

# Abdo

An autobiography: True in its imagination and fictional in its reality!  
Part of it has already **happened**, part is **happening**, and the rest **will happen** :)



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**Each of us is undoubtedly struggling with something inside.**

This was the answer I gave to one of my friends' question as we gathered around the blazing tea circle, roasting some delicious corn in our field after midnight. A group of childhood friends, we were playing here yesterday, each of us five years old, and in the blink of an eye, we found ourselves on the verge of forty.

We were pondering, as usual, abstract matters that are hard to articulate, as if we were releasing the worries stuck in our souls, freeing them from the shackles of our chests, like the sparks flying from the fire before us. One of them asked me what were the most important things I'd learned in my life and during my travels, since I was the friend in the group who had travelled the world and seen people in many sorts of conditions. I didn't hesitate much in answering, as if I had memorized it by heart. I told him that I had learned not to judge anyone based on the external state they try to show, no matter how well I might know them, and to have compassion for all people, for **each of us is undoubtedly struggling with something inside.**

They were curious to know the secret behind such excessive generosity towards others. So I began to recount a peculiar story that had happened to me over ten years ago, when I travelled for the first time in my life outside Egypt.

At that time, I was approaching thirty, doing my PhD in Theoretical Computer Science at the Hamilton Institute, in a small, beautiful Irish town called Maynooth. From the outside, everyone saw me as Ahmed, the smart, sociable PhD student who seemed completely calm and collected. At least, that's how it appeared from the outside; I'm not sure if this was my good fortune or my bad luck. But inside me, there was a frantic mouse that I knew well, sitting alone in a vast, barren desert, constantly gnawing at its nails in anxiety, and desperately battling those ghosts, the ghosts of loneliness and madness.

One day, I arrived at the institute and found everyone talking about a mouse. A different mouse than mine. A mouse that had snuck into the building and was wreaking havoc. He was eating papers, sneaking into desk drawers to eat the students' stored nuts, chocolates, and other snacks, and leaving his droppings wherever he wanted. The modernity of the building helped him. Each floor consisted of two layers: A traditional concrete layer where the infrastructure of water pipes, electrical wires, internet cables, and so on is placed, and another aesthetically pleasing layer covering the first. This top layer had circular openings that could be easily removed to connect our devices to the internet and electricity. It was very easy for that mouse to live peacefully between these two layers and move smoothly between the floors of the building without running into trouble. Everyone was annoyed with him and wanted to get rid of him at any cost, but to no avail. This situation continued for several weeks.

One day, I arrived at my office around nine in the morning as usual. When I opened the office door, I found him in front of

me. He was shocked to see me and quickly tried to flee and hide, as if he had seen a human, but I surprised him and pleaded with him, saying...

- Please, don't be afraid of me! Please.

I was surprised that he stopped, turned around, then raised his head and looked at me. It seems there is still something who understands us in this strange world. Our eyes met in silence for a few moments. His eyes were a beautiful hazel, yet confused. I could see his loneliness clearly; I knew those eyes well, I saw them every morning in the mirror. It also seemed that he saw the lonely, agitated mouse inside me. I approached him, opening my palm. He climbed onto it slowly. I brought my head close to his and breathed deeply. Then, I found my nose gently rubbing against his as I said...

- Hi, this is your friend Ahmed!

And from that moment, my secret friendship, hidden from everyone's eyes, began with that beautiful mouse I named **Abdo**.

Anyone who knows me well knows that cheese and I are not close at all. I've never been fond of its smell or taste. During my school days, for no less than ten years, my mother would prepare cheese sandwiches every day for my sisters and myself. And by the way, it was only one type of cheese that I still remember very well, despite all my miserable attempts to banish its taste from my tongue. I think that period was enough to saturate me to the point of disgust in my relationship with cheese. This feeling is undoubtedly shared by many, many Egyptians, especially among my generation.

But for **Abdo**, I would go every morning to buy him a piece of cheese. I hated buying cheese from those gigantic stores that make me feel less than nothing, make me feel like I'm the commodity there. I searched for a cheese shop until I found it on one of Maynooth's obscure side streets. It was a small shop owned by an old Irishman named Ronan.

Ronan was a very pure man, his heart as white as my grandmother's bed sheet. He had a good sense of humour, although his tongue was a bit rude. He inherited the cheese shop from his father after his father's death, and lived with his wife Nora on the top floor. He found a son in me and I gave him a fatherhood that God had not granted him, I considered him exactly like my father. He was just like us Egyptians, and if it weren't for his red hair, I would have said he was from **Shubra\***. My relationship with him was informal and friendly par excellence; we both loved laughing, joking, and coffee. A warm relationship full of sarcasm and self-mockery, without any of the silly barriers that people make with their own hands, and I've never understood why they make them.

Nora was very beautiful and extremely generous. She would invite me to lunch almost every day, but she had one flaw, a very serious one! She always cooked potatoes. Only potatoes! Please don't misunderstand me; I never intend to mock what happened in the past with the Great Famine in Ireland and its connection to potatoes. I'm just telling you what happened to me. Nora really didn't cook anything except potatoes, I had absolutely nothing to do with that!

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\* **Shubra** is a very famous local Egyptian district.

I felt deep misery for Ronan and her, but what was my sin to have this much misery on my lunch plate every day? I was cursing **Abdo** himself, because if it weren't for him, I wouldn't have eaten all these potatoes. In my childhood, I was forced to eat tons of cheese from my mother's hand, and in my youth I ate an equal weight of potatoes from Nora's hand, and I'll probably eat tons of something unknown, which I'll surely hate, from my future wife's hand. In any case, I could not and will not have any choice but to smile at all of them while hiding my deep resentment, while silently cursing myself from the depths of my stomach! What a miserable person I am, lacking the slightest control over the simplest things in my life.

I used to wake up early every morning and go directly to Ronan, open the shop with him, and have a coffee while checking on how he and Nora were doing. Then I'd buy a piece of cheese for one Euro, hurry straight to the office before any other creature arrived, and seek out that troublemaker **Abdo**.

I'd take the piece of cheese out of my bag and place it in front of me on the desk. Then I'd tap my foot on the floor of the building five times and then say, "**Abdo, come on, breakfast is ready!**" Finally, **Abdo** would emerge from his hiding place. I had previously agreed on the details of these spiritual rituals with him. I looked like a magician conjuring up the spirits of mice. And suddenly, you'd find him climbing up onto the desk. Before eating his breakfast, he liked rub his nose against mine and gently pat my face with his tiny hands. That was his love language and his way of checking on how I was doing. How beautiful you were, **Abdo**! He was as tender as my mother, whose gentle presence never truly left my being.

One day, before **Abdo** started eating his breakfast, I found him cutting a piece of cheese with his hands and bringing it to my mouth. I didn't want to embarrass his delicate hands, make him feel disappointed, and tell him that I didn't like cheese. Reluctantly, I took the piece and began to taste it shyly. Its taste was indescribable, how delicious the cheese was, and how unfair I had been to it! How foolish I was! From that day on, we shared breakfast together, and my frantic mouse found his companion in **Abdo**, reassuring his heart and calming his mind.

Sometimes, I would take him for a walk to get some fresh air. I'd place him in my backpack, opening its middle pocket so he could pop his head out and see what was happening around him. I'd also put a piece of cheese in there with him to snack on if he got hungry.

I remember well the day I took him with me to enjoy a concert featuring some of **Bach's** music. I placed my backpack on my lap, and he poked his head out to watch in awe the huge orchestra of elegantly dressed musicians. I think he also loved [Bach's Second Partita for Solo Violin](#); he wouldn't have held his breath and stayed so calm in the backpack if it were a cat playing the violin. No one noticed him that day except for a beautiful clarinetist whom I glanced at occasionally. Her eyes were very sad, and I could sense her lost soul. Eventually our eyes met, and I smiled at her. That's when she saw **Abdo** poking his head out of the backpack and smiling at her too. Perhaps he was smiling at her mouse. She smiled back, almost laughed, but composed herself when I gestured to her by placing my index finger over my lips, laughing as well. How beautiful and warm the life of mice is, we feel each other so

easily! I believe, or rather I'm almost certain, that **Bach** himself had a gentle, large mouse inside him, perhaps even many!

I was about to complete the second year of my PhD, with two more years still ahead. As you know, the piece of cheese cost me one Euro daily. An idea came to me: I made a large wooden piggy bank and wrote "**Abdooo**" on it, then took a picture of us together and stuck it on the side. Every day, after buying him a piece of cheese, I would store away another Euro.

Days passed with their ups and downs until I completed my PhD, defended my thesis, and had only two weeks left in Ireland before returning to Egypt. All I could think about was **Abdo**. How could I leave him behind and go? I couldn't take him with me, and I had neither the desire nor the energy for a farewell. I opened the piggy bank and found nearly seven hundred Euros inside. I topped it up to make it a full seven hundred, then went to Ronan and handed him the money, saying...

- Here, Ronan, take this money. I want cheese worth this amount. Also, divide it into seven hundred pieces, each individually wrapped well.

The old man was surprised by my request and asked me, saying...

- Stop joking around, man. If I didn't know you don't drink, I'd say you're drunk! Do you realize what you're asking for? Your flight is in two weeks! What are you going to do with all this cheese? Are you crazy?

I knew this would happen someday. I hadn't ever told him about **Abdo** before, and he didn't know that the piece of cheese I took from him every morning wasn't for me. **Abdo** was my purest secret that I kept to myself. I tried to come up with some logical excuse for my illogical request, but as usual, I failed to lie.

I remained silent for a minute, unable to speak, looking at Ronan bashfully, not knowing what to say. Then I decided to tell him my story with **Abdo**, without whom I would never have met him. He looked at me in a silence I had never experienced from him before and said to me...

- I wouldn't put this past a crazy person like you, Ahmed... I wouldn't be surprised at all.

He went on to say...

- Anyway, I'll be better than you... Seven hundred pieces of cheese from a friend to his companion? Let's make it a thousand from a father to his son... but I'll subtract one and make it nine hundred ninety-nine for **Abdo**, since that's my favourite number.

I hugged him tightly, then we prepared the cheese together. It was a massive amount, enough for **Abdo** for at least three years, by my estimate. We wrapped the pieces with great care to ensure no smell could escape. Every night after midnight, when no one was around, I would go to the institute and carefully hide the cheese pieces in the circular openings in the office floors throughout the building. It took me ten days to conceal it all.

On the final day, I had breakfast with Nora and Ronan, who offered to drive me to the airport at noon. I said my goodbyes, thanking them from the bottom of my heart. Our farewell was not without jokes, despite the tears. I took from Ronan the last piece of cheese I would buy for **Abdo** and then headed to my office to say goodbye to him.

I placed the piece of cheese in front of me on the desk, then tapped my trembling foot on the floor five times, saying in a barely audible, choked voice, "**Abdo, come on, breakfast is ready!**" He came out with his head bowed without even glancing at the cheese. It seemed he knew I was leaving; why else would I store all this cheese for him? He looked at me for a long time, and I saw a tear glistening in his hazel eyes, eyes I didn't even dare to meet. I hadn't seen him this sad since the first time we met. I closed my eyes, where a tear was also trembling, and leaned my head closer to him. I rubbed my nose against his as I started telling him about the plan I had made for him concerning the cheese. Then I took a deep breath and opened my eyes wide, releasing from their prisons that tear I had held back for so long. I locked my gaze with his for a minute and then told him...

- Listen, **Abdo**, I'm leaving now and I don't know if we will meet again or not. Escape from this place immediately if you get the chance... Escape and do not look back or regret anything you've missed. And don't forget, **Abdo**... I mean, don't be afraid... Don't be afraid to love as your friend feared.

Then I left him and escaped. I felt his broken spirit watching me from the office window as I walked away, but I was far too cowardly to turn around, and much more fragile than I had expected.

The story didn't end there, my friends, as I thought it would. More than two years after my return to Egypt, I woke up one morning to the sound of an email from Damien, my PhD supervisor. My heart raced, and I was so nervous that I couldn't hold my phone to open the email. I feared something had happened and, for some reason, that they had discovered what I did after reviewing the institute's cameras. I was afraid they might dispose of the cheese or find **Abdo**.

I took my phone and went into the bathroom. I struggled to control my trembling hands and, after a few minutes, finally managed to open the email. I read the first line and then breathed a sigh of relief. Damien was inviting me to give a lecture as part of the institute's annual seminar series about the research I had done during my PhD. I almost flew with joy, knowing that I would see **Abdo** again. I agreed only for him, and for his sake, I endured the burden of dealing with Madame Naglaa, an embassy employee who had exhausted me during the new visa process. If I could have booked her a one-way private plane to Siberia, without return, I wouldn't have hesitated for a moment.

I arrived in Dublin after midnight. I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. I was thinking about the unknown that awaited me the following morning. I took the train early and headed to Maynooth. I went to Ronan's shop, but it was closed; it was

still very early. I decided to walk around for an hour to recall my memories of this place and to clear my mind of any unhelpful thoughts, if I could. I walked through the entire town, then returned to the shop, which from a distance I saw was open. I stood for a moment, observing Ronan through the glass door as he cut a piece of cheese for a customer. I stood completely silent, with only a calm smile on my face. He turned around while cutting the cheese, and our eyes met. Contrary to his habit, he also stood looking at me for a few moments, during which we did nothing but smile at each other. I opened the door and entered. He said to me with his usual, expected vulgarity, as he punched me in the shoulder before nearly suffocating me with the intensity of his hug...

- Damn you, man! Why didn't you tell me you were coming?
- I wanted to surprise you, Ronan, but it seems I was mistaken; you're too old and might die from surprises like this. Sorry, old man.
- Old! Who's the old one here? I'm younger than you, you wretch.
- My supervisor invited me to give a lecture about my PhD research, so I'm here again for a week.
- You should have told me so I could get things in order, man.

Then he continued, pulling me by the arm, saying...

- So no cheese and no customers, then. Today's a day off in your honour! Let's go to Nora; she'll be very happy to see you.

We closed the shop, went upstairs to Nora, and enjoyed coffee on their lovely balcony. I asked how they were doing, despite knowing already from our monthly updates. I gave them the gifts I had brought from Egypt.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, so I excused myself to head to the university since there were only two hours left until the lecture. At that moment, Nora told me...

- Dinner is at our place today anyway. I don't think it needs to be mentioned; it's a given!
- Of course, Nora, I've missed your cooking a lot. What will you be making for us today from your rich and diverse kitchen recipes?

She knew I was teasing her, as usual, and she knew I was right. She did nothing but grit her teeth and made a face of mock irritation, waiting for more sarcasm, knowing that I would not disappoint her, and I certainly didn't.

- Let me guess, Nora!

After a moment of pretending to think, I said to her, smiling...

- Seems extremely complicated. I think you'll cook... maybe some potatoes... maybe... who really knows!
- You never change, Ahmed. Those who don't know you well might think you're a serious person, but in reality, you're completely the opposite; you excel at nothing in your life except sarcasm and joking.
- What's the problem with that, Nora? We're not immortal, and in the end, all we'll leave behind are the memories of these playful moments. I hope I can stay this way forever, as

long as I understand the context of the conversation. But I promise I'll drop the sarcasm for this week if you do one thing!

- What is it?
- Please don't cook any potatoes today!
- You know, I intended a little while ago not to cook potatoes for you today because I suspected you didn't like them. But just to spite you, I'll do it anyway. In fact, I'll cook them for you all week!
- You were just guessing! How did you not realise? I must have been that good at acting. That makes me so proud!
- Stop it... You'll kill me.

We laughed. Then, as I was about to leave, I stopped for a moment, looking at Ronan, unsure what to say. He looked at me and said...

- I know what you want... you want a piece of cheese for your old friend.

The old man read my eyes, and I responded with nothing but a nod and a shy smile. He continued, saying...

- Do you remember the day we prepared the cheese together? That day, I removed one piece from the thousand, leaving nine hundred ninety-nine, and I told you then that it was my favourite number. Do you know why I love that number? Because it's a warm number, a number that always leaves a chance to meet, an optimistic number. Yes, Ahmed, there are optimistic numbers and pessimistic ones, like a thousand. A thousand means nothing but the end and

departure; it's the sound of closing doors, planes taking off, and the sobs of loved ones after embraces of farewell. I made nine hundred and ninety-nine pieces of cheese that day to force fate to listen to my deep-rooted desire to meet, and here we are meeting again, my friend.

- It's a thousand now, Ronan, so do you think this is the end then? I don't agree with your theory about numbers because I will prove it wrong again. You, yourself, can force all the numbers to be optimistic and come visit me with Nora in Egypt, I can host you both forever.

Then I looked at Nora, jokingly...

- Watch out, Nora. You're now living with an old wise man who reads eyes and understands what people want without a word. You're living with a deep philosopher, a very deep one! And a brilliant mathematician, a very exceptional one! He dissects the psychology of numbers with his sharp knives like cheese and distinguishes the optimistic ones from the pessimistic. Be careful, Nora. Be very careful!
- Damn! Yes, Nora, he'll never change, no matter what happens to him.

We then went down, laughing, to the shop, and he cut a large piece of cheese and handed it to me, saying...

- I sincerely hope from the bottom of my heart that you find your friend just as you left him!

I thanked him and went to the institute. Damien welcomed me and took me to my former office to introduce me to the new members of the research group. My heart started pounding

hard; here I was, about to meet to **Abdo**. I greeted them without paying much attention, just staring at my desk, where one of the new students was sitting. I tried to hold myself together, but I couldn't. I politely asked him to stand up from his chair so I could do something. He was very obliging and immediately stood up.

I opened my bag, took out the piece of cheese, and placed it in front of me on the desk. Then I tapped my foot five times, saying, "**Abdo, come on, breakfast is ready!**" I waited for minutes, but nothing happened. Where is **Abdo**? I became extremely nervous, and my blood started rushing through my veins. No one there seemed to understand what was going on, and undoubtedly they were all wondering about the fool sitting there, tapping the floor with his foot and talking to himself. Rather, he had come to give a lecture that was supposed to be scientific! I repeated the ritual a second and third time, to no avail. I was deeply disappointed. Silence reigned for a few minutes without anyone saying a word. At that moment, I wanted to leave, but I grabbed the piece of cheese, threw it into my bag in frustration, and asked Damien if I could go to the seminar room, since there were only ten minutes left until the talk was scheduled to begin.

I placed my laptop in front of me on the desk and the attendees began to arrive. Damien introduced me to everyone. I started the lecture with no desire or motivation. After ten minutes, I opened my bag to take out my laser pointer to highlight some equations on the projection screen. The piece of cheese somehow got stuck to the pointer as I was pulling it out. I threw the cheese on the desk in front of me and continued my

explanation. Everyone was seemingly watching me intently and paying close attention to what I was saying. After a few minutes, however, I turned around and saw that no one was looking at me at all. They were staring in astonishment at something on the desk.

That damned **Abdo** was hopping around next to the piece of cheese with an unusual joy, moving his legs side to side like the pendulum of an ancient clock brought back to life. I froze in place, my trembling legs unable to carry me any longer. I sat down, panting in the chair, staring at him for minutes, unable to comprehend what was happening.

He was hiding his hands behind his back. He came closer to me and then opened them in front of me. There was a small piece of cheese in his hands. It seemed that this was what had delayed him from answering my call a few minutes ago; he must have been cutting a piece of the cheese I had stored for him so we could have breakfast together as we used to. I forgive you then, you rascal. He came even closer and placed the piece of cheese in my mouth; it was the most delicious piece of cheese I had ever tasted in my life!

Everyone sat bewildered by this eccentric Egyptian man who had just arrived from an equally eccentric land, thousands of miles away. The damned mouse that had driven them all to the brink of madness for years, not only did it seem to know him, but it had somehow fed him. Little did they know that if it weren't for that damned mouse, this man would have fallen off that brink of madness years ago.

I opened my right hand, onto which he confidently climbed. I lifted him high onto the throne of my palm, like a king above everyone's heads. Then I slowly lowered my hand until his face was level with mine. Our eyes met again, filled with nostalgia. We breathed deeply together, his breath warm. How much I had missed it. How I had missed you, you little rascal!

We rubbed our noses together as we used to. Then **Abdo**, in the midst of everyone's astonishment whose mouths were wide open, opened his little hands and gently embraced my face, resting the side of his head on my cheek. Then I spoke to **Abdo** and said...

**Hello!**

For serious reasons related to his personal safety, **Abdo** refused to share the selfie we took together, I must respect his decision. However, he was generous enough to share a picture of his droppings, in case you're interested :)

