting again?

And what if you have something to lose now?

He looked at his foot again.

Nothing there now.

But when he focused...

He could see the faint shadow.

Too weak for anyone else to notice.

Too strong for him to ignore.

He felt a moment of panic.

Then buried it quickly.

He smiled.

A forced smile.

And said:

"That's big news."

His wife smiled happily.

As for him...
He didn't know if he was happy.
Or scared.
Or angry.
For the first time since his ball had vanished...
He didn't know what he felt.
And as she talked excitedly about the child...
He kept looking at his foot.
And at the faint ghost appearing and disappearing.
As if the future itself...
Was trying to return.

Night fell.
The night the movement had waited for, for months.
The night they'd drawn maps for.
And written letters about.
And discussed in secret rooms among the followers of freedom.
But what they didn't know...
Was that the plan had never been theirs to begin with.
And everything that had reached them...
Had reached them because the state wanted it to.
The hero sat on his bed.
As for the other inmate...
He was tense.
Checking the time every minute.
"One more hour."
He said, smiling.
"In an hour you'll be out."
The hero looked at him.
Then smiled.
"Or I'll be entering a new game."
The inmate didn't understand what he meant.

And didn't care.
He believed in the plan.
And thought it was the fruit of months of the movement's work.
When in reality...
It was a plan written somewhere else.
And at midnight...
It all began.
Exactly as planned.
A guard who was late.
A door that opened.
A camera that malfunctioned.
A hallway that became empty at just the right time.
Every step happened on schedule.
With exaggerated precision.
Precision that made the hero smile.
"This is too easy."
He whispered to himself.
He wasn't seeing an escape operation.
He was seeing doors being opened for him deliberately.
An hour later...
Then two hours...
They were outside the prison.
Inside a black car.
Speeding down rural roads.
The inmate beside him laughed.
"We did it!"
"We did it!"
"Freedom!"
The others echoed the word.
"Freedom!"
"Freedom!"

"Freedom!"

As for the hero...

He sat in the back seat.

Looking out the window.

With a strange calm.

Then suddenly...

The laughter stopped.

All at once.

As if someone had given a signal.

The men turned around.

Weapons appeared.

Aimed directly at him.

Silence fell.

The hero looked at the black barrels.

Then at the inmate.

Then at the driver.

Then burst out laughing.

A loud laugh.

Louder than the engine.

And longer than it should have been.

The men looked at each other, puzzled.

"What's so funny?"

He couldn't stop.

He laughed until tears streamed from his eyes.

"I was..."

A laugh.

"I was telling him..."

Another laugh.

He pointed at the inmate.

"That it's a play."

"And here's the play."

They grabbed his hands.

And tied them tightly.

But the laughter didn't stop.

"Well done."

"Well done."

"You played your roles well."

One of the men hit him.

The laughter stopped for a moment.

Then came back stronger.

"The funny thing..."

He said, gasping from laughter.

"Is that the children of freedom think they freed me."

Silence fell.

He continued:

"They think their secret letters worked."

"And that their men infiltrated the prison."

"And that they outsmarted the state."

He smiled mockingly.

"When it was the state that wrote the plan."

"And the state that let it go through."

"And the state that opened the doors."

The men looked at him in silence.

So he continued:

"There's no escape this easy."

"Not from a prison like that."

"And not for a prisoner like me."

"Everything was arranged."

"Too precisely."

"Even the guards were playing their parts."

"Exactly as you're playing yours now."

He smiled as he wiped blood from his lips.

"So this is the solution."

"Get me out of prison first."

"Then make me disappear."

"So the state is no longer responsible for me."

Silence fell inside the car.

He smiled more.

"Clever."

"If I died inside the prison..."

"Questions would appear."

"And if I vanished after escaping..."

"Then I'm just a fugitive."

"Not a prisoner."

"No responsibility."

"No investigation."

One of the men looked at him coldly.

But the hero continued:

"Are you going to pressure me?"

"Or kill me right away?"

"Or haven't you even decided yet?"

No one answered him.

So he gave a short laugh.

"So they haven't decided."

"As usual."

"The executors only know half the plan."

One of the men looked at him angrily.

"Shut up."

He laughed again.

"Even that isn't your idea."

"Is it?"

"Someone higher than you told you: tell him to shut up."

"So you said it."

Silence fell.
And for the first time...
The men didn't get angry.
They got uncomfortable.
Because part of them knew he was right.
One of them approached him.
And said coldly:
"The game's over."
The hero smiled.
And looked out the window.
At the dark road.
Then said:
"No."
"Now it's finally getting interesting."
Then he suddenly remembered.
His wife.
And the child.
And for a split second...
He felt something like a sting in his chest.
He looked at his foot.
At the spot where the ball had vanished.
The faint shadow appeared again.
Too weak for anyone else to see.
Too strong for him to ignore.
Then it vanished.
But this time...
He didn't laugh.

An hour later...
The car stopped in front of an abandoned warehouse.
The hero was pulled out, shackled.
And pushed inside.

The lights were harsh.

A single camera set up in the middle.

A metal table.

And several men waiting.

He looked at the camera.

Then smiled.

"So we've reached the confession scene."

No one answered.

One of the men placed papers in front of him.

"You're going to record a video."

"You'll say everything you published was a mistake."

"That your ideas were delusions."

"That the freedom you talked about is impossible."

"That people should go back to their normal lives."

He looked at the papers.

Then raised his head.

"Shoot me in the head and get it over with."

Silence fell.

"That saves time."

The men looked at each other.

Then one of them said:

"What about the child?"

He froze.

For the first time in years.

He truly froze.

"What child?"

"Your child."

He felt his heart pound.

Hard.

Terrifyingly hard.

As if someone had woken him from a long dream.

He looked at his foot.
And froze more.
There was a ball there.
Not complete.
But no longer just a shadow.
A faint circle.
Clear this time.
Smaller than everyone else's balls.
But present.
Beginning to form slowly.
As if something was coming back from the dead.
He felt heat in his body.
And sweat on his forehead.
And anger.
Real anger.
He hadn't felt it in a long time.
He looked around in confusion.
As if he didn't know himself.
Then the man said:
"Your wife is with us."
He raised his head fast.
"What?"
"We told her you escaped."
"And that she'd see you tonight."
His heart began pounding faster.
Faster.
And faster.
And the ball grew bigger.
Centimeter by centimeter.
As if it were feeding on every heartbeat.
The men looked at his foot.

Then at each other.
Even they looked stunned.
"So the reports were true."
One of them whispered.
As for the hero...
He wasn't hearing anything anymore.
All he could hear..
Was his own heart.
"Last chance."
Said the man in charge.
"Record the video."
"Or your wife dies."
Silence fell.
The hero closed his eyes.
For long seconds.
Then opened them.
And all the sarcasm vanished from his face.
"Turn on the camera."
The recording began.
He sat in front of the lens.
And looked at it.
This time...
He wasn't performing for fun.
He was performing to survive.
He said everything they wanted.
That he'd been wrong.
That his ideas were delusions.
That the freedom he'd talked about was impossible.
That people should go back to their lives.
That he was just a fugitive.
And that they shouldn't follow him.

Then they turned the camera toward his foot.
Toward the ball that had returned.
Clear.
Real.
Tied to him once again.
The recording ended.
And the camera was turned off.
Silence fell.
Then a side door opened.
And his wife walked in.
She was laughing.
A light laugh.
Relaxed.
Fearless.
No tears.
He looked at her.
Not understanding.
Then said in a hoarse voice:
"Are you okay?"
She looked at him.
Then smiled.
A smile he'd never seen from her before.
"You fool."
He froze.
"What?"
She laughed.
"I'm not pregnant."
Silence fell.
He felt as if someone had struck him in the chest.
"What?"
"I was never pregnant."

Then she stepped closer.
"Don't worry, sweetheart."
"I was just doing my job."
He looked at her.
Then at the men.
Then back at her.
And for the first time since his ball had vanished...
He understood the meaning of betrayal.
And understood why it had come back.
Because the problem wasn't love.
Or the child.
Or the future.
It was that he had believed.
And for just one moment...
He had allowed himself to have something he feared losing.
And in that moment...
The ball was complete.

Final Chapter: Fall of the Symbol

The hero began to hallucinate.
He could no longer tell the faces of the men who'd deceived him apart from his wife's face, the one who'd sold the last illusion inside him, from his old face, the one he thought had died long ago.
They didn't kill him.
They didn't need to kill him.
They threw him somewhere far away, on an abandoned road outside the city, and left him there the way you leave something whose usefulness has run out.
The state no longer cared about him.
It had gotten what it wanted.
The video.
The image.

The confession.

The clip was published everywhere.

The man people had called the symbol of freedom appeared, eyes empty, repeating the words they wanted from him.

He said everything he'd talked about had been a mistake.

He said his ideas had been hallucinations.

He said his dreams were impossible to carry out.

He said people should go back to their lives.

Then the camera turned toward his foot.

The ball was there.

Clear.

Heavy.

Tied to him once again.

At first many refused to believe it.

Some said the video was fabricated.

Others said they'd forced him.

And some cried quietly, not because they were mourning a man, but because they were mourning a moment when they'd believed they could be free.

But the days passed.

And people grow tired.

The revolution that had filled the streets began to fade.

The chants grew fewer.

The banners disappeared.

The walls were painted over, covering the slogans.

And those who had talked about him day and night went back to their jobs, their debts, their fears, and their balls, which had grown bigger than before.

Online, the comments began to change.

"What did you expect from a homeless addict?"

"You believed a madman."

"It was obvious from the start."

"All revolutions end like this."

Some read those comments and laughed.

Others read them and fell silent.

As for him, he wandered through roads he didn't know, dragging his massive ball behind him.

Scrrrape...

Scrrrape...

Scrrrape...

The sound came back.

The same old sound.

But this time there was no audience.

No cameras.

No speeches.

No revolution.

There was only one man.

A tired man.

Behind him, a black iron ball.

And inside him, a broken laugh he couldn't tell was mockery of the world, or mockery of himself.

And on a cold morning, a woman passed by, holding a small child's hand.

The child looked at him for a long time.

Then asked his mother:

"Mom... why is his ball so big?"

The mother pulled his hand quickly.

And said, without looking at the man:

"If you keep misbehaving and don't listen to me... you'll end up like him."

The man stopped.

Looked at the child.

Then at the ball.

Then laughed.

A short laugh.

Quiet.

Then he kept walking.

The End