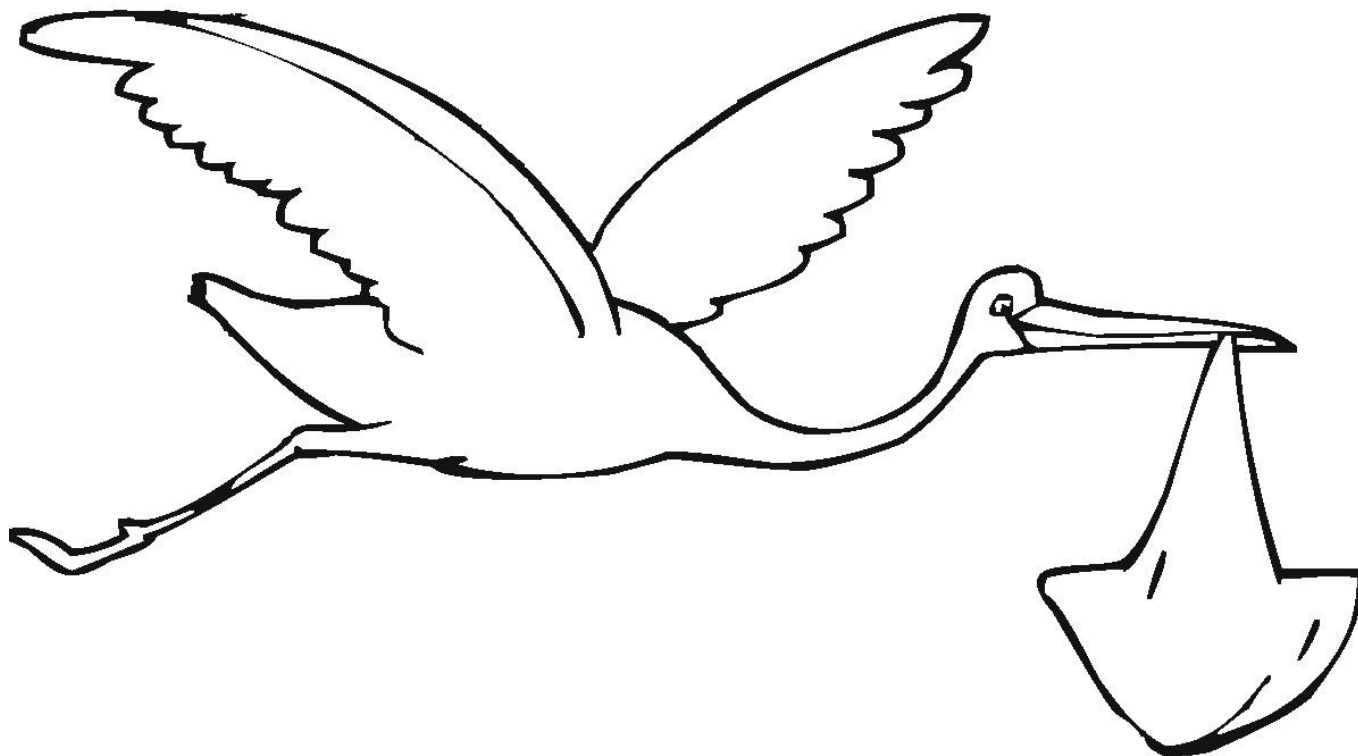


A Knock from the Stork



***A Knock from the Stork* By Mostafa Shoul**

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Prefatory Note

The present one-act play does not include the conventional dramatis personae. This is a deliberate choice as the author wishes to let the reader/audience discover the characters at the opportune time with the unfolding of the play so as not to spoil the suspense effect.

A Knock from the Stork

A One-Act Play

A table and chairs in the center of the dining room. In the background, appears the front door at the end of the corridor at the right of which stand a telephone table and a bergère. Beside the telephone, a framed photograph shows a young couple, the male wearing a uniform. At the dining table an older couple is sitting for dinner facing each other.

HUSBAND: *(clearing his voice)*. Hum! I guess my special dish isn't warming us enough, huh?

Pause.

Do you know... Do you know what they call a young pitman going out with a coal miner's daughter? (*Silence*)... Carbon dating! (*Laughs satisfied, while his wife remains silent*).

Pause.

Wife seems rather sad.

Come on, honey, I am only trying to cheer you up.

Pause.

Now, you're not brooding again! Whenever you bring up this thing you pull a long face.

WIFE: You never understand... You no longer have the most rudimentary feelings.

HUSBAND: Please, Mary. It's a special day, our anniversary.

MARY: You were such a sweetheart...Look what the military machine has made of you. They don't armor only cars out there, but humans as well. You have become a two-footed shelled vehicle with a hardened heart... though flabby somewhere else.

HUSBAND: Sure, it was quite an experience, but...

MARY: You don't realize the pain of loneliness, the torment of a still home... You...

HUSBAND: You got it all wrong. I learned a lot, because I endured a lot. I know perfectly what loneliness means. I'm not talking about cozy loneliness, sinking in a soft armchair and sipping pricey wine, but about being alone, lost in the middle of nowhere, far, far away from home in a blue funk, going flaky.

MARY: I had been waiting for you all that time in an empty house. No babbling, no toddling around.

HUSBAND: You said you were not ready, when I was still here. You were afraid you could not to manage on your own when I was out.

MARY: We still had a chance when you came back.

HUSBAND: Why do you relish rubbing salt into the wound? You know that it wasn't my fault. How could you put the blame on me when you know all about the tragic event?

MARY: You bet! Yes... Yes, I know: it was that "damn shell-splinter" that found your underpants. I've heard the story only too often.

HUSBAND: But you either tend to forget it, or take it as a mere third-rate war movie. It was all-fired real, mind you. And I suffered like hell.

MARY: Weren't you beaming when you first were called?

HUSBAND: I admit I had been proud to take part in that chest-beating show, but then I tearfully wished I had been a pitiable 4-F, or I had gotten that million-dollar wound to be out of that snake pit.

MARY: Well, did you think you were going to have a stroll in a bamboo park?

HUSBAND: That was more or less what they had told us. But when the bird drops you in the boonies, you have to buckle for your dust. No, it was not a stroll; we couldn't take the air. The air was unbreathable, anyway; too heavy.

MARY: Lighter than a smoke, I guess.

HUSBAND: (*not taking notice of what she said*). We didn't walk; it was stepping in fits and starts, our wide-open eyes now seeking the next safe foothold, now panning across the area to spot an eventual enemy's head that would pop up out of some hidey-hole to bac bac us with his AK-47.

MARY: Well, I suppose that you guys turned yellower than your enemies.

HUSBAND: (*ignoring her remark*). No respite. No break. The only solace was the time of c-ration: beans and dicks.

MARY: Did you expect to be invited for egg rolls at your enemy's table?

HUSBAND: (*still ignoring her*). Oh, yes... I came back home somewhat diminished, but, thank God, not a BK amputee, like that unfortunate bro. I could have, though. Worse still, I could have checked out altogether, because it was a life or death run each sortie.

MARY: Yes, you finally came back. That had been my dearest wish. You found me still waiting. And now, we are here, both of us, face to face.

HUSBAND: You mean nose to nose.

MARY: (*ignoring him*). No interfering. No third voice interrupting our day-by-day echoing.

HUSBAND: (*annoyed*). Not mere hot air, anyway; I for one have given voice to my suffering, but you haven't been eager to stand by me; never said you were really sorry.

MARY: I am awfully sorry for both of us. But here we are...

HUSBAND: What can I do?

MARY: (*bursting into tears*). I don't know... I don't know.

HUSBAND: (*consoling*). There, there...

MARY: (*still sobbing*). Not even a single kiddie birthday party here.

HUSBAND: (*trying to propose a solution*). Well... We... we could think of some homecoming day. Why not? After all...(Telephone rings.)

Mary stands up, wiping tears away, to go to the phone.

She tries to compose herself before she picks up the receiver.

MARY: Hello...Yes, Mrs. Lamb speaking... That's right, John's wife. (*Listening*)... Excuse me, but you must be...What dough are you talking about?... Now, is it dough or bread?... Cabbage? I beg your pardon! ... Do you really mean that we are supposed to have sent you the cabbage in order to receive the package? (*Irritated*)... OK, you want cabbage, you'll have it (*She slams the handset on the phone cradle*.) Here you are! (*Heads back towards the table*.) Right on the face. (*Then looks back as if to address the caller*) Cabbage yourself!

JOHN: Who was it?

MARY: Another wet blanket.

JOHN: Come on, Mary, take it easy. Must be a wrong number... Or at most a prank call.

MARY: No, the guy was taking a firm stand

JOHN: Well, he must be a telemarketer, then. (*Mary resumes her seat at the table. Happy that the call has changed the subject of discussion, her husband hastens to carry on.*) You know how dogged telemarketers are. They're invasive. And if you don't say a raging “no” right away, you'll have problems shaking them off.

MARY: I've never heard of telemarketers dealing in dough and bread; much less in cabbage.

JOHN: Perhaps some grocery store trying to offer a special service; you never know. Cut-throat competition makes business wear many faces.

MARY: But I understood that *he* wanted cabbage.

JOHN: (*laughing*). You should start growing cabbage on the window sill. It must be paying.

MARY: I've had enough of it!

JOHN: (*still joking*). You're right... (*Pointing at her meal*) Go back to your brussels sprouts before they grow into big cab...

MARY (*interrupting*). Button up, will you?

JOHN: Well, I just thought that pulling legs is more fun than pulling long faces.

Telephone rings.

JOHN: Oh, that makes a change.

MARY (*gets up and decidedly goes again to the phone*) Not him again! (*Picks up the handset.*) How dare y... (*Surprised.*) You got what you want?... (*Ironically*) Oh yes, I'm always prompt in sending cabbage through the phone. Now what?... My... Are you kidding me? (*She seems to be stunned and clumsily puts back the handset, then looking at the phone.*) It's not possible... (*She turns to her husband.*) Is it possible?... (*She looks down as if addressing herself in a brighter way.*) It is possible.

JOHN: (*paying now more attention to what is going on*). What is not possible and possible at the same time? Sounds like a riddle. (*Gets up and joins his wife who seems to pass out.*) What is it? (*Worried.*) Who was it?

MARY: (*wavering*). I... I think I'm going to faint.

JOHN: (*very anxious*). What's going on? Tell me!

MARY: I wish... I wish I could sort it out.

JOHN: (*supports her as she leans on him*). Easy, easy... You'll be OK. Now, will you enlighten me? Who was it?

MARY: (*breathless*). I... We... we've got a son...

JOHN: (*baffled*). A son?... Was it the doctor? (*MARY swoons.*) Mary, Mary! (*He pulls her to the bergère and seats her.*) There... You'll be fine.

MARY: (*leaning on the back of the seat, her eyes closed*). Aaah!...

JOHN: (*puzzled and after some hesitation puts his hand on Mary's abdomen, then as if to sound it more accurately he sticks his right ear on it*). Cabbage? I can not figure it out: cabbage patch where babies are found? ...Giving birth?... Pregnant?... How come? (*He goes to the table and brings a glass of water, then tries to make MARY, still groggy, sip a mouthful.*) Here, have some water; it will help.

MARY: (*hardly takes a sip*). Oh, my God!

JOHN: (*eager to know more*). What did the doctor tell you? Isn't he kidding? A baby boy?... How is it possible? I mean...

MARY: It wasn't the doctor.

JOHN: (*more and more confounded*). Who was it then, Mary?

MARY: I don't know. Somebody... A voice telling me that the child is to be delivered soon.

JOHN: Oh, Mary, it must be Gabriel, then. Halleluja, it's a miracle!

MARY: Don't be so grim!

JOHN: So, what are we doing now?

MARY: We are expecting.

JOHN (*touching his abdomen*). Both of us?

MARY (*convinced that something is going to happen*). Well, I am, anyway?

JOHN: With a flat belly?

MARY: Jeez, won't you give up being stupid?

JOHN: Well, how is this bundle of joy going to come, then?... Heavenly sent?

MARY: Sort of.

JOHN (*mockingly*). It's not a miracle; it's a... miraculous miracle! (*Telephone rings.*) Oh yes, I sense that the voice is about to announce the providential nativity. (*MARY gets ready to answer.*) Hosanna!

MARY: Hello!... What parcel on the doorstep?... Our son? Our baby is here right on the doorstep?

JOHN (*incredulous*). Wrapped and thrown with the evening newspaper onto the threshold? That's an original baby arrival.

MARY (*hangs up*). He is here, John, right behind the door!

JOHN: All by himself?

MARY: Well, I don't know. Someone will probably ring the doorbell.

Pause

JOHN: Now, if the baby's not attended, he can't ring the bell... He's a good chance of being too small to reach the push button.

MARY (*irritated*). Aargh... I'll see to that myself. (*She goes to the door, opens it and finds what seems to be the motionless body of a young person on the very doorstep, wrapped in a jute drawstring sack and lying on his side in a crouching position, his back to the door*). John! Come here!... I didn't imagine him overgrown.

JOHN (*joins her*). Oh, an interesting case of postmaturity.

MARY: Indeed, but anyway... At least this will let us get around the diaper stage.

JOHN: Still born?

MARY: I was told he had been sedated for the trip.

JOHN: Lucky devil, I mean cherub... On second thought, he is not lucky; it looks like OD.

MARY: (*grumbling*).

JOHN: (*perplexed*). What are we supposed to do?

MARY: (*starts to pull the body*). Umph... Will you help me welcome him?

JOHN: Are you kidding?

MARY: (*resolute*). Come on, we are not going to abort this so desired issue.

JOHN (*about to help but reluctantly*). If you ask me, we are going to have a difficult delivery.

MARY: Be a little bit more positive!

JOHN: Well, don't you see? Breech presentation.

MARY: So what?

JOHN: That'll be real labor; take my word for it.

MARY (*goes out, stepping over the body, then facing JOHN she bends down to reach for one end of the sack*). OK, you pull and I push as hard as I can.

JOHN: Wait, wait! He first has to be turned into a head-down position. (*Both of them, holding the sack from either end, turn it to be head-first toward the door.*) That's it. Now you can push. Push! ...Push!... You're doing just fine.

MARY: Oomph!

JOHN: Thank God, no forceps needed. (*Pulling along the corridor and singing ironically*) He ain't heavy, he's my...youngster...

MARY: Is it time for singing?

JOHN: (*wistful*). Yeah, that reminds me of hauling those toilsome body bags from the field to board the noisy and impatient chopper, the same anxious thought whirling in my head: tomorrow I may be in the same bag to be sent home like smoked ham. (*They lay the body on the floor near the phone table.*) Gee! I didn't realize that he is this big.

MARY: (*bothered and tensing*). Does size matter?

JOHN: (*with calming gestures*). No more contractions, most of the travail is done. (*Pointing at the sack*) Now all we have to do is tear the placenta.

MARY: (*rather angry*). You stop it!

JOHN: Well, haven't you been craving for progeny? So let's have a normal delivery process. (*Bending over the body, he starts untying the strings of the sack on the feet side.*) I think I can manage without a surgical knife.

MARY: Let me help.

JOHN: OK, try to roll it up.

MARY: (*cynically*). Oh, thank you, I was about to do just the opposite.

JOHN: (*now the body is half uncovered, but his feet are tied with a rope*). Oh boy...Judging by the size of his sneakers, I'd say that he is old enough to...

MARY: Who cares about his age? It's a windfall. Aren't you glad we have a heaven-sent child?

JOHN: Err...

MARY: It's our son, and you'll have the privilege to baptize him, John!

JOHN: I'm not that kind of John, but did you mean *our* son?

MARY: Of course, he is.

JOHN: Well, I'm not so sure.

MARY: Come on, John. Why don't you accept this gift?

JOHN: If *you* do, it's because you certainly know what you're talking about. *I* don't know... Or maybe I suppose I do.

MARY: What do you mean?

JOHN: Well, a while ago, I was about to say that this lad, I mean your son, is old enough to have been conceived, gestated and born during my absence.

MARY: Could you be a little less ambiguous?

JOHN: I see that you have a strong feeling of kinship. (*He tries to find some clue to support his assertion by scrutinizing the body while uncovering the upper half of it, but finds that the boy's hands are tied, his*

eyes are blindfold and his mouth is sellotaped.) Oh, I now see why we've had no newborn first cry.

MARY (*waiting for further clarification*). Yes, you were telling me...

JOHN: I don't claim that he's got the color of your eyes or even that of your hair, but I swear by my grandfather's pipes that he has your dressing style (*referring to the boy's pinkish tee shirt*).

MARY: Well, have a closer look; he may have genetically inherited my bras as well.

JOHN: Didn't you admit that he is your son?

MARY: Yes, but... I mean...he is ours.

JOHN: Speak for yourself. I deny him.

MARY: Please, John, don't be...

JOHN: I may be guileless, but I'm not that stupid, you know!

MARY: Don't you realize it? It's God's grace.

JOHN: You've got a point there, and it's amazing; yes, I was blind but now I see.

MARY: What the heck do you see?

JOHN: Recollections.

MARY: So what?

JOHN: Well, they make me reconsider things.

MARY: Aha!

JOHN: Oh, yes. No kidding.

MARY: I'm all ears.

JOHN: What's the point in telling you what you already know?

MARY: As a matter of fact, I know lots of things, but I'm far from getting hot.

JOHN: Just dust your intimate memory.

MARY: (*with eyes closed, pretends to laboriously think back*). Oh, yes. I can see... me and ... you.

JOHN: Now, you're getting real cold.

MARY: Give me a hint, then.

JOHN: How about you and that snotty carrottop?

MARY: You mean Robert?

JOHN: Yes, your little Bobby, who used to shadow you after high-school classes.

MARY: You should be ashamed of yourself. He was only a kid.

JOHN: Well, he was man enough.

MARY: You sure know that he needed help.

JOHN (*sniggering*). In husbandry?

MARY: Don't pretend that you didn't know he had problems with biology. Besides, his mother begged me to give him remedial courses.

JOHN: I won't be surprised to know that you taught him anatomy, too.

MARY (*disgusted*). Rotten! That's how you are.

JOHN: I have never been, even amidst the swamps out there, where it stank of rottenness and immersion foot. I had always been myself: steadfast, disregarding the hoochgirls' advances, shunning boom-boom parties with the buck privates.

MARY: I suppose that was after the mishap.

JOHN: You can be sarcastic, but this is the truth anyway. I lived through all that fuss and deprivation thanks to your sweet-scented letters; they made me forget my loneliness and the smell of gunpowder. They sheltered me in that hellish place. They did, because I believed in you. I lived on, because I thought you would be patient enough. Bad luck!... A real bummer.

MARY: You're going crazy.

JOHN: Maybe, but I am no fool.

MARY: I must be dreaming.

JOHN: *I* have been dreaming. Now, with this here exhibit I'm wide awake.

MARY: You're not serious!

JOHN: I've never been so serious. If I had only known that a stupid Jody had taken my place, I would have chosen to be zapped and sent back to the World in a casket, or even buried in-country among the

little people.

MARY: (*solemnly*). Now, you're going to listen to me...

JOHN: Trying to sweet-talk me into swallowing your snake oil?

MARY: (*angrily shouting*). You listen to me!

The tied legs of the lying body twitch.

JOHN: Softly! You shook him up.

MARY: Oh, he's coming to. (*She leans to uncover the boy's eyes.*) Oh my, he's got slit eyes!

JOHN (*indignantly*). A Dink?

MARY: (*outraged by her husband's contempt*). We say Asian.

JOHN: That's what I meant: a Slant.

MARY: Why do you still bear a grudge against those people? There's no reason to dislike them; the war is over, you know!

JOHN: You say this because you have never been their butt.

MARY: What is more, he doesn't seem to be one hundred percent Asian. (*Something suddenly clicked.*) Hey, wait a minute. He's only half Asian; where does the other half come from?

JOHN: Well I must admit that it's not from your dumb redheader.

MARY: Oh, I sure know that; he may be readheaded but he's always been clean-handed. How about you, John?

JOHN: Don't try this with me.

MARY: What bothers me is that he bears your name, he's got Asian features and *you* were in Asia, not me. Did I hear you say he's not your son and that you deny him?

JOHN: I confirm this.

MARY: How can I believe you?

JOHN: You must, because it is the truth.

MARY: You didn't believe me, so there's no reason to believe you.

JOHN: You're wrong.

MARY: Oh, I was wrong when I trusted you, not even knowing where and with whom you were capering, and I stupidly languished for all that time.

JOHN: Be sensible, Mary!

MARY: I can now easily imagine how you could have an affair with a moose... or with many, for that matter. Oh my God, this adds insult to injury.

JOHN: You know that you have always been the only one...

MARY: There was a time when Mary had a little Lamb, as our schoolmates used to tease us, but I just now realized that I've had a vicious ram.

JOHN (*exasperated*). Come on, you now believe your own fantasies.

MARY: Should I believe yours instead?

JOHN: Believe *me*; veteran's honor!

MARY: I'm afraid it's double veteran's dishonor?

JOHN: Good grief! You...

MARY: Tell me; where have you left her?

JOHN: Whom you're talking about?

MARY: Your son's mother of course. Is she still waiting for both of you in the other part of the world or did you sneakily bring her in with the child?

JOHN (*shouting*). Nonsense!

The boy's body moves.

MARY: Quiet! You may shock him. (*She points at the boy's tied limbs.*) By the way, cut the cord of your son, John.

JOHN: Hang it!

MARY (*teasing further*). Come on, you're doing a good job as a midwife.

BOY: (*opens his eyes, his mouth still sellotaped*) Mmmm!... Mmmm!... Ahum!

MARY: (*exhorting*). Get a move on! He may choke; undo him!

JOHN: Not before you take it all back.

BOY: (*lets out smothered coughs*) Umph... umph... umph.

MARY: Hurry up!

JOHN: Why do you care? He's not your son after all.

MARY: So, you finally admit he is yours.

JOHN: Definitely not.

MARY: He is awake now; we will check this right away. (*She addresses the boy.*) Who are you?

BOY: Mmm!

JOHN: Well, this does not take us very far.

MARY: (*attempts to clear the boy's mouth, then hesitates and reformulates her question in a very articulate way*). Aren't you the son of John Lamb?

BOY: (*nods*). Mmm!

MARY (*addressing her husband*). Aha! So Mr. Lamb, you can see for yourself.

BOY: (*wriggling vigorously*). Mmm!... Mmmmm!

JOHN: (*annoyed*). Stop it, you swamp eel!

MARY: What is this? You still deny him?

JOHN (*taking offense*). Can you see me father a zipperhead?

BOY: (*angry*). Mmmm!... Mmmm!

MARY: It's high time we let him claim his father.

JOHN: Or his mother.

MARY: We shall see.

JOHN: I dare you!

MARY (*leans over the boy to ungag him*) Steady!... Steady! You'll be OK.

BOY: (*Mary removes the sellotape*). Ouch!... Aargh! Dad, dad!...

MARY: (*addressing her husband*). Do you hear that?

JOHN: What the hell...

BOY: I want my dad!

MARY: (*showing him her husband*). Right before your eyes!

BOY: (*wild with both anger and grief*) Release me; let me call my father!

JOHN: Oh sure; I'll be very glad to know him. But, in the meantime, meet your mum. Don't you recognize her?

BOY: (*terrified*) Crazy house?... Crackpots?

MARY: (*trying to calm him down*). Easy there! Didn't you say you are John Lamb's son?

BOY: Yes, I am, so what?

JOHN: Enough is enough. Stop all this nonsense!

BOY: I want to go home.

MARY: So, your mother lives somewhere here! (*She addresses her husband.*) You've been close-lipped all these years, hey?

JOHN: Oh, damn it!

BOY: I want to call my father!

MARY: By the way, do you spell his name L A M B?

BOY: My dad is not a sheep.

MARY: Is he...

JOHN: (*interrupting*). A slant?

MARY: (*reproaching*). John!!

BOY: Like I said, he is not a sheep; he is very powerful.

JOHN: Oooo, I'm shivering!

BOY: You will see: he is the owner of the most important factory in the area.

MARY: Oh, he must be a moneybag, then.

BOY: Uh-huh. That's why I've been kidnapped.

MARY: Kidnapped?

BOY: Did you think I got here while playing blindman's buff in a sack race?

MARY: But how did you land here?

BOY: I'm sure the henchmen were stupid enough to take me to the wrong destination after having pocketed the dough.

MARY: Dough?

BOY: Cabbage.

MARY: Cabbage?

BOY: Money; ransom money.

MARY: (*turning to JOHN who seems very concerned*). John... I am quite lost... What do you think?

JOHN: (*addressing MARY in private*). Mary, I think I'm... going to lose...

MARY: The child?

JOHN: My job. I work at LamCom, the most important factory in the area.

END

Mostafa Shoul is a teacher of English and linguistics at Mohamed First University, Oujda, Morocco. He has been writing (*unprofessionally*) poetry and scripts for comic strips, in addition to academic articles, both in English and French since the 1980s. He earned his first Doctorate from Grenoble University, France, his dissertation devoted to the problems hampering the understanding of the message in comic strips/books. In 1995, he got his PhD in linguistics from Laval University, Canada. Mostafa Shoul lives in Oujda Morocco where he still teaches and supervises both undergraduate and graduate students.



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