

Reasons and Names

Nour Bassam Hariri. Syria

Some said that Karim, the headmaster, killed her after he raped her. He raped her, they said, after she spat in his face when he tried to cozy up to her in his office. Some said that Doha, the headmaster's wife, killed her because she had an affair with her husband. Some said that Madar, one of her students, killed her because she had him expelled. She had him expelled, they said, because he put glue on her seat, making her skirt rip.

Some said that Nirmin, another teacher, killed her because she ruined her standing in the village as a professional and as a woman. Nirmin's fiancé Raid left her two days before their wedding, and Karim the headmaster renegeed on his decision to promote her to assistant headmaster. It was no coincidence, they said, that both things happened only two and a half weeks after the new teacher arrived in the village.

Some said that Raid killed her because she seduced him, flirting with him constantly until he left Nirmin for her, only to have her snub him when he came offering the ring he'd somehow gotten back from Nirmin.

Some said that Idriss, the mayor, killed her to stop her from marrying his son Taysir. Taysir insisted on marrying her, they said, but the mayor couldn't accept his son marrying a woman he himself had slept with. Some said that the mayor hadn't actually slept with her; that because of a diabetic reaction, his virility had failed just as he lowered himself onto her. Some said that Taysir killed her because he couldn't kill his rival for her affections, because his rival was his father, the mayor.

Some said that Dibo, the police chief, killed her because she was sticking her nose into matters that didn't concern her. They said she asked questions about why the younger pupils were constantly being detained and arriving home the next day in a worrying state, their eyes puffy as if they hadn't slept in a week, or maybe as if they'd been sleeping for a whole week. The children used to look, they said, as if someone had given them sleeping pills. As if that someone had perhaps detained them, and given them sleeping pills, and then raped them.

Some said that Yusuf, the doctor at the village clinic, killed her after she took his son to be tested to find out if the story about the sleeping pills was true. Some said that the heavily misshapen and bearded nurse, Nisrin, killed her after she saw the results of the test. They said that Nisrin was the police chief's lover, or maybe she became his lover after that.

Some said that the reverend sheikh Jamil killed her after she caught him coming out of Dibo's house while the police chief was on duty. Some said that Huda, the police chief's wife, killed her after the teacher caught her coming out of the sheikh's house while his wife was in town. Some said that Nahla, the reverend's wife, killed her after the teacher caught her going to the school at night. They said Nahla hadn't gone to town at all: she'd spent the night with Majid, the school's dumb caretaker. Some said that Majid killed her so he would go to heaven for saving the reverend's reputation and the privacy of his household.

Some said that the village gang – Yahya, Thair, Samir, Ziad, Tariq, Wael, Salim and Ibrahim – killed her after they raped her. They raped her, they said, after she caught them robbing the village council’s safe. Some said that Dergham, the head of the village council, killed her because she had caught him robbing the safe after he phoned the gang and pleaded with them to rescue him from a fire in the council building. He then set the building on fire himself so that the gang would be blamed for the theft, they said.

Some said that Atif the beggar killed her because he lost the upstairs room he was lodging in when his landlady, the widow Wafiqa, decided to rent it to her. Some said that Wafiqa killed her because she turned the upstairs room into a whorehouse. Some

said that her pupils ganged up on her in the forest during their school trip and killed her because her lessons were tough, and she was too strict. Some said that Samir, the curious pupil, was the one who pushed her into the valley to see if she would die.

Some said that she had committed suicide after every man and youth in the village had slept with her and every pensioner and boy had hit on her.

These were just some of the stories the children told when their new teacher, a beautiful young woman from outside the village, whose name I can’t remember, asked them what had happened to her predecessor, a beautiful young woman from outside the village, whose name the children couldn’t remember.