

9th Edition

# A SEA

# of words

**COMBATING**

all forms of violence against women

**Short stories by 16 young writers**

**A Sea of Words**

**2016 edition - 9th year**

**Combating All Forms  
of Violence Against Women**

**Short stories by 16 young writers**

**IEMed.**  
European Institute of the Mediterranean

 **Anna Lindh  
Foundation**  
— EUROMED —

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## Foreword

**Senén Florensa.** Executive President,  
European Institute of the Mediterranean

In 2016 we are celebrating the ninth year of the project “A Sea of Words”, jointly promoted by the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation. The objective of the contest over this period has been to help foster dialogue between European and Mediterranean countries through exchange of experiences and knowledge between youths. On this occasion, we have sought to participate in the initiative that declared 2016 the European Year on Combating Violence Against Women, an issue that for us is of special interest because for many years the IEMed has participated in several initiatives and projects to fight against gender inequalities and foster women’s visibility in the Euro-Mediterranean area. In this respect, we should note the work of the FFEM (Euro-Mediterranean Women’s Foundation, in its French acronym).

Thus, yet another year, the European Institute of the Mediterranean wishes to promote exchange of experiences and cultural dialogue through writing in a contest aimed at young writers who, under the motto “Combating All Forms of Violence Against Women”, have created deeply moving stories. Undoubtedly, reflection stimulated by writing can improve awareness based on the need, in the first place, to question our own prejudices and stereotypes and those of people surrounding us to change our view of women and their role in current societies.

We have received over 300 texts by youths (an excellent level of participation) from 32 countries who in very different ways have explored how women are seen and their problems, their lack of a voice and empowerment, and discrimination against them, all aspects that show the violence encapsulated by the contest motto. The response of the participating young writers is characterised by its quality and, very particularly, the emotive nature and harshness of their stories. Indeed, we have been able to read very painful stories, many of them inspired by real events, that through literary language and calling on our conscience and empathy tell us about the difficulties and injustices many women endure in their daily lives. The perspectives are highly diverse, as are the settings of the stories (from developed areas to very deprived environments), but they are all a cry for help that seeks to raise awareness about the injustice and harassment that women face simply for being women.

The diversity of the stories echoes the richness brought about by the existence of different cultures and traditions in the Euro-Mediterranean area. Women are traditionally the depository of this cultural richness passed from generation to generation and that on many occasions is not visible or appreciated but highly vulnerable. Women’s empowerment and the fight for equality and an end to violence are therefore necessary for the development of strong and healthy societies.

The three winning young women in this year’s “A Sea of Words” have convincingly expressed the fighting spirit that we wanted to encourage at the IEMed. The story “Reasons and

Names”, by the Syrian Noor Hariri, set in a small nameless village, features a play of voices speculating about the reasons for the death of a woman. The second winning story, “And Then Smiled the Almond Tree”, by the Tunisian Souha Bakhta, also set in a small village, depicts the struggle of a girl in search of her identity, and the very bitter clash with her society, which expects her to fit in. The third award was for the story “Chicca Is Running” by the Italian Valeria Mingolla, which describes the desperate flight of a young fugitive.

The 16 stories selected in this year’s “A Sea of Words” therefore show the need to combat all forms of violence, even the most subtle, which are entrenched in Mediterranean societies and are sometimes so much the norm that we do not see them. Hence the relevance of literature as a medium of condemnation and a call for reflection.

The enthusiastic response to this year’s “A Sea of Words” renews our faith in the usefulness of and interest in a project that will soon be ten years old and that, year after year, confirms that Euro-Mediterranean youths want to get involved in improving their societies and, above all, to contact and learn from other restless young people like them. In total, since its creation, over 2,000 young writers from Euro-Mediterranean countries have participated in the contest “A Sea of Words” and around 60% have been women. And this growing trend has continued this year: almost 65% of the stories have been written by women.

This shows that we must continue working at the IEMed and the Anna Lindh Foundation, with all the instruments within our reach, to offer young people in the Euro-Mediterranean region a society free from violence, where women can develop freely alongside men.



Award Ceremony of the 2016 Contest “A Sea of Words”

## أسباب وأسماء

نور بسام حريري. سوريا

قيل إن مدير المدرسة كريم هو الذي قتلها بعد أن اغتصبها حيث اغتصبها بعد أن بصقت في وجهه حين حاول الاقتراب منها في غرفة الإدارة. قيل إن زوجة المدير ضحى قتلها لأنها على علاقة بزوجها. قيل إن أحد طلابها مضر قتلها لأنها فصلته وحاكمته حيث فصلته وحاكمته لأنه وضع اللاصق على كرسيها فشق ثوبها. قيل إن زميلتها المعلمة نيرمين قتلها لأنها قضت على حضورها المهني والأنثوي في القرية فلم يكن مصادفة أن ينفصل عنها خطيبها رائد قبل العرس بيومين وأن يتراجع المدير كريم عن ترقيتها لتصبح معاونة له وكل ذلك بعد مجيء تلك المعلمة الغريبة بأسبوعين ونصف فقط. قيل إن رائد قتلها لأنها أغرته بنفسها وتغنجت له حتى انفصل عن خطيبته نيرمين كرماً لها وبعد أن جاء إليها يعطيها الخاتم الذي استرده من نيرمين تنكرت له. قيل إن المختار إدريس قتلها كيلاً يتزوجها ابنه تيسير، حيث أصرّ تيسير على الزواج منها ولكن المختار إدريس ما كان ليرضى أن يتزوج ابنه بامرأة ضاجعها المختار يوماً، قيل إن المختار لم يضاجعها إذ خارت قواه فوقها بسبب نوبة سكري. قيل إن تيسير قتلها لأنه لا يستطيع قتل غريمه عليها لأن غريمه عليها هو أبوه المختار. قيل إن رئيس المخفر ديبو قتلها لأنها تدخلت فيما لا يعنيه حين أثارته مسألة اعتقال الطلاب الصغار المتكرر وعودتهم في اليوم التالي غير طبيعيين، كانوا يرجعون منتفخي الأعين وكأنهم لم يناموا منذ أسبوع أو كأنهم ناموا أسبوعاً، كان أحداً ما أعطاهم منوماً، كأن هذا الأحد اعتقلهم ونومهم ثم اغتصبهم، مثلاً. قيل إن طبيب المستوصف يوسف قتلها حين جلبت ابنه لتحلل له لتتأكد من قصة المنوم. قيل إن الممرضة الدميمة والبدينة ذات اللحية نسرين قتلها بعد أن قرأت التحليل حيث قيل إن الممرضة هي صاحبة رئيس المخفر، بل إنها صارت صاحبه بعد هذه الحادثة.

قيل إن رجل الدين الموقر جميل قتلها كيلاً تفضح بعد أن ضبطته خارجاً من منزل رئيس المخفر أثناء مناوبته. قيل إن زوجة رئيس المخفر هدى قتلها بعد أن ضبطتها خارجة من منزل الشيخ أثناء سفر زوجته إلى المدينة. قيل إن زوجة الموقر نهلة قتلها لأنها ضبطتها متجهة إلى المدرسة ليلاً ولم تذهب إلى المدينة بل قضت ليلتها مع المستخدم الأخرس ماجد. قيل إن ماجد قتلها كي يدخل الجنة لأن موتها سيعني الحفاظ على سمعة الموقر وحرمة بيته.

قيل إن زعران البلدة "يحيى وثائر وسامر وزبيد وطارق ووائل وسليم وإبراهيم" قتلوها عند النبع بعد أن اغتصبوها حيث اغتصبوها بعد أن ضبطتهم يسرقون خزنة البلدية. قيل إن رئيس البلدية ضرغام قتلها لأنها ضبطته يسرق خزنة البلدية بعد أن اتصل بالزعران مستنجداً بهم كي ينقذوه من حريق في البلدية، ثم أشعل الحريق بنفسه لتتقع تهمة السرقة على الزعران.

قيل إن الشحاذ عاطف قتلها لأنها حرمته من العلية التي كانت تؤويه فيها مالكتها الأرملة وفيقة قبل أن تستأجرها هي. قيل إن وفيقة قتلتها لأنها حولت العلية إلى كرخانة. قيل إن طلابها اجتمعوا عليها في الغابة أثناء رحلتهم العلمية وقتلوا لأنها شديدة عليهم في التعليم والعقوبات. قيل إن الطالب الفضولي سمير هو من دفعها إلى الوادي ليرى إن كانت ستموت.

قيل إنها انتحرت بعد أن ضاجعها كل رجال القرية وشبابها وداعبها كل العجائز والأطفال.

تلك كانت بعض روايات التلاميذ الصغار عندما سألتهم معلّمتهم الجديدة والجميلة والغريبة التي نسيث أسمها، عن معلّمتهم السابقة الجميلة والغريبة التي نسي الطلاب أسمها.

## 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.

## ضحك اللوز

سهى بختة. تونس

أنا فتاة، أو شجرة لوز أول الربيع لديها تلك الأجنحة البيضاء الزغبة الصغيرة التي ترفرف بشدة ولا تأخذها إلى أي مكان

نحن سبع شجرات في البيت وطائر... أخي التوأم ... أنا وهو آخر من أنجبت أمي أو بالأحرى هو ... فذاك عيد ميلاده، هو من خطأ أول خطوة هو من ظهر أول سن في ثغره، و هو من نطق أول كلمة ملأت أرجاء البيت بالسعادة. وأنا كنت غير مرئية.. طوال الوقت.

لقد كان لديه هذا العضو الصغير بين فخذه، هذا العضو الذي جعله يذهب إلى المدرسة. أنا لم يكن لدي ذاك العضو الصغير لذلك لم أكن أذهب إلى المدرسة. وبقي راسخا في ذهني أن ذلك العضو، هو من يتعلم، أنه هناك، يكمن العلم والذكاء. فامتنتع طوال الوقت عن فهم أو تعلم أي شيء لأنني لم أكن أملك العضو.. أخي وأبي كانا يمتلكانه... وكانا لذلك ذكيين جدا ويخبراننا بما يريدانه فنقوم نحن البقية بالقيام به...

لم أكن أذهب إلى المدرسة لكنني كنت أجد دائما فرصة التسلل من البيت والذهاب للركض عند الحقول... أنا أحب الركض واكتشفت أنني سريعة عندما هربت من أبي الذي كان يريد أن يضربني... كان يريد أن يضربني لأنني تطوعت مرة لحراسة المرمى فقد كان عدد الصبيان ينقص واحدا... ثم بعد هربي من والدي انتبه جميع الحي لسرعتي ووضعوني في خطة قلب الهجوم... وكنت أسجل الأهداف وأفتح نراعي في الهواء فيتجمع الصبيان حولي ويعانقوني ثم في بعض الأوقات أنزع قميصي وأواصل الركض...

كل مرة أفعل ذلك كان أبي يرغب في ضربي لكنه يركض دون طائل كنت خفيفة جدا وكنت أركض أسرع من الجميع لأختبي في حقل بعيد... حقل اللوزات... ذلك هو أبعد مكان أستطيع أن أذهب إليه، أصل هناك متعبه فأنام. ويرادوني هذا الحلم المرعب... هذا الحلم، تنبت فيه فزاعات غريبة. قرب كل شجرة لوز، فزاعة عملاقة مخيفة تبعد الطيور من المكان ثم يظهر والدي راكضا فلا يتمكن مني لأنني أسرع، فيخرج عضوه الذكري الذي يصبح طويلا جدا كأنه ثعبان يخرج ويتمكن بفضل من الإمساك بي.. عندها أستيقظ بقلب مختنق لكنه نابض بقوة... فأعود إلى البيت بطيئة كغروب الشمس... وأصل سريعا كغروب الشمس أيضا... تسرع أمي بغسل يدي وتغيير ثيابي، ثم تسرع بإخفاء الأدلة حتى لا يعود أبي ويغضب... وإن كل ما يشعرني بالحزن، بعد اليوم السعيد المليء بالأهداف والتنافس والتعرق والصباح، هو وجه أمي الساكن. إنه لا يملك ملامح عتاب أو غضب، أو أي شيء. فقط ذلك الوجه الأبدي الذي اعتدناه وهو يشبه كثيرا وجه الأيام، لا يتغير أبدا هكذا فقط فمها

في مكانه، وعيناها ساهمتان بلا أي بريق. كنت دائما أفكر أن ذلك ربما بسبب الدخان فأمي كانت تصنع الخبز وتبيعه، تجلس في السقيفة تفتح باب المنزل وتفتح بين ساقيهما لتجعل بينهما نارا وتصنع هناك الخبز فيأكل الجميع... لم أكن أرى أمي سوى وهي تصفع كرة العجين داخل الإناء الخشبي كي تجمع الفتاة ويلتصق بالكرة الرئيسية ثم تكوره مجددا... هذا ما تفعله أمي بنا أنا وأخواتي إنها تصفعا ذلك الصفع الرقيق المحكم على مؤخراتنا كي نعود إلى رشدنا ونلتزم بهذه القوانين الصغيرة الاعتيادية المنطقية جدا والتي لا يوجد أي سبب كي نستغرب منها... مثل أن نعد الماء الساخن كي يستحم والدي، مثل أن نغسل ثياب أخينا ونضعها على حبل الغسيل ونجمعها قبل المغيب، لأنه ليس من الجيد أن تظل ثياب الصبيان على حبل الغسيل عند المغيب...

لم أكن أرى أمي سوى وهي تقوم بالعجن، تقوم بتبليل يدها والعجن، تفعل ذلك في صمت وذلك ما يجعلها مخيفة بالنسبة لي، أكثر إخافة حتى من والدي الراكض خلفي. ذلك ما تفعله طوال الوقت. ورغم ذلك كانت توجد أيام نخرج فيها جميعا لنتنزه نزهة قصيرة عند أطراف القرية، يحدث ذلك في اليوم الأول من الربيع، نذهب لاستقباله هكذا نسوي هذه العادة... نقف لنحس النسيم العذب يسري في فساتيننا... وكنت ألتفت كي أتثبت إن كان فستان أمي يموج بالنسيم أو لا... لا أعرف أي سبب يجعلني أعتقد أنها مختلفة جدا، وأنها ربما مصنوعة من شيء صلب.. لكن كنت ألتفت لأجد فستانها متموجا، وأجد وجهها مختلفا إذ تختفي تلك السحنة البنية التي تعشي عينيها، وتظهر ابتسامته تشبهه حكمة الأشجار في الوقوف بصبر لا يمنعا من الاهتزاز الخفيف المرح مع الريح... ظلوا يشاهدون الأفق والشمس ويغنون للربيع أخوتي وأخي، أما أنا فبقيت أشاهد وجه أمي. عند العودة انحنيت أمي وجمعت بعض الأغصان الجافة الصالحة لإشعال النار. ففهمت أنها مازالت تفكر في الخبز وأنها عدا ستعيد وجه الأيام المعتادة.

أتذكر هذا اليوم جيدا، عندما نجح أخي وتخرج من المدرسة الابتدائية وكان الجميع مسرورا، إلا أنا فقد كنت حزينة لأن ذلك يعني لي سيغادر هذه القرية كي يواصل دراسته بالمعهد وأنتي لن أراه كثيرا ولن يحدثني عن الأشياء السحرية التي تحدث في المدرسة... ويعني أن عضو العلم لديه سيكبر.. أما أنا فساوأل الجهل بكل تلك المعلومات والأشياء المثيرة التي سيتعلمها. " لو كان لدي عضو لذهبت إلى الإعدادية في المدينة" قلت لأمي التي انفجرت ضاحكة وظلت تضحك بطريقة هستيرية لم تبد لي مبررة. "نعم" قالت لي وهي تلمح عينيها من الدموع. وبقيت أفكر طويلا أن أخي قد ينال، هناك في المدينة من العلم، ما يجعل عضوه طويلا جدا وتقيلا ويخبئه داخل سرواله وتصبح حركته غريبة وبطيئة وربما قد يضطر إلى حراسة المرمى لمدى العمر... وكل ذلك بسبب العلم والذهاب إلى المدينة... فأعدت التفكير، أنا سعيدة جدا لأنني لا أملك عضوا... ثم رحلت أركض أركض في كل مكان.

ورغم الفزاعات الكثيرة التي تكاثرت حولي، تمكن طائر أخيرا من الحط على أحد أغصاني. لقد كبرت، وعرفت أنه ليس بإمكانني نزع قميصي بعد إحراز الهدف... لقد كبر نهدي وصارا شهيبيين وكنت أعرف ذلك ويبدو أنني لست الوحيدة التي عرفت ذلك، فأمي قادتني إلى ركن في البيت أين

نكس الثياب النظيفة وراحت تجرب عليّ حمالات نهد أخواتي... وقالت لي أنه من الآن وصاعدا عليّ أن أنتبه... لكنني لم أكن أعرف لأي شيء عليّ أن أنتبه، أو كيف عليّ أن أنتبه. ثم كيف تعتقد هي أنني أفهم ما تقوله، وهي التي لم تخاطبني في كل حياتي أكثر من مرتين، أنا الجائزة المجانية المرفقة مع أخي، والتي ككل تلك الجوائز المجانية، توضع على الرف ولا يعرف المرء لأي شيء قد تصلح.

لقد صرت أحب حارس مرمى الفريق الخصم ولا أعرف ما معنى ذلك، أعرف أنه ينظر إلى نهدي، وأعرف أن ذلك يعجبني.

الآن عندما أتذكر، الأسباب التي جعلتني أمارس الجنس للمرة الأولى، إنها مضحكة جدا، كان أمرا غريبا، لم يكن مرعبا، فأنا لم يرعيني أحد من ذلك، لم يكن هناك سوى " انتبه " ولم يبد لي أنه عليّ أن أنتبه من "القيام بذلك" وإلا لكان شخص ما أخبرني... لقد أردت أن أرى ما تحت السروال، كيف انتفخ ذلك العضو الذكي المليء بالمعرفة... أمسكته بين يدي وشعرت أن العلم والذكاء وكل تلك الأمور السحرية قد تنتقل لي بمجرد أن أمسكه. ثم شعرت بشيء ما شيء غريب وجديد منعش ومحبط متوقع ومفاجئ سخّي ومحدود جدا، واعتقدت راسخة أنني الآن صرت ولدا . عن طريق العدوى. وهذا أمر لم يتفطن إليه أحد قلبي، لا إختوتي ولا أمي ولا أي أحد وإلا لصرن كلهن صبيانا وتخلصوا للأبد من القيام بكل شيء ولتمكّن من الذهاب إلى المعهد، المعهد البعيد في المدينة، المعهد خلف حقل اللوز.

ثم تأكدت من النظرية عندما انقطعت العادة الشهرية البيوضة عن زيارتي، كم كنت سعيدة من التخلص من ذلك النزيف الدوري، والذي اعتقدت لمدة طويلة أنه مرض سيطيح بي في النهاية. لقد كنت سعيدة جدا، وقررت أن أخبرهم بذلك أخيرا. لكن ذلك أمر صعب... سيكون صعبا عليهم أن يكون لديهم ولد ثان في العائلة بهذه السرعة. ثم قررت أن أنتظر إلى أن يختفي نهدي. كي يقتنعوا ولا يعتقدوا أنني مجنونة. لكنني ولسبب أهله صرت حاملا، وهذا الأمر لم أستوعبه، كيف صرت حاملا. كيف يعقل أن يحدث ذلك لي أنا . أنا التي أسجل الأهداف، أنا التي أريد أن أصبح رجلا عندما أكبر. كيف حدث ذلك.

أما أمي فصارت تندب حظها عندما أخبرتها أنني صرت صبيانا وأن العادة الشهرية انقطعت، وأني صرت أأخذ الطعام في بطني المنتفخ تماما كوالدي. وأنه عليهم أن يتركوني أذهب إلى المعهد. ثم صارت تضربني وتسالني عن والده. وأنا في الحقيقة لم أكن أعرف. ربما هو الله، فعل بي هذا كي أتأدب، لأنني بنت شيطانية، لأنني لم أرض بأن أظل بنتا إلى الأبد. لم يخطر ببالي أبدا أن الولد السمين بطيء الحركة حارس مرمى الخصم قد يكون والدا لأي شيء فما بالك بابني. وذلك لأن أحدا لم يخبرني كيف تتم مثل هذه الأمور.

وعندما رأيت وقع الأمر على الجميع وبدأت أفهم قررت أن أحتفظ بالصمت وأن أعتبرهم كلهم غير مرئيين. هذه المرة ركضت كثيرا. لكنني لم أتمكن من الوصول إلى الحقل لقد تمكن والدي من بلوغي . نزع حزامه الجلدي الذي تحول إلى ثعبان وراح يضربني ويسألني من والده. لكنني بالطبع لم أخبرهم ، لأنهم غير مرئيين.

أظن بعد ذلك أن أبي توقف عن ضربي لأن يده كانت تؤلمه كثيرا بعد ذلك. ثم أن أخي قد عاد وقد تولى هو مهمة ضربي. وذلك أمر لصالحني ، لأنه لم يكن يؤلمني كثيرا. حتى أنه كان يتحدث إلي. كأنني موجودة ولست غير مرئية. أخبرته أن الله هو والد ابني وأنه ربما قد يعاقبهم جميعهم لأنهم يعاملوننا هكذا. وأظن أن أخي صدقني لأنه توقف عن ضربي مباشرة بعد أن أخبرته بذلك.

في اليوم الموالي، قرر والديّ اصطحابي لطبيب نفسي في المستشفى الموجود في المدينة وقد سرنى أن أرى أمي متجملة واضعة شالا حريريا. همست في أذني أنها المرة الأولى التي تذهب فيها إلى المدينة. وقد كانت مغتبطة وشعرت أنني قمت أخيرا بشيء واحد جيد في كل حياتي. كان أبي واجما وكان ينظر إلي في تحسر ثم قال "إننا لم ننتبه جيدا لهذه الفتاة ، ربما هو ابن الله حقاً، ربما الله يريد أن يعاقبنا"

الطبيب كان طبيبة في الواقع. وجال في خاطري أن هذه المرأة تمكنت من أن تصبح رجلا. وأنتي لا أعلم كيف تمكنت من القيام بذلك. فأنا قد أكون جربت كل شيء من الركض وارتداء قميص أخي ومن نزعه إلى إقحام عضو ذكري داخلي لكنني لم أفجح و عوض أن تسألني صرت أنا من يسألها. فكانت تضحك في خجل من أسألتي ومن ازدحامي بالإعجاب بها. لكنها في النهاية سألتني إن كنت أعجب بالصبيان، فأخبرتها أنني كنت معجبة بحارس المرمى. لكنه لا يمكن أن يكون والد ابني. لأنه ولد صغير بدوره. فضحكت عندما أخبرتها عن العدوى التي اعتقدت أنها أصابتنى وعن العلم التي رأيته يقذف من عضوه الذكري. وقالت لي إن ذلك العضو أبعد ما يكون عن العلم أو المعرفة ودهشت أنا لذلك جدا.

كانت الطبيبة ظريفة جدا وضحكت معها واعتقدت أنه ليس من السيء جدا أن يكون المرء امرأة طوال حياته. كانت أجمل من أمي رغم شال الحرير. حتى أنها وضعت يدها على رأسي. وذلك أمر لم يفعله لي أحد في حياتي. وقالت : هنا ، هنا الذكاء وأنت فتاة ذكية جدا. ثم فسرت لي أشياء كثيرة.

أخبرت والدي بعد ذلك أن جنّنا ما مسني وهو سبب حملي. ولا أعرف لماذا سرّ والدي لذلك، لقد كان حزينا عندما اعتقد أن الله هو سبب حملي ، والآن ها هو يعانقني ويطلب الغفران مني عن كل الضرب الذي تلقّيته عندما عرف أن جنيا هو والد حفيده. ثم كان من الطبيبة أن تخبرهم أن الإجهاض في هذه المرحلة المتقدمة سيكون أمرا خطيرا جدا. فصارت أمي تبكي وقالت أنه سيكون أمرا رائعا أن نحظى بطفل في العائلة. وأنا شعرت بلذة غامرة تسري فيّ. سأكون أم جنّي صغير، أرجو فقط أن يكون لديه عضو صغير شيطاني.

في القرية عندما عدنا، صدق الجميع بسرعة أمر الجني ، بل وقالوا أن ذلك حدث سابقا. ففهمت أن الفزاعات هي المسكينة ... هي المغروسة في الأرض بوجه بسيط وقبيح. أما شجرات اللوز فيحدث أن تثمر بفاكهة لذيذة حتى وإن لم تبرح مكانها، فإن الريح أو جني الريح سيأتي ويزورها. بقيت أتأملها مرفرفة بأجنحة خضراء مرحة . ربما هي لا تريد الذهاب إلى أي مكان ... عند اقتراب غروب الشمس، رحت أركض عودة... لا يجب أن تظل ثياب ابني على حبل الغسيل إلى حين مغيب الشمس.

## Then the Almond Tree Smiled

**Souha Bakhta.** Tunisia

I am a girl. I am an almond tree blooming in early spring, whose small downy white wings, flutter as they may, cannot bear it away.

There are seven trees in our house and one bird – my twin brother. He and I were the last children my mother bore, or to be more precise, he was the last. Our birthday is his. He was the first to take a step, the first to have a tooth come in, and the first to utter a word that filled the house with joy. I was invisible all along.

He had that little organ between his legs that allowed him to go to school. I didn't have one, so I couldn't go. My mind fixed on that organ as the center of learning, where knowledge and intelligence were stored. I could never learn or understand anything because I didn't have the organ my father and brother had. That was why they were so clever, why they could tell us what they wanted done, and why the rest of us would do it.

I didn't go to school, but I was forever on the lookout for opportunities to sneak out of the house and run to the fields. I loved running, and I found out how fast I was the time I ran away from my father when he wanted to beat me. He had caught me playing goalkeeper when the boys were one player short. After I ran away from my father, the whole neighborhood realized how fast I was too, and from then on I played striker. When I scored, I would raise my arms in the air and the boys would gather around and hug me. Sometimes I would take my shirt off and run some more.

Every time I did that my father would try to beat me, but he could never catch me. I was light on my feet, so I could run faster

than anyone else and hide in one of the far-off fields, among the almond trees. That was as far as I could go. I would reach it exhausted and fall asleep, only to have the terrifying dream come again. In the dream, strange scarecrows sprang up beside every almond tree, giant scarecrows that frightened the birds away. Then my father would appear. He couldn't catch up with me because I was too fast, but he would take out his male organ and it would get longer and longer, like a snake, and he would catch me with that.

I would wake up feeling smothered, my heart pounding. I'd creep home as slowly as the setting sun, only to arrive as fast as the setting sun as well. My mother would quickly wash my hands and change my clothes, hiding all clues so that my father wouldn't get angry when he arrived home. The only thing that made me sad, after those happy days filled with running, sweating, scoring, and shouting, was my mother's still face. She didn't look angry or reproachful, she just didn't have any expression at all. Hers was the eternal face of the passing days. It never changed. No spark ever brightened her somber eyes. I always thought it was because of all the smoke from the bread she baked to sell to the neighbors. She would sit out on the terrace, open the door of the yard and spread her legs to kindle a fire between them, where she would make bread for everyone to eat. My mother was always slapping dough in her big wooden bowl. She would shape a roll of dough, slap it back into the main ball and round it out again. That was what she would do to me and my sisters as well.

She would give us a light but firm slap on our backsides to bring us back to our senses and make us obey each and every rule, no matter how small. It never occurred to us to question their logic. One rule was to heat the water for our father's bath. Another was to wash our brother's clothes, hang them out to dry, and take them in again before sunset. It's not good for boys' clothes to be left out on the line at sunset.

My mother was forever making dough. She would moisten her hands, moisten the dough, and remain silent all the while. Her eternal silence was what I found scary, even scarier than my father chasing after me. Despite all this, there were still days when we all made outings to the edge of the village together. We would go there on the first day of spring to welcome it in, as custom demanded. We would stand still and feel the sweet breeze rustle our dresses. I'd look around to see whether my mother's dress was stirred by the wind or not. I don't know why I thought she was so different, as if her dress were solid, but I'd look around to see her dress rustling, and her face would change. The somber expression shrouding her eyes would lift, and a smile would appear, making me think of trees that stand ever patient yet are happy to shake merrily when the wind stirs them. My sisters and my brother would stand there gazing at the horizon and singing to spring, but I'd stand watching my mother's face. On the way back, when she bent down to pick up some dry twigs that would burn well in her fire, I realized that she was still thinking about her bread, and that tomorrow her face would return to normal.

I well remember the day my brother passed his elementary school exams. Everybody was happy except me. I was sad because it meant that he would leave our village to continue his studies. I would hardly ever

see him, and he wouldn't be able to tell me about all the magical things that happened in school. It also meant that his organ of knowledge would get bigger and bigger, while I would know nothing of all the exciting things he was to learn.

"If I had that organ, I'd be going to school in the city," I told my mother. She laughed hysterically, in a way I saw no reason for. "Yes, you would," she said as she wiped the tears from her eyes. I thought for a long time about my brother and all the things he would learn in the city. It would certainly make his organ bigger, thicker and heavier. He would have to hide it inside his trousers and it would hamper his movements. Maybe he'd have to play goalkeeper for the rest of his life. All because he was going to study in the city! On second thought, I was glad I didn't have that organ. I went out and ran and ran all around the village.

Despite the scarecrows springing up around me, a bird finally managed to land on one of my branches. I found I could no longer take my shirt off after scoring a goal because my breasts had grown, and I knew they were attractive. It seemed I wasn't the only one who knew it, because one day my mother took me to where we kept the clean clothes, and tried my sisters' bras on me. She told me that from then on I would have to be careful. I didn't know how I was meant to be careful, or of what. Besides, how could she expect me to understand what she said, when my whole life she had barely spoken to me more than a couple of times? I was the free prize that had been delivered along with my brother, and like most such prizes, I had been tucked away on a shelf because nobody could see any use for me.

I began to like the other team's goalkeeper. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew he kept looking at my breasts, and

I knew I liked that. When I look back on it now, my reasons for having sex the first time were pretty funny. It was strange, but not scary. Nobody had ever told me to be scared of it; I had only been told to be careful. I couldn't have realized what they meant by being careful, not ever having been told. I wanted to see what happened inside the trousers, how that organ would swell with knowledge and intelligence. I grasped it in my hands, thinking that all the knowledge and intelligence would pass to me just by holding it. Then I felt something strange and new: it was invigorating and at the same time frustrating; expected yet surprising. I was utterly convinced that I'd been infected with boyhood, something no one had ever understood before me. If my sisters and my mother had known, they would have all become boys, given up their endless tasks, and gone to that faraway school in the city beyond the almond grove.

I was able to confirm my theory when the horrible time of the month stopped coming. I was delighted to be rid of my period bleeding, which for a long time I thought was some fearsome disease that would eventually carry me off. I was so pleased I wanted to tell them about it, but I knew it would be hard to so suddenly have a second boy in the family. I decided to wait until my breasts went away, so they'd believe me and wouldn't think I'd gone mad. But then, for some unknown reason, I became pregnant. I couldn't make sense of that. How could I have gotten pregnant? How could that happen to me? To me, the goal scorer? To me, who wanted to be a man when I grew up? How could this have happened?

My mother cursed her luck when I told her that I had turned into a boy, that my period had gone away and now I was storing up food in my swelling belly just like my father. I said now she would have to let me go

to middle school. She started hitting me and asking me who the father was. The truth was that I didn't know. Maybe it was God. Maybe He had afflicted me with this so I would behave better. I'd been naughty and hadn't wanted to remain a girl forever. It didn't cross my mind that the other team's fat, slow-moving goalkeeper could be a father of anything, least of all my child. Nobody had explained to me how these things worked.

When I saw how everyone was taking the news, I decided to keep quiet and pretend they were all invisible. I ran and ran and ran, but this time I couldn't make it to the almond grove. My father caught me. He took off his leather belt, which turned into a snake, and began to beat me and ask who the father was. But of course I didn't tell him, because He was invisible.

I think my father stopped beating me only because his hand got very sore. My brother came home and took over for him. That was just as well, because he didn't hurt me as much. He even talked to me as if I was actually there and not invisible. I told him that God was the child's father and that He might punish them if they kept on treating me that way. I think he believed me, because as soon as I said it, he stopped beating me.

The next day, my father decided to take me to a psychiatrist at the city hospital. I was very happy to see my mother wearing makeup and a silk scarf. She whispered in my ear that it was the first time she'd been to the city. She was delighted, and I thought I'd finally done something good in my life. My father, though, was despondent. He kept looking at me with regret, and eventually said: "We didn't look after the girl properly. Maybe it really is God's child and He wants to punish us."

The psychiatrist turned out to be a woman. It occurred to me that if this woman had been able to turn into a man, I should find out

how she did it. I had tried everything: running, wearing my brother's shirt, taking it off, and even sticking a male organ inside me, yet none of it had worked. I asked her questions, rather than the other way around, and she laughed shyly at them, taken aback by how impressed I was with her. Once I'd finished, she asked me if I liked boys. I told her that I had liked the goalkeeper, but he couldn't be the father of my child, because he was young himself. She laughed again when I told her about the infection I had caught, and how I had seen his knowledge leaping from his male organ. "That organ is about the farthest thing in the world from knowledge and intelligence," she told me to my great amazement.

The psychiatrist was very nice. We laughed together and I began to think it might not be such a bad thing to be a woman after all. She was prettier than my mother, in spite of the silk scarf. She even patted my head, which nobody had ever done before. "Here," she said, "this is where intelligence comes from, and you're a very intelligent girl." Then she explained many other things to me.

She told my father that some kind of genie or spirit had touched me, and that was the reason for my pregnancy. I don't know why

my father was happy about that. He'd been very upset when he thought God had caused my pregnancy, yet when he found out a genie had fathered his grandchild, he hugged me and asked me to forgive him for the beating he'd given me. The psychiatrist warned them that an abortion would be extremely dangerous this far into the pregnancy. My mother began to cry and to say that it would be wonderful to have a child in the family. I felt a profound happiness flow through me. I would be the mother of a little genie. I just hoped it would have a little satanic organ.

When we got back to the village, nobody was surprised to hear about the genie. It had happened before, they said. I realized that the scarecrows were the ones to be pitied. They're staked to the ground, and have plain, ugly faces. But an almond tree can send forth beautiful fruit without ever moving from its place, and every so often the wind, or a genie of the wind, will come visit it. I stood looking at the countless green wings as they fluttered joyfully. Maybe the tree doesn't want to go anywhere.

When the sun starts to set, I run back. My son's clothes mustn't be left out on the line when it goes down!

## Chicca sta correndo

**Valeria Mingolla. Italia**

Tra le bianche distese di margherite affamate di sole, appena oltre la periferia della città, Chicca sta correndo.

Le braccia rigide. I pugni serrati.

La sbircia un poco la luna, facendosi largo, a fatica, tra le folte chiome degli ulivi.

Chicca sta correndo e non può fermarsi.

Piccoli solchi, imprecisi come pennellate furtive, marchiano la terra umida al suo passaggio.

Il sudore le bagna la fronte. Innumerevoli piccolissimi cristalli di sale sporgono dai suoi occhi, più neri che mai, per precipitare fino agli angoli delle labbra e poi ancora più giù, lungo il collo innervato.

Raccolti malamente in una coda di cavallo, i crespi capelli castani, seguendo l'ondeggiare del suo corpo le frustano le spalle coperte solo da una leggera camicetta di cotone.

È stanca Chicca.

Corre e continuamente si volta a guardare indietro. Lui c'è ancora, lo vede perfettamente. È troppo veloce.

I seni cominciano a farle male e allora con un braccio cerca di sostenerli mentre con l'altro continua a darsi la spinta.

Il respiro è affannoso, è stanco quanto lei. L'aria arriva dritta nei polmoni passando per la bocca dischiusa e il cuore batte talmente forte che per un brevissimo istante Chicca teme che possa essersi fermato.

Domani c'è scuola. E non ha nemmeno ripetuto bene chimica perché la domenica sera non si studia; si va in centro a passeggiare e poi non si sa mai che becca finalmente quel tipo che le piace e comunque a lei della chimica non gliene frega niente. Vuole fare la hostess.

Chicca ha 15 anni e tra pochi minuti le resteranno solo quelli.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tra le bianche distese di margherite assetate di pioggia, appena oltre la periferia della città, Paolo sta correndo.

Le braccia rigide. I pugni serrati.

Incerti i suoi movimenti, disarmonici: calza una sola scarpa. L'altra, la destra, deve averla perduta. Tornerà a cercarla dopo.

Paolo sta correndo e non vuole fermarsi.

Il calzino di cotone fatica ad avvolgergli il piede: ha rapito i colori al terreno e del terreno ha assunto gli odori.

Nemmeno una nuvola a sbiadire il sole cocente. Con una mano, rapidamente, tira giù la cerniera della felpa e senza fermarsi la sfilata, lasciandola cadere: non fa rumore.

La fronte corrugata separa i folti capelli ricci e scuri dagli occhi color cielo.

È alto Paolo. Alto e magro. È uno di quelli belli e intelligenti lui. Uno di quelli che dopo il liceo andrà per certo all'Università e dopo la laurea lavorerà in uno di quegli ospedali che si vedono solo in tv.

È stanco Paolo ma con il poco fiato che gli resta in corpo urla, svegliando le margherite al suo passaggio.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ferma ai piedi di un grande ulivo Chicca è sfinita. La mano destra preme sulla corteccia, la sinistra è sul cuore, a contenere i battiti impazziti. Le cosce, i polpacci, i piedi tremano come giovani foglie esposte ai venti del nord.

S'accascia e il suolo accogliente l'abbraccia. Chiude gli occhi, piange.

Mi staranno aspettando a casa, spera.

Verranno a cercarmi, prega.

Poi una mano le afferra i capelli e in quell'istante per Chicca non ci sono più colori, luci, contorni. Non ci sono più le stagioni o il Natale o le cene del venerdì sera.

C'è solo un uomo che sta violentando una piccola donna.

Fiato s'impossessa d'altro fiato.

Chicca graffia, morde, piange. Le mani, sporche di terra e sangue, disegnano forme astratte sul corpo umido di quell'uomo senza nome. E non può più urlare perché lui le ha detto che se ci proverà di nuovo allora sarà costretto a ucciderla. E Chicca non vuole morire. Vuole solo tornare a casa.

Gli occhi sbarrati, sempre più neri, si riflettono in quelli di lui: ci è rimasta intrappolata dentro. Non ci sono vie di fuga.

Il peso dell'uomo le comprime i polmoni fino a lacerarne l'anima.

È troppo grande e forte. Le mani callose, ruvide, s'intrecciano attorno al suo minuscolo collo. Lo guarda Chicca. Fissa le rughe profonde sulla fronte, quelle attorno agli occhi. I pochi capelli ingrigiti dal tempo. I denti, serrati. La barba pungente.

L'urlo.

A Chicca non resta nulla. Nemmeno se stessa. Solo qualche ciuffo d'erba tra le mani e la luce della luna a rischiararne il volto pallido. Dalla camicetta glicine è caduto un bottone. Chissà se qualcuno se ne accorgerà. Chissà se qualcuno si preoccuperà di ricucirlo.

L'elastico che le legava i capelli si deve essere perso da qualche parte. Tutto ciò che aveva a dosso ora, caoticamente sparso nel campo, altera l'armonia del paesaggio.

Chicca è immobile. Il collo livido. Gli occhi, sbiaditi, fissano un punto impreciso nel cielo stellato e tra le labbra sottili resta intrappolato un ultimo impercettibile suono.

\*\*\*\*\*

A Paolo gli hanno telefonato.

I suoi.

Piangendo. No, urlando. Urlando qualcosa che avesse a che fare con Dio, con Chicca. C'è un campo. Un mostro. E ancora Dio e Chicca.

Poi, ha cominciato a correre.

Le braccia rigide. I pugni serrati.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tra le bianche distese di margherite, appena oltre la periferia della città, c'è una piccola area sulla quale non cresce più nulla.

Poco più un là, sporco di terra, giace, lucido, un piccolissimo bottone.

## Chicca Is Running

Valeria Mingolla. Italy

Just outside town, through a white carpet of daisies hungry for sunshine, Chicca is running.

Arms stiff. Fists clenched.

The moon catches glimpses of her in hard-won peeks between thick olive branches.

Chicca is running and can't stop.

Tiny dents, as careless as hurried brush-strokes, are pressed into the damp soil as she passes.

Sweat prickles her forehead. Countless salty droplets spring like miniature crystals from her eyes – now darker than ever – to trickle down to the corners of her mouth and along her tensed neck.

Her frizzy brown hair is pulled back into an untidy ponytail that bounces in time to her moving body, slapping against shoulders covered only by a light cotton shirt.

Chicca is tired.

She continually looks behind her as she runs. He is still there; she can see him perfectly. He's too fast.

Her breasts start to hurt and she tries to hold them with one arm. She uses the other to pick up her pace.

Her breath is labored, as tired as she is. She sucks air directly into her lungs through open lips, and her heart is beating so hard that for a split second Chicca fears it may have stopped.

Tomorrow is a school day. She hasn't even properly revised chemistry because Sunday evenings are not for homework, they're for going into the center. Who knows if she might bump into that boy she likes? Anyway, she really doesn't care about chemistry. She wants to be a flight attendant.

Chicca is fifteen years old, and in a few minutes' time that's as old as she will ever be.

\*\*\*\*\*

Just outside town, through a white carpet of daisies hungry for rain, Paolo is running.

Arms stiff. Fists clenched.

His movements are uncertain, clumsy: he's got only one shoe. He must have lost the other one, the right one.

He'll come back and look for it later.

Paolo is running and doesn't want to stop.

His cotton sock is starting to come off, having soaked up the colors and smells of the earth.

Not a single cloud shades the baking sun. With one hand, he quickly unzips his hoodie and, without breaking stride, he pulls it off and lets it fall noiselessly to the ground.

His furrowed brow keeps his thick and curly dark hair out of eyes the color of the sky.

Paolo is tall. Tall and thin. He's one of those handsome, clever types that are bound to go to university straight out of high school. After graduating, he'll work in one of those hospitals you see only on TV.

Paolo is tired, but he uses the little breath he has left in his body to scream, waking up the daisies as he runs past.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chicca has stopped under a huge olive tree, exhausted. Her right hand presses against the bark, her left against her heart, trying to calm its mad beating. Her thighs, calves and feet tremble like young leaves in the northern wind.

She sinks to the ground, giving in to its embrace, then closes her eyes and cries.

They'll be waiting for me at home, she hopes.

They will come and look for me, she prays.

Then a hand grabs her hair and for Chicca there are no more colors, lights, shapes.

No more seasons, Christmases or Friday night dinners.

There is only a man raping a small woman.

Breath possessing other breath.

Chicca scratches, bites, cries. Dirtied with soil and blood, her hands trace abstract shapes on the sweaty body of that nameless man. She has stopped screaming because he told her that if she does it again he will be forced to kill her. And Chicca doesn't want to die. All she wants is to go home.

Her eyes are wider and darker than ever. They are reflected in his. She is trapped inside him. There is no escape.

The man's weight presses her lungs apart, rips out her soul.

He is too big, too strong. His rough, calloused hands squeeze around her tiny neck. Chicca looks at him. She stares at the deep lines on his forehead, around his eyes. His sparse hair, grey with age. His clenched teeth. Prickly beard.

A scream.

Chicca has nothing now, not even herself. Just a few blades of grass in her hands and the moonlight on her pale face. A button has fallen off her lilac shirt. Who knows if anyone will notice? Who knows if anyone will bother to sew it back on?

The elastic band from her ponytail must have come off at some point. Everything she was wearing is now strewn willy-nilly over the field, disturbing the quite order of nature.

Chicca lies quite still, her neck bruised. Her eyes – dulled – stare at nothing in the starry sky, though a final, indiscernible sound remains trapped between her lips.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paolo receives a phone call.

From his parents.

Crying. No: screaming. Screaming something about God, about Chicca. There's a field. A monster. More about God, and Chicca.

That's when he starts to run.

Arms stiff. Fists clenched.

\*\*\*\*\*

Just outside town, through the white carpet of daisies, runs a small patch of ground where nothing grows anymore.

In the dirt nearby glints a tiny button.

## أتعيب الخالق أم المخلوق؟ (برينة من كل التهم المنسوبة إليها!)

جلال الدين سمعان. الجزائر

إهداء

إلى نافيساتو ديالو ومن عشن ما عاشته... وما أكثرهن!  
إلى أخي محي الدين الذي سمح لي بالغياب عن يوم تخرجه من الجامعة فقط لكي أتمكن من إنهاء  
هذه القصة... أحبك!

- ... وهي برينة!

حين تلفظ القاضي بهذه الكلمات، ساد في القاعة ولثوان صمت رهيب تلوى على أعتاب الوجوه مثل  
أفعى واختفى على ملامحها/الجحر؛ بدت هذه الثواني قرونا وراح الجميع ينظر إلى بعضهم بعضا  
وعلامات التعجب بادية على سحناتهم. فكّر محامي المتهمة في أن الأمر ليس إلا خطنا من القاضي  
وأنه قد نطق بحكم قضية أخرى. أما المتهمة مطايشة<sup>1</sup> فرددت بين شفتيها "حتى السجن لفظني" وبقيت  
عالقة في ذهول لا تدري هل تفرح أم تنتظر أكثر علّ القاضي يتراجع معتذرا وينطق بكلمات غير  
التي صدرت منه للتو: "هي برينة".

حين لم يصدر من القاضي أي شيء من هذا القبيل، لم يُنه هذا الصمت إلا زغرودة أم مطايشة قبل أن  
تتخرط في بكاء هستيري وتهوي على كرسيها مغمى عليها... ولكن مطايشة كانت تعلم يقينا بأن كل  
هذا لأجل شرف الدفاع عن النفس لا عنها وبأن "الكَلّ هنا استغرب من برائتي حتى أنا: نعم أيها  
الإخوة كرامازوف، لقد مات الله في القلوب لأن كل شيء أصبح جائز!".

### سنوات كثيرة من قبل

علينا دائما بلوغ سن الصدمة، السن الذي نكتشف فيه أن الحياة ليست من خلالنا بل في تخليها عنا  
أيضا. كان سن الرابعة وقتها، بدأت كطفلة تشعر كأنما هي كائن غير مرغوب به. لا تتذكر بأن أباها  
قد حملها على أكتافه لتلامس الثريا ثم ينزلها أرضا فيتحول إلى حصان تمتطيه دون خوف؛ حتى

<sup>1</sup> اسم شنيع كان إلى زمن غير بعيد يطلق على البنات كاسم رسمي في عدة مناطق من الجزائر كعلامة عدم رضى بهذا  
المولود البنات وهو يعني: المرمية أو غير المرغوب فيها!!

المرّة الوحيدة التي احتضنها فيه بعدما تركها لساعات وحيدة أمام إحدى المحلات ستكتشف لاحقاً بأنه لم تكن إلا مجرد تمثيلية أمام الناس لأنه يومها كان في نيته التخلي عنها هناك وإلى الأبد ولا تدري ماذا حدث بالضبط وجعله يغير قراره ليعود ويرجعها إلى البيت. لا تتذكر بأن أمّها وضعتها في حضنها لتنهال عليها بالقبل، ذلك الدفء الأموي الأنثوي الذي يتدرعها فتفتتح شهيتها على الحياة. كانوا وكأنهم يتحاشون هذا المسخ و بما أنها تريد معرفة الأسباب كأبي طفل يحاول بالبكاء مواجهة محبتهم، لا بد لها من مواجهة ذاتها، مواجهة انعكاسها.. ورغم أن تصرفاتهم كانت مرآة توحى بأنه ثمة خطب ما، لكن لم يكن هذا كاف لتسلم لهذه الغرابة حتى أسلمت للوقوف كعمود للكهرباء أمام مرآة النافذة، و بدل أن تحافظ على طولها تهاوت على الأرض كمن يحاول إخفاء نفسه على الجدار: "أكلّ هذا القبح من أجلي؟ ما الذي تركته للشيطان؟".

لقد امتلأت فجأة بالفشل في أن يحبّها الآخرون، وكمن يستعد للكران تنامي معها ذلك الرفض، فالآخرون هم الجحيم يا سارتر.. نعم! أولئك الذين كلّما تقاطعت معهم ذكروك كم أنك سيء أو كم أنك عطبت جمال المكان. وريثما تتأكد من أنهم يحولونك إلى عدميّ، عليك أن تواظب على كل السبل المؤدية إلى ابتكار الحياة من جديد، حياة تليق بتفاصيلك الممزقة عند كل مقاس حاد لم تفعله لكنه، يا للغرابة، أصبح يعينك وحدك.. لهذا فإنك تفتش عن شعوب تأوي إليها دونما أن يرونك، فمطايشة التي كانت تنتحب كشجرة مقطوعة في فرن، كانت تهرب جذورها إلى ركن بعيد أعده والدها من الكتب و جمعتها أمها داخل علبة كرتون. كانوا شعوباً هادئة تصغي إليهم وهم لا يبصرون، كانت كمن يراقب الحوارات و الأحداث كإله من فوق دون أن يحدث خرخشة في المكان. و على الرغم من أنها تمضي و تحيي في الغرفة إلا أن لا أحد منهم يلتفت ليراه، هي مطمئنة الآن بين دفات الكتب، كمن يستغني عن من حوله بالذين يحلون فيه من جديد...

## أيام معدودات قبل الحادثة

ثم كبرت مطايشة وحدث أن كتبت:

"أنتم الذين أتيتم بي دونما أن تنتظروا موافقة مني، كنت متعة جميلة في تلك الليلة، متعة انتصبت لها كل العروق و زئر لأجلها في كليكما وحشكما الضاري بكل عنفوانه، و حينما هدتنا تركتmani على أبواب تلك الغابة؛ يبدو الكل هنا على وحشيتيه إذ يحققون أصولهم الفرويدية، لكنني أغفر لهم ظهورهم الضاريّ المستحب.. غير أن لطافتهم المصطنعة أمام الغرباء تجعل الوضع كمن يريد تغطية الجبال بحبل من الغسيل مصدقاً ذلك.. أنتم الذين تؤذون الحقيقة أغفر لكم سوء انتصاركم بالكذب لكن وحده الله لم يدع لي وجهاً جميلاً كي أنظر إليه لأطلب مغفرة من ذنب ارتكبته، أم تراه هو من ارتكب فيّ كل هذه الذنوب، و إلى اليوم لم يحدث أن زارني حتى في المنام ليشرح لي الأمر فأغفر له أو أرفض.. هذا البعيد الذي كان في مقدوره لكنه امتنع، كيف يمكن للرؤوف أن يجرح؟ للجميل الذي يحب الجمال أن لا ينصفي؟ إنه المتكبر يستمع إلي و يعدل عن مساعدتي... ثم لماذا أنا بالذات؟".

كان الصباح باكرا حينما استيقظت على الصراخ في الرواق، كأن أحدهم يريد اقتحام غرفتها بالقوة و آخر يدفعه للخلف. و لأنه للتو استيقظت لم تفهم ما يدور من حوار، و مسرعة استقامت في فراشها و أرخت السمع:

- دعيني أريها كيف يمكن لفتاة، مجرد فتاة، أن تكفر بالله بهذه الطريقة.

- إنها قلقة فقط وما كانت لتكتب هذا عن راحة ضمير.

...

...

كان الجدل يتزايد، أيقنت هي أن الورقة وقعت بين يدي والدها، لكنه لم يعد يهمها الأمر، لا التعنيف و لا حتى الضرب.. لقد توقف جسدها كليّة عن الشعور بالأذى، إذ تلقت ما يكفي ليجعل جلدها صلبًا:  
"ماما الأذى داخلي يكبر، فكل عنف خارجي يخيل لي كأن أحدهم يداعبني لا غير".

في الاتجاه المقابل، كانت سهام تلقي بالكرة للصبيّة في الشارع إذ علقت على شرفة غرفة مطايشة، ثم نظرنا إلى بعضهما البعض و تبادلنا ابتسامة ساذجة، ربما تعني صباح الخير أو كم أنت قبيحة أو أي شيء آخر.. و إن لم تسلم عليها يوما في الشارع فإنها على الأقل لم ترهقها ابتسامتها.. ظل الجدل لوقت طويل أمام الغرفة ثم بدأ يتلاشى كأن شخصا ثالثا أمسك بأبيها و أخذه بعيدا. إنهما يتعدان الآن بلا عودة لكن غضبه لازال يملئ البيت حتى حينما غادره، لذلك بقيت عالقة في فراشها إلى أن دخلت عليها والدتها ثم في وسط الحجرة و قفت كأنما إشارات كثيرة تمنعها من التقدم أكثر. إنها تتطلع لهذا الكائن المخنوق الذي لم يدر رأسه إليها، كأنها تريد إيصاله رسالة واحدة: لن أغفر.. لن أغفر. كانت مطايشة تراقب سهام ساهية ثم تنظر نحو السماء كأنها تتبادل الحديث و بعضا من اللوم مع أحدهم غير مرئي..

- إن الله يبتلينا ليختبرنا، ثم إن نجح هذا الامتحان فنكسب الرهان، تقول الأم.

- لم يكن بالأصل ثمة رهان.. الامتحانات غير العادلة لا تعد سوى عقاب.

تستدير إليها الآن فرأت دمعها ينسكب:

- صدقيني يا أمي بهذا الوجه التعيس قضي عليّ. أنا ذلك الكائن مع وقف التنفيذ في مجتمع لا يؤمن سوى بقيمة الجسد. تذكرني يوم أخبرك أخي عن الفتاة التي تعجبه، دون مشقة سألته هل هي جميلة؟، بعدها استرسل هو في الحديث عن تفاصيلها.. أتعلمين ما هو أشد ألما الآن؟: أن لا يكون لك أحد في مكان ما ينتظر حدوثك في حياته.

توقف الحديث بينهما. استدارت مطايشة مواصلة مراقبة سهام و هي تتبادل هذه المرة الابتسامات مع أحدهم قد تراءى الآن إليها بجوار شجرة زان كبيرة، كأنما تكتشف بالصدفة أن لا أحد يجدر الابتسام لها و لو من باب العطف، إنها ابتسمت لشيء لم يحدث..

في المساء خرجت من غرفتها بعد أن تأكدت أن والدها ذهب في اجتماع طارئ خارج المدينة و سيقضي الليلة هناك. من بعيد كانت الأم تغط في النعاس قبالة التلفاز، أما أختها وقد تعثرا بنظراتها فقد أشاحوا بوجهيهما عنها كأنما لا أحد في الرواق. "على أي حال، الحياة لن تتوقف عند هؤلاء" ترددها في استنكار. ثم إنها تنتظر هذه الليلة اتصالا من خالتها نفيسة عن عمل قد أوصتها به. "لم يعد الأمر بهم، سأقبل بعاملة نظافة هروبا من هذا الجو المطبق على أنفاسي، شهاداتي الجامعية التي عملت بجد للحصول عليها كونها آخر أمل لوجه يشبه الخطيئة الأولى لن تجلب لي منصبا محترما. المناصب تمنح لذوات الأجساد المكتنزة والوجوه الجميلة و لأصحاب النفوذ، وبما أنني لا أملك الاثنين فلن أقلق نفسي بما استحق وما أخذت".

في تمام العاشرة ليلا رن الهاتف، الكائن الوحيد الذي نقل لها خبرا مفرحا وهو أنها "تستطيع منذ الغد الالتحاق بعملها الجديد". قالت خالتها نفيسة كما يحلو لها مناداتها ثم أردفت:

- عليك أن لا تتأخري، فاليوم الأول مهم فيه الانضباط.
- أجل سوف أكون في الوقت تماما.
- إذن تصبحين على خير يا م...

لكنها لم تشأ أن تتلفظ بهذا الاسم الشنيع وأغلق الهاتف. ابتسمت بعدها مطايشة من ردة فعل خالتها نفيسة تجاه اسمها، هذا الاسم الذي لم يعد يشكل لها أي عقدة بل وجدته جد ملائم لخلقها.

في اليوم الموالي وفي الساعة الثامنة وقفت مطايشة بجوار خالتي نفيسة، تستمع إلى كل الأمور المتعلقة بمواد التنظيف و بغرف المكاتب و الحمامات و الأماكن التي لا يجب أن تدخلها إلا بوجودها كمكتب المدير مثلا. لم تعر مطايشة اهتماما لهكذا نصيحة، ربما كان الأمر متعلق بأهمية الأوراق. رغم هذا أكدت لها الأمر لأكثر من مرة ومضى كل في عمله.

لم تتباطأ الأيام وكما المعتاد كان الحنف مسرعاً، كقطار في اتجاه محطته الأخيرة، إذ كانت تتحنى قليلا ماسكة أداة التنشيف حتى تجده يقف أمامها كأنه تسحب على رؤوس أصابعه، وفي ارتباك تستقيم ثم تحاول في حرج تغطية صدرها.. كان الأمر لوهلة تظنه صدفة، لكن الصدفة لا تتكرر و هذا ما جعلها تخبر نفيسة، فردت أن لا أحد يعمر طويلا هنا إلا من لم يعد لهم ما يخسرونه: "الشرفاء يعيشون الآن في منازلهم، قد حذرتك من أول يوم". تراجع للخلف وردت: "هل يستطيع رجل سوي مجامعة هذا المسخ؟! وفي ثقة تامة أخبرتها نفيسة أن أمثال هؤلاء لا يبحثون عن الوجوه، بل ما تخفيه... الثقب.

## في المحكمة مرة أخرى

إنها لا مرتبة وكل هؤلاء الذين يعبرون حياتها يقفون اليوم ليشاهدوا منظرا غريبا: الفتاة التي لم تستطع الدفاع عن وجهها تجرأت على القتل! و لأنهم ينظرون الآن إليها بأصوات عالية ثم تقرأ على

شفاهم نكات بديئة. يرجح أن تخرج هي من هذه القاعة مخدوشة كأرنب حاول القفز فوق مقوره، لكن لا أحد يبلي الآن البلاء الجيد فالأم تزداد تبجحا أما الأب و قد غرق في التأمل فإنه يحاول كسر قلبها من جديد فيدفعها بقوة نحو الخارج. لم تكن المرة الأولى، كانت نظرتها تحاول قول هذا الشيء له دون إحداث ضجيج، لكن القاضي أوقفها طالبا منها أن تتوجه معه نحو مكتبه، كان الأمر شبيهة أينما وجدت مطايشة وعليه رافقتها والدتها حتى نهاية الرواق..

### ثم نكتشف أن في داخل كل منا قاتل غير معلن

إن الذين يولدون و في أفواههم ملاعق من ذهب في إمكانهم التوجه إلى وجهات عدة في أي وقت شاءوا، أما الذين خبروا الحرمان فإن هم تأخروا عن مواعيدهم المحددة فلن تستطيع ملعقة من قصدير الدخول لأفواههم.

تعد أصابعها في الفراش و هي تكرر جملها، "الآن يجب أن أستيقظ.. الآن عليّ أن أحضر نفسي.. لا أستطيع شرب فنجان القهوة، لقد قضيت عشر دقائق أراقب الشارع و سهام تعود باكرا خفية.. الآن عليّ أن أتوجه للعمل.."

ثم بعدها يستدير القاضي ليخاطبها من جديد : إن تبرنتك ما هي إلا إنصاف لكلّ اللواتي الآن، وأنا أنطقُ بذلك الحكم، هنّ في مكان ما ليس ببعيد شاعت الظروف عليهن. في هذه اللحظة بالذات، هنالك امرأة ما لم تستطع الدفاع عن نفسها. بعدها شهقت مطايشة كأنما أشياء كثيرة تهاوت من علو فوقعت على صدرها الضعيف ككأس فهشمته.. إنّه يتقدم إليها بينما هي كانت تحاول مدّ يدها نحو المنظف، وعلى بعد خطوتين منها علق بنطاله في الدلو فانقلب محدثا ضجة جعلتها تستدير بسرعة كأنما كانت تستدير نحو حقتها.. كان يواصل التقدم بينما هي تتراجع للخلف مرتعدة، كانت تتوسله بكلتا عينيها لكنّه بدا كأنه لا يرى منها سوى ارتجاف الصدر شعفا.. لا خوفا، فاذا تقدّم حتى التصق بها صرخت لكن ما أبعد صرخات القبو! فحيث ما استطاع لمسها، لم يتوان في سحبها دون رافة. كان يقض على رقبتها كأنما مصاص دماء يبحث عن غايته، ورغم جثته الضخمة لكنها لم تستسلم. كانت تتلوى من بين ذراعيه كماء يحاول التسرب من بين الأصابع ولأن المكان كان قد ارتوى تماما جراء سقوط قنينة المنظف على الأرض من يدها حينما كان يهم بمهاجمتها، فإن محاولته الانحناء قليلا و مد يده ليرفع عنها ثوبها جعلتها تركله و قد ساعدت لزاجة الأرض على فقدان توازنه، فهوى بكل جسده على غفلة. ولأنهما كانا قريبين جداً من الدرج المفضي إلى الباب الخلفي فإن رأسه قد وصل تماما حيث لا يمكنه العودة من جديد، فانتشر الدم في كل الأرجاء..

### بعد المحكمة

كان القاضي ينظر إليها عن كثب وهي تغادر مكتبه كطير قطعوا جناحيه ثم بعدها لم يعد من الممكن له الطيران، ومع هذا سيظل يُطلق عليه لقب طائر وكلما رأى في الفضاء سرّباً ذكره بعجزه.. ذلك

العجز الذي تفاقم سريعاً بمسافة قصيرة، المسافة ما بين المحكمة و الطريق، كان عليها أن لا تتوقف حيث توقف الآخرون ينتظرون إشارة للأمان فيعبروا. لم يعد هؤلاء يشبهونها فما جدوى الامتثال

لطبائعهم؟ كانت كمن يحاول المرور من حياة لحياة أخرى، إنها تعبر الآن حاجزها و على غفلة من والدتها واصلت دون توقف خطاها نحو اللارجعة، نحو اللاعودة... كان المنظر مروعاً، فقد هسمتها الشاحنة في ثانية كبالون انفجر من المآسي. حين نزل السائق خائراً على الأرض واضعا يدها على رأسه من شدة المنظر، قال عابراً: ما ذنب هذا الغريب في هذه الجريمة؟ رد آخر: القدر يورط من يشاء حين يريد تحرير من شاء. وهناك، عجوز على كرسي الانتظار تنظر من بعيد و تسأل كلّ الراكضين نحو الحادث: ما الذي حدث، كثيرون يتهامسون ولا تفهم شيئاً فتعود إلى أصابع يدها تتأمل فيهم عمرا بأكمله... أما والدتها فكانت تصرخ: لقد قتلت ابنتي بينما تضمها بشدة إلى صدرها، حينما رأت على حمالة صدرها شيئاً فتوقفت عن الاهتزاز و تهجّت ضميرها كأنما كتب بالدم، لا يكاد يقرأ: "قتلتني أمي..."

القاضي يراقب من نافذة مكتبه في الطابق العلوي من المحكمة ويكتشف أن في الحياة لا يكفي أن تكون بريئاً. أما والدها و الذي جلس على قارعة الشارع هادئاً يتلقى نظرات الناس كالسكاكين فإنه غاب في صمته، ربما يفكر فقط بالعار لا بخسارة كائن منه... ابنته.

هي مستلقية الآن بين هذه الحشود، كأنما أخيراً هنالك شيء جعل البشر يهتمون لأمرها.. و إذ تركت كلاماً على حائط الزنزانة المؤقتة، ستقرأه بعد خمس سنوات و بضعة أشهر امرأة:

"إن كان الموت وسيلة أخرى للنجاة، فلنجر به حين لا نجد طوق نجاة يأخذنا بعيدا عنه، وها أنا مع كلّ تلك المعوقات الدينية أقدم عليه كأنما أقدم على الصلاة، ففيها الخلاص من الذنوب أما في صلاة الموت فإنه الخلاص الأبدي من الذنوب، وإن كنت سألقاك يا الله أجلاً فإنني سأهرول إليك، وإن كنت قد أمرت بمجيئي فإنني سأسلبك حق أخدي متى ما تشاء".

ثمّ عادت ورسمت دائرة حول جملتها على الحائط "بريئة من كل التهم التي نسبت إليها" ونامت كأنما عثرت الآن على الطريقة الوحيدة التي يمكنها من خلالها إخبار مطايشة بأن خالتها نفسية أيضاً قد تحررت... بالاعتقال.

تيزي نبراهم، الجزائر

## Do You Blame the Creature or its Creator? (Innocent of all charges)

Djellal Eddine Semaane. Algeria

*Dedicated to Nafissatou Diallo and  
the many who have suffered what  
she suffered  
And to my brother Mohieddine,  
who allowed me to miss his graduation  
just to finish this story:  
I love you!*

### Innocent of all charges!

“Not guilty!”

As soon as the judge uttered the words, a terrible silence fell in the courtroom. It snaked its way across the faces of all those present for a few seconds that felt like centuries. They stared at each other in astonishment. The defendant’s own lawyer thought that the judge had got mixed up and pronounced the verdict from another case. Mutayisha,<sup>1</sup> the defendant, muttered to herself: “Even the prison won’t have me!” She stood dazed, not sure whether she could feel happy or should wait to see if the judge excused himself and said something else instead of “Not guilty!”

When it became clear that the judge wasn’t going to say anything more, the silence was broken by a trill of joy from Mutayisha’s mother that quickly collapsed into hysterical tears before the woman passed out in her seat. But Mutayisha herself knew that her mother just wanted to be seen to defend herself, not

<sup>1</sup> Mutayisha: a repulsive name that until recently was given to girls in some rural areas of Algeria as a sign that the parents were not happy to have a female child. It means “cast aside, undesired.”

her daughter. “Everybody here was surprised by the verdict,” she thought, “myself included. Yes, dear brothers Karamazov, God is indeed dead, for everything is now permissible!”

### Many years earlier

We have to arrive at the age of shock, the age when we realise that life is not just about us, but also, sometimes, about leaving us aside. The child was four years old when she began to realise that she was unwanted. She couldn’t recall her father ever lifting her onto her shoulders to touch the lamp in the ceiling, or getting down on his knees to become a horse she could mount without fear. Even the one time that he hugged her was after he had left her alone outside a shop for several hours. She would later find out that the hug was just for show: he had intended to abandon her there and be rid of her for good. She didn’t know why exactly he had changed his mind and come back for her. She couldn’t recall her mother ever hugging her and showering her with kisses. She never tasted the maternal affection that gives children an appetite for the world and arms them for it at the same time.

They seemed to be trying to avoid this deformed creature. Like any child, she wanted to know why, so she tried to confront their love with tears. But in the end, she had to confront herself – she had to confront her reflection. Their behaviour was mirror enough to show that there was something wrong. But that wasn’t enough to resign her to being a freak, until she steeled herself and stood like

a ramrod in front of her reflection in the window. She didn't stand there long, but leapt away to hide against the wall. "My God, is all that ugliness for me? Could I not have spared some for the devil?"

She became suddenly incapable of being loved. She was prepared to be rejected, and so rejected she was. Hell, as Sartre said, is other people. Indeed! All those people who every time they came across you reminded you how awful you were or how you spoiled the look of the place! As you've realised how they're all reducing you to nothing, you have to keep trying in every way possible to reinvent the world, a world that would suit your torn features. It wasn't you who tore them but, strange to say, the fact that they're torn has become your sole responsibility. So you search for a people you can take refuge with, somewhere the others can't see you.

Mutayisha, as bereft as an uprooted tree seeking somewhere to lay down new roots, found a hideaway: the books her father had bought and her mother had packed away into a cardboard box. They were a quiet people: she could listen to them without them staring at her. She could survey their happenings and their conversations from on high, like a god, without making any noise among them. Even though she was constantly going in and out of the room, none of them ever turned to look at her. Mutayisha became at ease between the leaves of the books, like one who renounces the people around him because he has found new friends to replace them.

### **A few days before the incident**

Then Mutayisha grew up, and she wrote:

"You who brought me here without asking my consent, I was a night of pleasure for you then. I was a pleasure for which all veins in your bodies stiffened, and the voracious beasts in each of you roared with all

their might. And when you had grown still you left me alone on the edge of this jungle. All those here appear at their most savage because they are realising their Freudian nature. I forgive them their crowd-pleasing voracious appearance. But their feigned kindness to strangers is like trying to conceal the mountains with a line of washing, and believing that it will work. Those of you who are tormenting the truth, I forgive you your deceitful victories. But God alone did not give me a beautiful face so that I could stand before Him and beg forgiveness for my sins. Was it perhaps He who committed all these sins against me? To this day He has not come to me, even in a dream, to explain all this so that I could decide whether or not to forgive Him. Far away though He is, He could have done that, yet He did not. How can the Merciful be cruel? How can the Beautiful, who loves beauty, not be just to me? In His arrogance, He listens to me but does not aid me. Why me?"

It was early in the morning when she was woken by shouting in the corridor, as if someone was trying to break into her room and someone else was holding them back. Barely awake, she couldn't immediately make sense of the conversation. She quickly sat up in bed and strained her ears to catch it.

"Let me show her what happens when a girl, a mere girl, commits blasphemy like that!"

"She's just anxious. She wasn't in her right mind when she wrote it."

The argument got louder. She concluded that the piece of paper must have found its way to her father, but the yelling and even the prospect of a beating didn't bother her. Her whole body had given up feeling pain. Enough pain can toughen the skin: "As long as my inner pain still grows, all bodily violence seems no more than a caress."

Looking in the opposite direction, she saw Siham throwing a ball to the boys in the street. The ball went onto Mutayisha's balcony. The two girls looked at each other and exchanged a naive smile that could have meant "Good morning," or "How ugly you are!" or any number of other things. If one day she didn't greet her in the street, she would at least be spared a smile. Outside her room, the argument was still going on. Eventually, it began to fade, as if a third party had taken her father by the arm and drawn him away. The two voices grew distant, but her father's anger still possessed the house until he left for the day. So Mutayisha stayed in bed until her mother came into the room and then suddenly stopped in the middle of it as if halted at a red light. She looked at the strangled creature that didn't turn its head towards her, as if trying to send a single message: "I'll never forgive you." Mutayisha was absent-mindedly shifting her gaze between the street outside, where Siham stood, and the sky, where she seemed to be carrying on a conversation with some invisible party, or perhaps castigating them.

"God sends us troubles to test us. If we succeed we'll win the prize," her mother said.

"There wasn't any prize to begin with. Unfair tests are no more than a punishment," the girl replied.

She finally turned towards her and her mother saw her tears flowing down.

"Believe me, mother, this face has done for me. I've received a suspended sentence to live in a society that only values the body. Do you remember the day my brother told you about the girl he liked? Without any hesitation you asked him: 'Is she beautiful?' And he waxed lyrical about all her features... Do you know what is most painful, mother? That there's nobody, anywhere, waiting for you to come into his life."

Their conversation halted. Mutayisha turned back in the direction of Siham, who was now exchanging smiles with someone who must have just come into sight near the big beech tree. It was as if she suddenly realised that nobody could be bothered smiling at her, even from mere kindness. She had smiled for something that hadn't happened.

She left her room in the evening, once she knew for sure that her father was attending an urgent meeting in another city and would spend the night there. Somewhere far away her mother was drowned in slumber in front of the television. She caught the eyes of her brothers but they quickly looked away as if there was nobody there. "Well, neither of their faces are going to launch any ships either," she thought in disgust. Anyway, that night she was expecting a phone call from her aunt Nafisa about a job she had recommended her for.

"I'll put up with being a cleaner to get away from this suffocating environment," she thought. "I may have thought that the university degrees I worked so hard for would be the only salvation for a face that looks like original sin, but they haven't got me a good job. The good jobs go to women with shape-ly bodies and beautiful faces or people with good connections. Since I don't have any of those qualifications I won't worry myself about comparing what I'm entitled to with what I've got."

At precisely ten o'clock in the evening the telephone rang. It was the only entity in the house that ever brought her good news. The news this time was that she could start her new job in the morning. Then her aunt added:

"You mustn't be late. It's very important to be on time the first day."

"Yes, of course. I'll be there exactly on time."

"Good night so, Mu..."

But her aunt didn't want to pronounce the loathsome name, and put the phone down instead. Mutayisha smiled at how her aunt reacted to her name. It no longer caused her any psychological difficulty: in fact, she found it extremely fitting for how she had been created.

At eight o'clock the following morning, Mutayisha stood beside Aunt Nafisa and listened to all the instructions about cleaning fluids and the various offices and bathrooms and the places that she should only enter if her aunt was with her, such as the manager's office. Mutayisha didn't pay much attention to that particular instruction, which she assumed was because they kept important documents in those offices. But her aunt repeated it several times. Then the two women set to work.

The days went by fast and, as is its custom, doom came quickly, like a train speeding towards its final destination. She was bending over slightly one day, the polishing cloth in her hand, when she found him standing in front of her as if he had come in on his tiptoes. Taken by alarm, she straightened up and in embarrassment tried to cover her chest. For a moment she thought it was an accident. But accidents don't happen repeatedly, so she told Nafisa about it.

"Nobody stays here long unless they've nothing left to lose," her aunt replied. "You won't find any honourable people outside their own houses these days. I warned you right from the start."

She took a step back and replied: "Could any sane man want to have sex with a creature like me?"

Her aunt calmly informed her that such people weren't looking for faces, but for what's hidden: the holes.

### **In the court once more**

She was invisible, and all those who had crossed paths with her had now come to see

a strange sight. The girl who couldn't protect her own face yet dared to kill a man! Now they were looking at her and talking loudly. She could read the dirty jokes on their lips. She was expected to leave the courtroom in a bad way, like a rabbit that's tried to jump too high. But none of them could stand the test. Her mother became more and more boastful, while her father was immersed in thought. He was trying to break her heart again. He gave her a violent shove towards the exit. She tried to tell him silently, with a look, that it wasn't the first time. The judge stopped her with a request to go with him to his office. Mutayisha going anywhere could raise suspicions now, so her mother accompanied her to the end of the corridor.

### **In which we discover that inside each one of us is an unannounced killer**

Those who are born with a silver spoon in their mouth can go wherever they like whenever they like, but those who have experienced deprivation won't be able to get even a tin spoon inside their mouths if they miss their scheduled appointments.

She counted her fingers under the bedclothes and repeated her phrases: "I have to get up now... It's time to get ready... I can't drink coffee, I've spent ten minutes watching the street and Siham has secretly sneaked home early... It's time to go to work."

Then the judge turned back towards her and started speaking again: "Your verdict is simply justice for all the women who, at this moment when I pronounce it, not far from here, are suffering due to what their circumstances have forced on them. At this very moment, there's a woman somewhere who's not able to defend herself." Mutayisha sighed as if a whole load of things had fallen from somewhere overhead, landed on her breast and smashed to pieces. He was com-

ing towards her as she tried to reach for the cleaning fluid. When he was two steps away, his trousers snagged on her bucket and it fell over, raising a din that made her turn around as if she was turning towards her doom. He carried on towards her and she stepped back, trembling. She was pleading with him with her eyes but he seemed to see only a breast that was trembling with passion, not with fear. He kept coming until he was right up against her. She screamed, but screams don't carry far in a basement. Now that he could touch her he didn't hold back, but pulled at her without mercy. He bit her neck like a vampire seeking sustenance. Despite his powerful build, she didn't give in. She twisted from between his arms like water flowing out between the fingers. The place had been covered in cleaning fluid after she dropped the bottle while trying to fend him off. He stretched out his hand to try and lift her dress, and she gave him a kick. The slippery floor foiled his efforts to right himself, and down he went with all his weight. Their struggle had taken place right beside the steps leading to the back door, and his head hit somewhere it wouldn't come back from. Blood spread across the floor.

### After the hearing

The judge watched her intensely as she left his office. She looked to him like a bird whose wings had been clipped. It would never fly again, yet people still called it a bird, and every time it saw a flock of its fellows in the skies it would be reminded that it was crippled.

In the short distance between the courtroom and the street, the sense of being crippled swelled.

It didn't make sense to stop with everybody else on the corner waiting for the green light. She no longer resembled them in any

way, so what was the use of acting the same as them? She seemed to be crossing from one world to another. She was passing her barrier. Taking her mother unawares, she kept on walking to a point of no return.

It was a horrible sight. The lorry crushed her in an instant, like a balloon burst by sorrows. When the driver got out and, overcome by what he could see, sank to his knees putting his hands on his head, a passer-by said: "What's that stranger done wrong?" Another replied: "Fate strikes whoever it wishes when it decides to free someone else!"

An old woman sitting at the bus stop watched from a distance and asked the people running towards the scene: "What's happened?" They were whispering to each other, but she couldn't understand anything, so she returned to staring at her fingers for a live-long age.

"You've killed my daughter!" Mutayisha's mother shrieked, hugging her tightly to her breast. But then she saw something on her daughter's bra that made her stop trembling. Her conscience spelled the letters out as if they were written in blood. It could just about make them out: "My mother killed me."

The judge, watching from his office window on an upper floor of the court building, discovered that in this world it's not enough to be innocent. But her father, sitting in the middle of the street and receiving looks like knives from all around, was plunged in a distant silence. Maybe he was only thinking of the shame of it, and not that a life had been extinguished – his daughter's life.

She was stretched out now in the middle of all that crowd, as if finally she had been able to do something that made people pay attention to her. And she had left her words on the wall of the holding cell, where another woman read them five years and a few months later.

“If death is another way to be saved, then let us try it, since there’s no lifeboat to take us far away from it. Here I am, ready for it, despite all these religious handicaps, as if I was preparing for prayer. For prayer may save us from sins, but the prayer of death saves us from all sins forever. And if, O God, I was to meet you later, here I am hastening

towards you. And if you ordered me to come, here I am taking away your right to decide when you should take me.”

The woman drew a circle around her words on the cell wall: “Innocent of all charges.” Then she slept, as if she had at last found the only way of telling Mutayisha that her aunt Nafisa too had been freed... by being jailed.

## Lice

**Mira Petrović.** Hrvatska

Odmah pri ulasku u bolničku sobu rukama prekrivaju usta, Linda ne zna zašto. Kažu:

„Sve će biti u redu.“

„Gad će platiti za to.“

„Može se i bez baleta.“

Kažu, lice se može rekonstruirati, medicina je napredovala, sve se dâ popraviti. Evo, Marija sad ima bujnije usne, a Evina majka si je ugradila bolju stražnjicu. Ovo je ipak doba žena, sve to potvrđuje – glazbeni spotovi, novine, plakati, showbiz politika. Novo tijelo može se naručiti kao u restoranu, samo biraj; po zakonima ljepote medijskih manipulacija. Zato ne brini, Linda; opet ćeš biti lijepa. Brige nemaš, identitet ti je siguran.

Linda ih svo to vrijeme gleda u čudu; ne razumije o čemu pričaju. To su njezine kolegice iz kazališta – ne poznaju se dovoljno dugo da bi jedna drugoj davale opskurne savjete koje uostalom nitko ne traži. Zajedno su pripremile balet *Tramvaj zvan čežnja* i to im je jedina poveznica, ishodište međusobne netrpeljivosti. Ona ima ulogu razmažene neurotičarke DuBois, na kojoj joj sve zavide i zato je i mrze, zato govore takve pizdarije o izgubljenoj ljepoti, samo da bi je uznemirile. Sve su one htjele biti glavne; iako su pred njom na audiciji glumile da im je drago, prijateljski su se smješkale i ljubile obraze. A tek sad im je drago, Lindi je jedino to jasno; drago im je tek sad kad je u bolnici i noga joj je u gipsu, ruka je slomljena, a one govore o uništenoj ljepoti – kakva ljepota? Za par mjeseci, eto je opet u baletnim papučicama i u glavnim ulogama koja će ih sve pomesti poput vihora. Zašto je onda gledaju s takvim sažaljenjem u očima?

„Tko je to napravio?“, pitaju je milo, pravi je to *baby talk*, a Linda govori „što?“ „Pala sam“, kaže, „nesretan slučaj, zar niste vidjele?“

Tišina je sve samo ne ugodna. U vazama je cvijeće, na krevetu bombonijera. Želi uzeti jednu pralinu, ali ima osjećaj da ne može otvoriti usta. Usna joj je otečena i svaka riječ je napor, bori se da ne frflja, još joj samo to treba. A premijera je večeras i najradije bi se ubila. Njezina zamjena je tu u sobi, među njima, i već likuje; tko bi joj i zamjerio – i Linda bi se tako ponašala da su uloge obrnute, sakrila bi sreću u pogledu lažne samilosti, potapšala bi je po ramenu kao što ova i radi i usput govori, „sve će se srediti; ako ništa drugo, uvijek možeš raditi koreografije.“

„Ali vježbat ću“, kaže Linda. „Opet ću biti ona stara.“ Nitko ništa ne odgovara. Samo najhrabrija među njima kaže, „jedino ako budeš držala masku na licu, Linda.“

„Ma o čemu vi?“, pita Linda jer već joj je dozlogrdila ta šarada. „Koja maska?“

„Zar se stvarno ne sjećaš?“, kaže jedna.

„Zar ga nisi prijavila?“, kaže druga.

„Nisam imala koga“, kaže Linda. Sad je već vidno uznemirena. Ovo je neka paralelna stvarnost u kojoj je zapela. Zove medicinsku sestru, pita je da joj donese ogledalo; „donesite mi ogledalo, može i neko malo, odmah, molim vas“ – što je to tako strašno da se svima oko nje lice trza?

„Polako, dijete“, govori medicinska sestra kao da je maloumna. „Još nisi spremna.“ U kojem se hororu ona ovo našla? Kad je opet postala dijete koje svi tetoše i pred njim negiraju što je istina?

„Recite mi što se događa!“, viče. „Što se događa, jebem vam mater?“, viče i pipa lice, a osjeća samo zavoje, samo zavoji na njezinome licu, licu koje je uvijek bilo najljepše, svi su joj to govorili – tvoje lice, nije samo tvoj pokret, tvoje lice. Još kad je bila mala, pristupili su joj neki ljudi iz modne agencije, rekli su joj da je savršen proizvod, *che bella roba*, rekli su joj jer su bili Talijani, iz Milana, i njezina majka koja je bila s njom dok su kupovale haljinicu za ljeto one godine kad je tek navršila šesnaest, oduševljeno je to prihvatila; poslala je s njima neka ide, neka živi – neka zarađuje na tome licu koje je Bog isklesao u zabranjenom savršenstvu. Ali Linda je rekla ne nakon samo par pokušaja. Linda je odabrala balet, a lice ni tu nije bilo naodmet. Lice nigdje nije naodmet. Pa kad te zaustavi policija zbog prebrze vožnje, malo se nasmiješ i kazna izostane. Kad uđeš u banku, dobiješ kavu i osobnog bankara koji će ti na kućnu adresu donijeti novu karticu, samo da se ne gnjaviš i da te još jednom taj bankar vidi. Da te počasti pićem. Da ti napravi uslugu, koju god hoćeš. Druge su govorile da se ševi za uloge, ali njoj to nije trebalo; lice je sva vrata otvaralo i to je bilo dovoljno, povećavalo je gledanost u Splitu u kojem kultura ne vrijedi nimalo. A sad odjednom svi hrle u kazalište uživati u baletima jer to je tehnika, to je tijelo, to je – lice.

„Kažite, preklinjem vas!“, viče Linda gledajući užas na licima svojim kolegica, na licu medicinske sestre; neko gađenje i samilost izmiješane kao u lošem koktelu koji ostavi samo gorak okus u ustima, i srce joj strašno lupa pa misli da će umrijeti, a onda odjednom osjeća mir, stupor; netko joj ruku polaže na krevet držeći upravo upotrijebljenu injekciju, kapci su joj otežali i sve nestaje u magli. Zastor je pao, aplauz izostao; sjećanja su samo manipulacija, negiranje, iluzija koja je sakrila strahote koje su se dogodile sinoć na proslavi rođendana jedne od kolegica, iako su proslave nešto veselo, jučer su bile sprovod, na napuštenoj farmi u kojoj je bilo svega i za jesti i za popiti a prostor je dušu dao i za plesanje i za skakanje i za ludi život u kojem se nitko ni za što ne mora brinuti, sve se raspalo. *Don't worry about a thing. Stay up all night to get lucky.* Osjećala se dobro tu večer. Pripreme za predstavu su bile gotove i zaslužila je provod.

I njezin partner je bio s njom te večeri. Ipak se radilo o društvu s posla te on nije mogao izostati. No društvo je bilo šaroliko, mogla se izgubiti u masi. Nije joj smetao, ali bilo bi joj draže da se nije pojavio. Kao kad te iritira zanoktica. Ne osjećaš je a opet je vidiš. Znao je s njom koketirati od dana kad ga je upoznala. Bio joj je dosadan. Možda čak problem nije bio u njemu kao njemu, kad bi otišla malo dublje u analizu. Jednostavno u zadnje vrijeme nije htjela biti s muškarcima. Posvetila se plesu i u njemu je pronalazila odgovor svojih žudnji. Možda je baš zato tako dobro glumila ovu ulogu – hiperseksualnu neurotičarku koja se gubi između mašte i realnosti, potpuno nezadovoljenu. Linda nije doživjela orgazam tko zna otkad, a osjećala se, kao nikad prije, u dosluhu sa svojom seksualnošću – hiperosjetljiva. Pomislila je čak da taj njezin osjećaj nema veze sa seksom, već s činjenicom da sebe prihvaća takvu kakva jest i da je to ispunjava. Postala je Narcis zapravo. Ujutro bi se pogledala u ogledalo i vidjela lice s naslovnice. Bilo je to nešto predivno; davalo je krila, raspupavalo snove.

Večer je protjecala sporo. Mjesto je bilo zapušteno i ta živost koju su sa sobom donijeli nije mogla dokinuti depresiju čitavog mjesta. Pekli su meso i gutali ga poput proždrljivih životinja. Linda nikad nije bila naročiti fan hrane. Jela je da bi preživjela, a ne da bi se nativila. Na-

stojala je sakriti gađenje pred tolikim natrpavanjem preko svake mjere. Ali zato je previše pila da to nadoknadi, jer neki oblik neumjerenosti danas nikoga neće preskočiti. Stalno je plesala, zavodeći sve oko sebe, toliko da je sve ženske osobe počela nervirati svojom lascivnošću koja je iz nje izbijala poput svjetlosti, zasljepljujući i privlačeći pozornost u isto vrijeme.

Njezin partner iz predstave stalno se motao oko nje. Plesali su zajedno na zadovoljstvo i ljubomoru publike, napravili su jednu malu pretpremijeru. Pred svima su odradili scenu silovanja, a pljesak je bio zaglušujući. Kasnije su otišli prošetati, on je pozvao. Hodali su po farmi, a svjetla skoro pa i nije bilo. Pitao je je li lezba, iz čista mira, dok je ona udisala miris nekog drveta i razmišljala o tome kako je izgubila doticaj s prirodom. Rekla je da se ne mora svaka na njega baciti pa eto, ona je ta koja neće i to se ne treba propitkivati. Ali čovjek je navikao osvajati i nailaziti na dobar odjek; takvima kao da je nekad nemoguće prihvatiti negativne odgovore.

„Zašto mi se toliko odupireš?“, upitao je i pokušao je poljubiti. Ona se odmaknula. Nasmijala se poput vragolaste djevojke i to ga je zašakljalo u preponama. Potrčao je za njom i bacio je na pod, kao u nekoj dječjoj igri koja se iz nevinosti najednom transformira u najveći zločin, bez predumišljaja. Ona ga je odgurivala. „Ej, čekaj! Čekaj!“ Stavila je ruku na njegova usta i rekla: „Bilo bi to previše stereotipno da me sad siluješ, zar ne?“, a on je usporio svoje pokrete, zaustavio je ruku na njezinome bedru iako je njezinu pičku dotaknuo već tko zna koliko puta, i grudi također. Sve su u predstavi već odradili, među njima nije bilo tajni. Pa i ta scena silovanja, svi su je nahvalili – to nasilje, tu silovitost, tu snagu kojom su muziku razbili u čestice, preguste da osiguraju dotok zraka pa gledatelji pomalo uzdišu, srce im lupa, otvaraju usta refleksno i čude se – toj brutalnosti koja je zapravo ljepota.

„Sve smo već napravili“, ponovila je Linda, ne bez straha, ali sakrila ga je iza maske da je preživljavanje imperativ, a hrabrost jedini mogući iskaz osobnosti. Ni sama sebi nije vjerovala, ali rekla je: „moramo smisliti neki drugi scenarij.“ Makla je ruku s njegovih usta, a on se odmaknuo, rekao je oprost i gotovo zaplakao. Bilo je to toliko apsurdno da se jedva suzdržala da ne prasne u smijeh. Ispunio je neki čudan ponos što ga je tako lako uspjela uvjeriti u iracionalnost njegove namjere, ali uspjela je. Uputili su se polako, u šetnji, gotovo kao zaljubljeni par. Pričali su o ulogama koje su odradili i onima za koje bi voljeli da tek dođu, te potom oboje upali u provaliju, što nije neuobičajen događaj u selendrama takvog tipa bogu iza nogu. Bilo je mračno; ništa ispred sebe nisu vidjeli osim vlastite muke. Njemu je stradala samo noga, njoj i noga i ruka, zbog čega je i završila u bolnici. I što su onda one luđakinje jučer pričale o licu i prijavama i koreografijama bez plesa kad je jasno što se dogodilo i nitko nije kriv?

Jedini problem je što se to nije odigralo tako kako ona misli i što njega riječi ipak nisu zaustavile. Ponijela ga je uloga, piće, njezina otvorenost, možda prekratka haljina, zaigranost. Tko traži opravdanje, taj ga i pronađe. Nije shvatio da ne znači ne, kao da je te stvari lako pobrkati. Ostao je u predstavi; osjetio je njezino nasilje u sebi. A Linda je u glavi izmislila sasvim drugu priču. Iz sebe je izbacila to da je on uzeo nož u napuštenoj štali i razderao joj pola kože s lica i svršio joj po ranama. Da je iz različitih baletnih društava izbačen upravo zato što je nasilan prema ženama. Da ima tu mračnu stranu koja sve žene straši i oca političara koji sve može zaatakati. Da joj je unakazio lice i uništio karijeru. Strašne su to priče. Nprobavljive.

Kad je bila mala, isto je tako sebi pričala priče. U osnovnoj školi su je zvali mjesec jer je bila puna prišteva koje je stiskala pod slabim svjetlom u kupaonici, osjećajući neko čudno uzbuđenje kad bi ugledala gnoj i krv koji su iz njih izlazili. Svi su joj se rugali, nazivajući je

rugobom stoljeća. Kad je prvi put obula Adidas tenisice jer su takve svi nosili, govorili su da što će njoj takve patike, da takve više nitko ne želi. A ona bi ih čula drugačije i postala bi dio grupe, dok bi je svi hvalili kako joj najbolje stoje, baš njoj.

Balet je bio njezin jedini spas u to vrijeme, ono u čemu je bila dobra, vrhunska; divili su se njezinim pokretima – to je bila realnost koja je spašavala. Ali unatoč njezinim bravurama, na predstavama bi joj davali sporedne uloge, stavljali bi je u zadnji red gdje je nitko nije mogao ni vidjeti ni doživjeti. Lice je bilo prepreka, bilo je to jasno kao dan. Lice je bilo strašilo koje je sputavalo i kočilo njezine snove. Svejedno, ustrajala je u vježbi. A onda je u srednjoj školi procvjetala bez ikakve najave. Lice se raščistilo. Nakon toga, kad god bi imala neki problem, samo bi se pogledala u zrcalo. Ljepota je postala lijek, neprijatelj, najbolji prijatelj; neporecivi izraz taštine.

Kad se to jutro probudi nakon inducirano g snu, nikoga nema kraj nje. Možda je tako i bolje; to joj ostavlja vremena za istraživanje. Traži torbicu kraj kreveta i prebire po njoj jednom rukom da pronade ogledalo. Ali ogledala nema, netko ga je ukrao. Netko je ukrao njezin odraz u njemu, čemu to? To je samo čini nervoznom. Da može, izjurila bi iz te sobe. Tijelo je zatvor, guši je. Zove medicinsku sestru objašnjavajući da mora na vece, kaže da se želi osloniti na dobru nogu da i ona ne propadne. U zahodu drži glavu visoko, da joj ništa ne promakne. Zrcalo je na zidu, a lice u njemu je i dalje isto i to je olakšanje – njezino prekrasno lice smiješi se. Ne vidi na njemu zavoj, niti vidi da se ožiljak proteže s jednog obraza na drugi, da je lice razrovano poput zemlje i da ga malo koja operacija može spasiti. Da je ranjena iznutra; da piša krv i da je netko sebi uzео za pravo da joj osakati utrobu.

U međuvremenu njezin partner ubire pohvale. Premijera je prošla odlično, svi ga hvale. Vidi ga čak i na televiziji, pozdravlja je preko malog ekrana; govori da mu je žao što nije bila s njim jer je vrhunska, ali raduje se nekom budućem zajedničkom projektu koje se dogoditi mora. Znači, kod njega ništa nije slomljeno. Znači, on se oporavio. Njezino lice se trza, gasi televizor. Sjećanja su poplavna stihija koja ruši sve brižno postavljene brane. A on se smiješi, bijeli zubi sjaje. Možda se osjeća kao da je osvojio cijeli svijet – sve je prevario jer nitko mu leđa okrenuo nije, a njoj nitko nije pomogao da se trgne i da nešto poduzme. Došli su s bombonijerom i fiktivnom tugom u očima i onda pokupili prnje. Ali to tako ne ide. Možda je sama i možda je u zavojima; svejedno, zove policiju jer više nema deset godina, a mašta nije dovoljna utjeha. Ulozi su veći, a iluzija teško održiva. Puna je rupa. Puna bijesa.

## The Face

**Mira Petrović.** Croatia

As they enter the hospital room, their hands rush to cover their mouth, and Linda doesn't know why. They say:

"Everything will be alright."

"The bastard will pay for it."

"You can do without ballet."

They say a face can be reconstructed, medicine has advanced, everything can be fixed. Look, Marija has fuller lips now, and Eva's mother got herself better buttocks implanted. After all, this is the age of women, you can see it everywhere – music videos, newspapers, posters, showbiz politics. You can order a new body, like in a restaurant, just choose; by the beauty laws of media manipulation. So don't worry, Linda, you'll be beautiful again. No worries, your identity is safe.

All the while Linda is watching them, wondering; she doesn't understand what they're talking about. These are her colleagues from the theater – they don't know each other well enough to offer obscure pieces of advice which, by the way, no one has asked for. They were preparing together the ballet *A Streetcar Named Desire* and that is their only connection, the source of mutual antipathy. She has the role of the spoiled neurotic DuBois, which has brought upon her everyone's envy and hatred, and that's why they're saying all that crap about lost beauty, just to upset her. They all wanted to be in the lead; although at the audition they pretended to be glad in front of her, and flashed her friendly smiles, and kissed her cheeks. And it's only now that they're glad, that's the only thing clear to Linda; only now are they glad,

when she's in hospital and her leg is in a cast, her arm is broken, and they're talking about destroyed beauty – what beauty? In a few months, she'll be back in her ballet slippers and in leading roles which will sweep them all away like a hurricane. Why, then, are they looking at her with such pity in their eyes?

"Who did this?" they ask her sweetly, regular baby talk, and Linda is saying "What? I fell," she says. "An accident, didn't you see?"

The silence is all but pleasant. There are flowers in the vases, and a box of chocolates on the bed. She wants to take a praline, but she has a feeling she can't open her mouth. Her lip is swollen and every word is a strain, she struggles not to slur, because that's the last thing she needs. And the premiere is tonight and she could just kill herself. Her understudy is here in the room, among them, and she's already gloating; who could blame her – Linda would be acting the same way had the roles been reversed, she would hide her happiness in the look of false compassion, pat her on the shoulder like this one is doing, while saying, "Everything will work out; if nothing else, you can always do choreographies."

"But I'll practice," says Linda. "I'll be my old self again." Nobody says a word. Only the bravest among them says, "Only if you wear a mask on your face, Linda."

"What are you on about?" asks Linda because she's grown tired of the charade. "What mask?"

"You really don't remember?" asks one of them.

“Didn’t you file charges against him?” asks another.

“I had nobody to file charges against,” says Linda. Now she’s visibly upset. This is some parallel reality in which she is stuck. She calls for the nurse, asks her to bring her a mirror. “Bring me a mirror, a small one will do, right now, please” – what is so awful that everybody’s face around her flinches?

“Easy, child,” the nurse tells her as if she were retarded. “You’re not ready yet.” In what horror movie has she found herself? Since when has she become a child again, patronized and having the truth denied to her face?

“Tell me what’s going on!” she yells. “What’s going on, for fuck’s sake?” she yells and feels her face, but she can only feel bandages, only bandages on her face, the face which was always the most beautiful, everybody told her that – your face, it’s not just how you move, it’s your face. When she was still a kid, she was approached by some people from a fashion agency, they told her that she was the perfect product, *che bella roba*, they said that because they were Italian, from Milan, and her mother, who was with her while they were buying a dress for the summer that year she turned sixteen, accepted it enthusiastically; she sent her with them to go, to live – to make a living off that face that God had sculpted in forbidden perfection. But Linda said no after only a few attempts. Linda chose ballet, and the face came in handy. A face always comes in handy. So when the police pull you over for speeding, you put on a smile and there’s no fine. When you go to the bank, you get coffee and your personal banker who will deliver the new card to your address, just to spare you the trouble and to be able to see you again. Buy you a drink. Do you a favor, whatever you want. Other girls said that she screwed for parts, but she didn’t

need to do that; her face opened all doors and that was enough, even to increase the viewing figures in Split where culture isn’t worth a dime. And now all of a sudden everybody is rushing to the theater to enjoy ballet because it’s the technique, it’s the body, it’s the – face.

“Tell me, I beg you!” screams Linda, watching the terror on the faces of her colleagues, on the nurse’s face; some disgust and pity mixed like a bad cocktail that leaves but a bitter taste in the mouth, and her heart is pounding so terribly she thinks she is going to die, and then all of a sudden she feels peace, stupor; somebody is laying her arm on the bed, holding the injection they’ve just used, her eyelids have grown heavy and everything disappears in a haze. The curtain has fallen, there is no applause; memories are only manipulation, denial, an illusion concealing the horrors that happened the night before at the birthday party of one of the colleagues. Although parties are something cheerful, yesterday they were a funeral. At an abandoned farm with plenty to eat and drink, and the place just made for dancing and jumping and for the crazy life in which nobody has to worry about a thing, everything fell apart. *Don’t worry about a thing. Stay up all night to get lucky.* She felt good that night. The preparations for the show were over and she deserved to have a good time.

And her partner was with her that night. After all, it was a party for friends from work and he couldn’t miss it. But it was a colorful group of people, she could get lost in the crowd. He didn’t bother her, but she would have preferred it if he hadn’t shown up. Like a hangnail that irritates you. You can’t feel it, but you can still see it. He would flirt with her on occasion since the day she met him. He bored her. Maybe it wasn’t even about him, if she were to analyze a little deeper. She simply didn’t want to be with men

lately. She dedicated herself to dancing and there she found the answer to all of her desires. Maybe that's why she was so good in this role – a hypersexual neurotic drifting between imagination and reality, completely unsatisfied. Linda hadn't had an orgasm since who knows when, and she felt, like never before, in tune with her sexuality – hypersensitive. She even thought that the feeling had nothing to do with sex, but with the fact that she accepts herself the way she is and that it fulfills her. Actually, she became a Narcissus. In the morning she would look at herself and see a face from the cover. It was something wonderful; it gave one wings, it made dreams blossom.

The evening was slow. The place was squalid and the liveliness which they brought with them couldn't abate the depression of the whole place. They fried meat and swallowed it like greedy animals. Linda had never been a particular fan of food. She ate to survive, not to stuff herself. She was trying to hide her disgust for all that gorging beyond measure. But she drank too much to make up for it, because some form of intemperance was bound to get you today. She danced all the time, seducing everyone around her, so much so that she started to annoy every female person with her lasciviousness radiating from her like light, blinding and drawing attention at the same time.

Her partner from the show kept prowling around her. They danced together to the delight and envy of the audience, staging a little pre-premiere. They did the rape scene in front of everybody, and the applause was deafening. Later they went for a walk, as he invited her. They walked around the farm, with almost no light. He asked her if she was a lesbo, out of nowhere, while she was breathing in the scent of a tree and thinking about how she had lost touch with nature. She said

that not every girl had to throw herself at him and so she'd be the one who wouldn't and there was no need to question it. But the man was used to conquering and getting a good response; such people can find it impossible to take no for an answer.

"Why do you resist me so much?" he asked and tried to kiss her. She backed away. She laughed like a mischievous girl and that tickled his groin. He ran after her and threw her down, like in a child's play that suddenly turns from innocence into the heaviest of crimes, without intent. She tried to push him off. "Hey, wait! Wait!" She put her hand on his mouth and said: "It would be too stereotypical if you raped me now, wouldn't it?" and he slowed down his movements, stopped his hand on her thigh although he had touched her cunt who knows how many times, and her breasts, too. They had done it all in the show, so there were no secrets between them. Even the rape scene, which everybody lauded – that violence, that vehemence, that strength with which they tore the music into particles, too thick to allow for the flow of air so the spectators gasp a bit, their hearts pounding, their mouth opening out of reflex and wonder – at the brutality which is actually beauty.

"We've done it all already," repeated Linda, not without fear, but hiding it behind the mask that survival is the imperative, and courage is the only possible expression of personality. She could hardly believe it but she said, "We have to come up with another scenario." She moved her hand from his mouth, and he stepped back, said he was sorry and almost cried. It was so absurd that she could barely refrain from laughing. She was filled with some strange pride for managing so easily to convince him of the irrationality of his intent, but she did. They walked on slowly, strolling, almost like a couple in

love. They talked about the parts they'd done and the ones they wish would come, and then they both fell over a precipice, which isn't so uncommon in such godforsaken places. It was dark, they couldn't see anything around them except their own suffering. He only hurt his leg, she a leg and an arm, which is why she ended up in hospital. So what were all those nuts yesterday going on about her face and filing charges and choreographies without dancing, when it's clear what happened and it was nobody's fault?

The only problem is that it didn't happen the way she thought and that words didn't stop him after all. He got carried away by the part, the drinks, her openness, maybe the dress that was too short, playfulness. He who looks for an excuse, finds one. He didn't understand that no means no, as if these things were easy to confuse. He was still in the show, feeling its violence inside him. And Linda conjured up an entirely different story in her mind. She forgot that he had taken a knife in an abandoned barn and cut open half of her skin and come all over her wounds. That he'd been thrown out of different ballet companies exactly because of his violence towards women. That he had a dark side which frightened all women, and a father politician who could hush it all up. That he mutilated her face and ruined her career. These are terrible stories. Indigestible.

When she was little, she also told herself stories. In primary school they called her the moon because she was full of pimples which she tried to pop under the faint bathroom light, feeling a strange thrill when she saw the pus and the blood that would come out of them. Everybody made fun of her, calling her the freak of the century. The first time she put on Adidas shoes because everybody wore them, they said what do you need shoes like that for, nobody wants those any more.

And she would hear otherwise and she would become part of the group, while everybody admired how they looked best on her, her of all people.

Ballet was her only escape at that time, the thing she was good at, first-rate; they admired her movements – that was the redeeming reality. But despite her bravura, they kept only giving her supporting roles in shows, they would put her in the last row where nobody could see her or experience her. The face was the obstacle, that was as clear as day. The face was the scarecrow that hampered and hindered her dreams. Still, she persevered in practicing. And then, in high school, she blossomed without any warning. The face cleared up. After that, whenever she had a problem, she would just look in the mirror. Beauty became the medicine, the enemy, the best friend, the undeniable expression of vanity.

When she wakes up from the induced sleep in the morning, there is no one beside her. Maybe that's better; it leaves her time for investigation. She looks for the purse next to the bed and rummages through it with one hand to find the mirror. But there is no mirror, someone has stolen it. Someone has stolen her reflection in it, why? It only makes her nervous. If she could, she would rush out of that room. The body is a prison, it suffocates her. She calls for the nurse, explaining that she needs to use the bathroom, saying that she wants to lean on the good leg so that it, too, doesn't go to waste. In the bathroom she keeps her head high, trying not to miss anything. The mirror is on the wall, and the face in it is still the same and that's a relief – her beautiful face is smiling. She doesn't see the bandages on it, nor does she see the scar that stretches from one cheek to the other, or that the face has been ploughed through like dirt and that no amount of surgery could save it.

That she has been wounded inside, that she pees blood and that somebody gave himself the right to mutilate her womb.

In the meantime, her partner is reaping accolades. The premiere went great, praises all around. She even sees him on TV, greeting her over the small screen, saying that he's sorry she wasn't with him because she's top-notch, but he's looking forward to some future joint project which is bound to happen. So, he has nothing broken. It means he's recovered. Her face twitches, and she turns off the TV. Memories are a flood force tearing down all of her carefully constructed

dams. And he is smiling, white teeth shining. Maybe he feels like he's conquered the whole world – he has fooled everybody because nobody's turned their backs on him, and nobody has helped her to snap out of it and do something. They came with a box of chocolates and fake sorrow in their eyes, and then they packed up. But that's not how it goes. She may be alone and she may be in bandages; but she still calls the police because she's not ten anymore, and imagination is not enough of a solace. The stakes are higher, and the illusion is hard to maintain. It's full of holes. Full of rage.

## روح

أسماء رمضان محمد علي. مصر

جن الليل وهجعت البهائم ونامت الأنام وسكنت الأصوات اللهم إلا صوت نقيق الضفادع وحفيف الأشجار الخفيف، صعدت إلى أعلى المنزل وتركت الهواء يداعيني ويرفعني لأعلى كانت رائحة النسيم ناعمة وبدت النجوم بعيدة وأقل توهجا... لماذا أشعر بأننا مع مرور الزمن نبتعد أكثر عن السماء ونبدو أكثر التصاقا بالأرض. راودتني كل تلك الأفكار وأنا أهيم فوق سماء القرية فقد تعودت منذ وقت ليس ببعيد أن أظل من الأرواح القليلة الهائمة فأغلب أرواح القرية أصبحت مثقلة بهموم أصحابها ولا تغادر جوار أجسادهم حتي الصباح... حتي روح عزيزة أختي التي كانت تؤنسني لم تعد تأتي معي علي سطح المنزل وظلت بالأسفل بجوار جسدها أيضا، تذكرت الماضي البعيد؛ عندما كنا صغارا كنا نخلق عاليا جدا وأحيانا نخرج من فضاء قريتنا الي فضاء القري المجاورة كنا أكثر سطوعا وكنا نجتمع حول النهر نلعب بالمياه أو نلحق عاليا فوق السحب، مع مرور الوقت لم نعد نستطيع فعل ذلك أو بالأحرى لم نعد نملك ما كنا نملكه في السابق: الحرية.

طفت أرجاء القرية وبحثت عن أصدقائي في المدرسة لم أجدهم أيضا، وعندها قفلت عائدة الي المنزل وهناك رأيته؛ كانت روح سناء جارتنا القديمة وأم نجلاء صديقة طفولتي كانت تشع نورا وتلحق أعلى مني بكثير حاولت للحاق بها لأتحدث معها قليلا ولكني لم أستطع الطيران لمستوي أعلى .. نظرت اليها وكانت ترقص وكأنها تستمع الي لحن جلي عزف لها خصيصا، حاولت ارهاف السمع لعلي أنال جزءا من نشوتها التي بدت ظاهرة على روحها ولكني لم أستطع، عدت إلى المنزل حزينة وانسلت الي فراش صاحبتني ولكني لم أصدر أي حركة حتى لا تستيقظ الآن، وجدت روح عزيزة بجواري وكانت تبدو شاحبة باهتة الضوء.

- أين كنتي طوال الليل؟ كنت أود التحدث معك قليلا

- خرجت للتخليق قليلا، تعلمين لا أستطيع البقاء هكذا طوال الوقت

- لم أعد أستطيع التخليق بعيدا

- لماذا؟ جميعنا كأرواح نستطيع التخليق، هكذا خلقنا

- ومنذ متي وجميعنا يتصرف حسب ماخلق؟

- يجب أن نحاول على أي حال

وهنا أدنت الشمس بالشروق وحان موعد رجوعنا إلى أجساد أصحابنا، حانت مني التفاتة الي روح عزيزة ووجدتها تعود إلى جسد صاحبتها هامة حزينة.

"هل ستنامون إلى الظهر ياكسالي، هيا أمانا الكثير من العمل"، كان هذا صوت أمي وهي توقظنا صباحاً؛ لا أدري تحديداً من الذي أقع أمي بأن وقت السادسة صباحاً يقترب من موعد أذان الظهر بأي حال، استيقظت مسرعة وظلت أختي تتململ في فراشها كعادتها وتطلب من أمي طلبها اليومي والذي أيضاً يقابل بالفرض في كل مرة: هل تتركيني أنام عشر دقائق فقط بأمي؟

ذهبت مسرعة الي حوش البهائم وقمت بحلب البقرة واستخرجت البيض من قن الدجاج، أعددت الافطار وتناولته سريعاً لألحق بالمدرسة؛ كان هذا هو المكان الوحيد الذي أعشق الذهاب إليه؛ سوف تحدثنا مدرسة العلوم اليوم عن القمر وتحكي لنا عن الذين استطاعوا أن يمشوا على سطحه عندما كنت صغيرة جداً حلمت بأني ذهبت إلى هناك في يوم ما، قالت لي أمي وأنا أعد نفسي:

- لن تذهبي للمدرسة اليوم، أمانا عمل طويل في الحقل، هل نسييتي حصاد القمح

- لا لم انس يا أمي، ولكن...

- لا يوجد لكن، هيا اذهبي لكي تنظفي تحت البهائم وتلحقي بأبوكي في الحقل

- أمي... ولكن عزيزة

- لا تقولي عزيزة، أختك ستزوج بعد حصاد القمح وأمامها العديد من الامور التي تهتم بها

نظرت إلى أختي نظرة المنتصر و عادت إلى غرفتها لكي تقوم بما تقوم به في كل ساعة من يومها وهو الوقوف أمام المرأة وتجربة ملابسها الجديدة، كل ثوب بمعدل مائة مرة.

أطرقت مذعنة وذهبت الي حوش البهائم، نظفت الروث من تحتها جميعاً وفرشت مكانه طبقة سميكة من التراب... سقيت البهائم وأطعمتهم: البقر والجاموس قدمت له التبن مع العلف وقدمت الحشائش للأغنام، وغلغل الشامي للطيور، انتهيت من أعمال الحوش، وجاء وقت أعمال المنزل بدأت بغرفتنا أنا وأختي... هذا ان صح أن نطلق عليها لقت غرفة بعد أن أمتلأت علي اخرها بجهاز أختي العروس تعثرت بالكثير والكثير من الأشياء وأنا أحاول الوصول لاختي.

- ما كل هذه الأغراض؛ هل تنوين الزواج أم تفتتحن مشروعا للملابس الجاهزة والمفروشات

- وهل تعدين هذه الأشياء كثيرة، نعم من حقا أن تقولي هذا الكلام، فأنت لم تذهبي معنا لفرش شقة ابنة خالتك فادية، لقد جهزتها أمها بأحسن وأفخم الأشياء؛ اشترت لها أكثر من 250 لحافاً، و180 منشفة للوجه، 90عباءة استقبال، أما أمي...

وهنا دخلت أمي وقطعت هذا الحديث التافه وأحمد الله من كل قلبي أنها دخلت في هذه اللحظة فانا كنت أعلم تمام العلم إلى أين سيقودنا هذا الحديث، عزيزة تظن أن أمي بخلت عليها بشراء أشياءها لأنها

لاتماثل أشياء فادية، ومن المؤكد أن فادية قامت بنفس الفعل مع خالتي لأن اشائها لاتماثل أشياء وفاء وهكذا....

أفقت من غفلي على صوت أمي تنهري لأنني لم أذهب للحقل إلى الآن، لم تعد أمي تتقن أيا من أعمالها اليومية كما تتقن الصراخ في وجهي، أجبته بأني ذاهبة في الحال وانطلقت مسرعة إلى الخارج، رغم أن الجو كان شديد الحرارة إلا أنني كنت أحب الذهاب إلى الحقل على المكوث في المنزل مع أمي وصراخها وأختي ونواحها.

عندما كنت في طريقي الي الحقل كنت أفكر في عزيمة التي ستتزوج بعد حصاد القمح وهي لم تكمل السادسة عشر ربيعا بعد، كانت أختي تكبرني بثلاثة أعوام وكنا اصدقاء أما الان أشعر وكأنها قد كبرت على حين غفلة مني... متي أضحت عزيمة التي كانت تلعب معي فوق سطح المنزل عروسا؟ هل تراني حزينة لفراقها بيتنا وبأني سأكون وحيدة بدونها أم حزينة لأنها لازالت طفلة، لا أريد أن أراها مثل فادية، ففادية التي حكمت القرية عن حفل زفافها الاسطوري وعن جهازها الذي تم حمله علي ست سيارات نقل كبيرة، وشبكتها التي تعدت قيمتها الأربعون ألف جنيه ليست سعيدة، هكذا رأيتها في حلمي كنت واقفة علي سطح منزلنا وفجأة رأيتها علي سطح منزلها تبكي بشدة وتئن أنينا موجعا، في الصباح التالي حكيت لأمي عن حلمي فاتهممتي بالكذب لأن سطح منزلنا بعيد كل البعد عن سطح منزل زوج فادية، أمي كانت علي حق كانت المنازل متباعدة ولكني رأيتها، وفي نفس ذلك اليوم صممت أن أذهب مع أمي لمباركة فادية، ذهبنا أنا وهي وأختي صباح؛ كانت شقتها بالغة الفخامة وبها الكثير جدا من الأثاث ظللنا ننظرها فترة في الصالة حتي أطلت علينا؛ كانت ترتدي أغلي عبائتها وتضع الكثير من مساحيق التجميل على وجهها كانت تبالغ كثيرا في اظهار سعادتها وهو ما أكد احساسنا بانها شديدة التعاسة.

وصلت الي الحقل ورأيت بأن أبي منهك في الحديث مع سائق الدراسة ويحاول اقناعه بأن يدرس له القمح ليلا لأن دراسة القمح محجوزة طوال النهار، لا أدري على ماذا اتفقا، لأنه في ذلك الوقت رأيت نجلاء صديقتي وقد خرجت من المدرسة لتوها ناديت عليها.

- نجلاء، نجلاااااااا

- أهلا بالذين يتغيبون عن المدرسة والامتحانات على الابواب

- ليس بيدي حيلة، أمي منعنتي لكي اساعد أبي بحصاد القمح، هل أخذتم اليوم درس القمر؟

- نعم ولكننا لم نكملة وأخذنا أيضا العديد من الدروس الصعبة، يجب أن تلتزمي من الغد في الحضور

- سأحاول، أنتي تعرفين أمي، لم أنتبه لكلامي مع نجلاء وأنا أكرر كلمة أمي أمامها مرارا، وهي التي حرمت من رؤية أمها بسبب جدها لأمها، نظرت اليها ورايت الحزن في عيناها

- أنا سأعود الي البيت أمامي الكثير من الواجبات، إذا احتجت إلى مساعدة أنا موجودة

- نجلاء، كيف حال والدتك؟

- لا أدري

أطرقت نجلاء رأسها وولت هاربة؛ لا أدري هل هربت من سؤالي أم من نظرات الناس التي لا تكاد تتركها في حالها منذ واقعة أمها الشهيرة والتي هزت أرجاء قريتنا عندما حدثت منذ عامين من الآن؛ فأم نجلاء كانت متزوجة من ابن جارنا "صلاح طنطاوي" وكان زوجها فاحش الثراء قضى نصف عمره بدولة الكويت وعاد محملاً بالأموال الكثيرة، تزوج من "سناء" والتي كانت أجمل فتيات القرية ولكنه وبعد سنوات قليلة بدأت يضربها بشدة ويهينها امام الجميع، وكانت في كل مرة ترضي وتسامح، ولكن في ليلة من الليالي فوجئنا بصلاح يجذب سناء من شعرها في الشارع وهي بملابس النوم ويبرحها ضرباً، استيقظنا جميعاً في ذلك اليوم علي صوت صراخها الذي أوجع كل أرجاء القرية ماعدا قلوب أبناءها الذين انشغلوا ليلتها باختراق جسد سناء بنظراتهم.

سرعان ما انتشرت واقعة سناء في القرية انتشار النار في الهشيم، وصممت سناء علي الطلاق وهنا كانت المفاجأة رفض أبوها بشدة وقال لها أن الزوجة الأصلية لاتغادر بيت زوجها إلا على القبر، وصممت سناء على الطلاق وطالبت به بصوتها العالي، واستجاب صلاح لطلبها لعلمه بأن أبوها سيرجعها إليه راضخة ولما لم تنزحزح سناء عن موقفها قيد أنملة قرر والدها تخويفها بأن وضعها في بيته القديم الذي لا يسكنه أحد ومنعها من رؤية ابنتها الوحيدة نجلاء وكان يضع لها الأكل والشرب من تحت عتبة الباب، مرت علي هذه الحادثة عامان لم تنزل سناء في ذلك المنزل المهجور وحدها، ولكني رأيتها في حلمي بالأمس كانت سعيدة... كيف تراها تكون سعيدة في هكذا مكان؟؟ كنت أود أن أحكي حلمي لنجلاء لكنها لن تصدقني مثل أمي.

انتهيت من جز الحشائش وتركت أبي مع سائق الدراسة يشربون الشاي وقد اتفقوا علي موعد فجر الغد لدراسة القمح، إذن أمامنا يوم طويل بالغد لم يكن ذلك ما يحزنني؛ تذكرت بأنني لن اذهب الي المدرسة في الغد أيضاً، لن أحضر بقية درس القمر كنت أود أن أعرف هل القمر الذي صعده هؤلاء الذين في الكتاب يشبه الذي ذهبت إليه في حلمي.

عندما عدت الي المنزل كانت عزيزة لاتزال أمام المرأة

- نريدك أن تتزوجي بعد الحصاد لا أن تصابي بالجنون ياأختي البلهاء

- هل تعتقدين بان فرحي سيكون مثل فرح فادية؟

- عزيزة، ألا تفنقدين المدرسة؟

- بالطبع لا

- لماذا، كيف استطعتي أن تتخلي عن تعليمك بهذه البساطة؟

- لأن الفتاة مصيرها إلى بيت زوجها في النهاية كما تقول أمي، لماذا إذن لا أختصر الطريق؟

- أي طريق؟ طريقك أم الطريق الذي اختارته لك أمي، والتي بدورها اختارته لها أمها؟

- لماذا لا تقومي بتجهيز العشاء بدلا عن أسئلتك الغبية؟

قمت لتجهيز العشاء؛ فلا فائدة تذكر من الحديث مع أختي وتجمعنا أربعتنا علي الطبلية، لم يكن هناك من صوت سوي صوت الملاعق وهي تلامس الاطباق وصوت أفواها وهي تلوك الطعام بملل، قال أبي فجأة.

- كنت مشغول اليوم مع صاحب الدراسة ولمحتك واقفة مع بنت الفاجرة

- نجلاء صديقتي ياأبي

- لا تتحدثي معها مرة أخرى، لانريد فضائح

صاحت أمي؛ هل مازلتي علي علاقة بها ماذا قلت من قبل هل تودين أن ألا يتقدم أحد لخطبتك، هذه البنيت لاتتحدثي معها مرة أخرى وإلا منعتك من الذهاب إلى المدرسة إلى الأبد.

- ولكن ماذا فعلت... وقبل أن أكمل الكلمة هوت كف أمي علي وجهي كالصاعقة ونزفت دما من فمي اختلط مع ماكنت ألوكة من طعام وازدرت اللقمة بوجع ودم، ذهبت الي فراشي باكية و غفوت بسرعة.

كان الجو في أعلي المنزل خانقا بشدة لم أكن أدري هل ذلك بسبب الغبار الذي تثيره دراسة القمح أثناء الحصاد، أم بسبب الوجع الذي أشعر به بسبب إهانة الأمس، لم انتبه لوجود أي من الارواح التي قد تكون هائمة في الجو بسبب شدة الغبار وعدم وضوح الرؤية، تذكرت أمي ومافعلته مع جسدي اليوم وتذكرت أختي التي لم تقف بجانبني؛ لماذا يكرهوني، ولكنني فجأة انتبهت علي روح شديدة للمعان كانت تحلق عاليا تارة وتنخفض تارة أخرى، كنت أود الذهاب للحديث معاها ولكنني كنت مثقلة بالهموم ولا أستطيع التحليق اليوم وفجأة أصبح لونها بلون الذهب انتشرت في الجو كله وغطي نورها على جميع أرجاء القرية وطغي على غبار القمح، تمنيت لو ذهبت اليها ولكنني لم استطع وفجأة اختفت، نزلت الي الدور السفلي وبقيت بجانب جسدي ولم أرد التحدث مع روح عزيزة التي ظلت عالقة بجوار المرأة ولم تستطع مبارحتها.

لم نستيقظ في اليوم التالي على صوت أمي وإنما استيقظنا علي أصوات صراخ عالية.

ماتت سناء.

## Soul

**Asmaa Ramadan Mohamed Ali. Egypt**

Night descended, the animals grew still, and men slept. All was silent but for the croaking of the frogs and the soft rustling of the trees. I went up to the roof of the house and let the breeze caress me and raise me aloft. The air smelled sweet and the stars seemed dimmer and further away. Why do I feel that as time goes by we grow more distant from the heavens and more tied to the earth? The question occurred to me as I roved the skies over the village. For a while now I had been one of the few souls still roaming about. Most of the villagers' souls were weighed down by their bodies' concerns and barely left them until morning. Even the soul of my sister Aziza, which used to accompany me nightly, no longer joined me on the roof but stayed below close by her body. I remembered how long ago, when we were very young, we used to soar high up and even leave our own skies to fly over neighbouring villages. We shone more brightly then. We used to gather around the river and play in the water, or rise high above the clouds. But with the passing of time we were no longer able to do that, or rather, we lost what we had once had: freedom.

I wandered from place to place over the village, looking for my classmates, but I couldn't find them either. I turned to head home, and then it was that I saw her: the soul of Sanaa, the mother of my friend Najla who used to live next to us. She was radiating light as she soared far above me. I tried to catch up with her, to speak to her for a while, but I couldn't fly that high. She was dancing as if listening to some bright melody that was playing for her alone. I strained my hearing,

trying to capture some of her ecstasy, but it escaped me. I returned home sorrowfully and slipped into my body's bed, but made no move that might waken it. I found Aziza's soul beside me, looking pale and faded.

"Where were you all night? I wanted to talk to you."

"I went out to fly for a while. You know I can't stay like this all the time."

"I can't fly far anymore."

"Why not? All souls can fly. We were created that way."

"Since when have we all behaved according to how we were created?"

"We have to try, at least."

It was almost sunrise, and time for us to return to our sleeping bodies. I turned to look at Aziza's soul as she went back and caught a glimpse of her looking lifeless and sad.

"Are you going to sleep there till noon, lazybones? Get up, we've a lot of work ahead of us!" My mother's voice woke us in the morning. I don't know why exactly she thought that six o'clock was close to noon. I got up hurriedly. Aziza, still in bed, grumbled her daily request that my mother denied every day: "Just another ten minutes, mother, please!"

I went to the cattle pen, milked the cows, and took the eggs out of the chicken coop. I got the breakfast ready and ate quickly to be ready for school. School was the one place I loved to go. That day our science teacher was going to tell us about the moon and the men who went and stood on its surface. When I was very young I once dreamt that I had gone there myself. As

I was getting ready, my mother said: “You’re not going to school today. We’ve a long day ahead of us in the fields. Have you forgotten the wheat harvest?”

“No, mother, but...”

“I’ll have no buts. Hurry up and clean out the cattle pen and then go and help your father out in the fields.”

“But mother... Aziza...”

“Don’t bring Aziza into it! Your sister’s getting married after the harvest and she’s got a lot to do.”

My sister shot me a triumphant look and headed back to her room to resume her never-ending task of standing in front of the mirror trying on her new clothes, each item at least a hundred times.

I bowed my head in submission and went to the cattle pen. I cleared out the dung and laid down a thick layer of soil. I brought the animals water and food: chaff and fodder for the cattle and the buffalos, grass for the sheep, and grain for the poultry. When I was finished it was time for the housework. I started with our room, if you could call it a room considering how it was filled up with Aziza’s trousseau. I tripped over one item after another before I reached her.

“What’s all this stuff? Are you getting married or setting up a clothes and furniture store?”

“Do you think this is a lot? You wouldn’t say that if you’d come with us to help get your cousin Farida’s apartment ready! Her mother got her the best of everything. More than two hundred and fifty bedcovers, a hundred and eighty hand towels, and ninety party gowns! But our mother...”

At that point my mother came in, cutting Aziza’s prattle short. And thank God she arrived right then, because I knew exactly where my sister was going. She thought our mother had been stingy with her trousseau,

because it wasn’t as good as Fadia’s. And no doubt Fadia thought the same about her mother, because her trousseau wasn’t up to the standard of Wafaa’s, and so on.

I was jolted back to reality by my mother’s voice scolding me for not having gone to the fields yet. Of all her daily chores, screaming in my face was what my mother really excelled at these days. I told her I was on my way and out I went. It was unbearably hot out but I still preferred the fields to staying inside listening to my mother screaming and my sister complaining.

On my way to the wheatfield, I thought about Aziza, who would be married after the harvest, before she saw her sixteenth summer. She was three years older than me, and we had always been friends, but now I had a feeling that all of a sudden she had grown up on me. When had the Aziza who had played with me high above the roof become a bride? Was I sad because she was leaving the house and I would be alone, or because she was still a child and I didn’t want to see her like Fadia? The whole village had talked of Fadia’s epic wedding, and of her trousseau that had to be loaded into no less than six big vans, not to mention the more than forty thousand pounds’ worth of gold that her husband bought her. But Fadia wasn’t happy. I had seen her in my dream. I was standing on the roof of our house and suddenly I saw her on her roof, sobbing and moaning in pain. In the morning I told my mother about the dream. She accused me of lying because the roof of our house was a long way from the roof of Fadia’s. My mother was right, the two houses were far apart, but I had seen her all the same. That same day I decided to go with my mother and my sister Sabah to congratulate her on her wedding. The apartment was the height of luxury, with a quantity of furniture that we sat gazing at while we waited

for her in the living room. She came in wearing her most expensive gown, with her face plastered with make-up. She was trying far too hard to look happy and that convinced me that she was truly miserable.

I got to the wheatfield and found my father deep in conversation with the driver of the threshing machine. He was trying to persuade him to thresh his wheat at night because the machine was booked up all day. I don't know what they decided on, because just then I saw my friend Najla coming back from school. I called out to her at once: "Najla! Najlaaaaa!"

"Oh, it's the girl who skips class right before the exams!"

"I couldn't help it, my mother made me stay and help my father with the harvest. Did you learn about the moon today?"

"Yes, but we didn't finish the lesson. And there were a lot of difficult lessons today. You'd better come tomorrow!"

"I'll try. You know my mother," I said, thinking nothing of giving out about my mother to Najla, whose grandfather had forbidden her from seeing her own mother. Then I looked at her and saw the sadness in her eyes.

"I'm going home. I've got a lot of homework. If you need any help let me know."

"Najla, how's your mother?"

"I don't know."

She hung her head and fled. I don't know whether she was fleeing my question or the eyes of the villagers, who had never let her alone since the notorious incident with her mother that had convulsed the village two years earlier.

Najla's mother had been married to our neighbour Salah Tantawi. He was extremely wealthy, having spent half his life in Kuwait before returning laden down with money. He married Sanaa, the most beautiful girl in

the village, but after a few years he began to beat her violently and humiliate her in front of everyone. Every time, she would forgive him and try to appease him. But one night, we were astonished to see him dragging Sanaa, still dressed in her nightgown, down the village street by her hair and raining blows on her. That night her screams woke us all up and rang through every inch of the village, except the hearts of its men, who were busy violating her body with their looks.

Word of what had happened went through the village like fire through straw. Sanaa decided to divorce her husband, and then came the second surprise. Her father rejected the idea, telling her that a good wife only leaves her husband's house when she goes to her grave. Sanaa insisted, raising her voice, and Salah agreed, convinced that her father would send her back to him beaten into submission. When Sanaa refused to change her mind, her father tried to scare her. He put her in his abandoned old house, locked the door on her, and forbade her from seeing Najla, her only child. He would slide some food and drink in under the door every day. It was two years now since the affair, and Sanaa was still locked inside the abandoned house. But I had seen her in my dream the night before, and she had been happy. How could anyone be happy in such a place? I wanted to tell Najla about my dream, but she wouldn't believe me any more than my mother did.

I finished my share of the reaping and left my father drinking tea with the thresher. They had agreed that he would come at dawn the next day. We would have a long day of it, but that wasn't what upset me. What upset me was that I would miss school the next day too, and wouldn't be there for the rest of the lesson about the moon. I wanted to know if the moon the men in the book had gone to was like the one I had visited in my dream.

When I got back to the house Aziza was still in front of the mirror.

“We want you to get married after the harvest, not to lose your senses, silly!”

“Do you think my wedding will be as good as Fadia’s?”

“Aziza, don’t you miss school?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not? How could you give up on your education so easily?”

“Because girls belong in their husband’s house in the end, as mother says. So I’d sooner not waste time.”

“You’d sooner not, or our mother decided you shouldn’t? Like her mother decided she shouldn’t?”

“Why don’t you go and get the dinner ready instead of asking stupid questions?”

I got the dinner ready. There was no point talking to my sister. The four of us sat around the low table. There was no sound but the spoons scraping the dishes and the tedious chewing of our jaws. Suddenly, my father spoke.

“When I was busy with the thresher today I saw you talking to that slut’s daughter.”

“Najla’s my friend, father.”

“Don’t speak to her again. We don’t want any scandals.”

My mother started screaming again. “Don’t tell me you’re still friends with her! What did I say to you before? Do you want to make sure nobody will marry you? Don’t speak to that girl one more time, or I’ll take you out of school for good!”

“But what did she do...” Before I could finish the sentence, the flat of my mother’s hand landed on my face like a bolt of lightning. Blood ran from my mouth and mixed with the food I was chewing. I gulped down a mouthful mixed with blood and pain, went to bed crying and fell asleep immediately.

The air over the house was oppressive. I wasn’t sure whether that was because of the dust from the threshing machine or because of the pain of the day’s humiliation. I couldn’t make out any of the usual roaming souls: the thick dust limited my vision. I thought of my mother and how she had treated my body that day. I thought of my sister and how she hadn’t stood by me. Why did they hate me? And then suddenly I saw a soul that shone brightly, sometimes soaring high and sometimes swooping low. I wanted to go and talk to her, but I was weighed down with care that day and couldn’t take off at all. All at once her colour changed to a golden hue that spread across the sky. Her light shone over the whole village and overwhelmed the lingering dust. I wished I could join her, but I couldn’t. And then she was gone. I went down to the ground floor and lingered beside my body. I didn’t want to talk to Aziza’s soul, which was still caught in front of the mirror, unable to leave it.

The next morning, it wasn’t my mother’s voice that woke me, but shouts and loud screams from outside.

Sanaa had died.

## 2:24 Uhr

### Maria Tramountani. Deutschland

## 23:36 Uhr

Thomas Henke hatte gerade seine Zähne geputzt und wollte ins Bett gehen, als sein Handy klingelte. Eine unbekannte Nummer. Ein mulmiges Gefühl beschlich ihn. Anrufe um diese Uhrzeit bedeuteten gewöhnlich nichts Gutes. Er nahm an und hielt sich das Telefon ans Ohr.

„Henke.“

„Hier Rossmann. Entschuldigen Sie bitte, dass ich Sie störe, aber es ist etwas vorgefallen.“

Rossmann leitete die Sicherheitsfirma, die nachts für die Unterkunft zuständig war, in der er arbeitete.

„Das Paar, das seit letztem Monat hier ist, das mit der schwangeren Frau. Die zwei aus Afghanistan.“

„Was ist mit ihnen?“

„Taub, mein Kollege, hat den Notdienst gerufen. Die junge Frau lag bewusstlos vor der Zimmertür. Ihr Gesicht war blutüberströmt.“

Henke wurde kalt.

„Die Polizei ist hier. Ich dachte, dass das Sie das gern wissen würden.“

„Ja, danke. Haben Sie Frau Stein angerufen?“

„Nein, noch nicht.“

„Überlassen Sie sie mir.“

„Okay.“

„Ich bin in 15 Minuten da.“

Henke legte auf. Er suchte schnell in seinem Handy nach dem Kontakt seiner Kollegin. Er tippte auf ihren Namen, das Wählzeichen ertönte.

„Komm schon, geh ran...“

Die Mailbox meldet sich. Vielleicht war sie schon schlafen gegangen. Kurz tippte er eine Nachricht, sie solle ihn so schnell wie möglich zurückrufen und dann zog er sich die Schuhe an, zog sich seine Jacke über, griff nach dem Schlüssel und verließ die Wohnung.

Keine zehn Gehminuten trennte seine Wohnung von dem vergleichsweise kleinen Wohnheim, in dem die 80 Geflüchtete untergebracht waren, für die Henke zuständig war. Sie hatten sich alle problemlos in das Viertel integriert, es gab kaum Vorfälle und nur wenige ältere Damen beschwerten sich über die „Ausländer“. Auch in der Unterkunft war die Atmosphäre gut. Es handelte sich um ein altes Studentenwohnheim, nicht um einen vorübergehenden Systembau, wie sie mittlerweile überall in der Stadt verteilt standen. Henke hatte Glück mit dieser Unterkunft. Davor hatte er in einer Notunterkunft gearbeitet, in der Zwischenfälle an der Tagesordnung waren.

Das afghanische Paar lebte noch nicht sehr lange in der Unterkunft, jedoch schon seit acht Monaten in Deutschland. Henke bekam die junge Frau nur selten zu Gesicht, sie war zurückhaltend, sah ihm nie in die Augen und machte keine Anstalt, Deutsch zu sprechen. Ihr Mann

war das komplette Gegenteil. Er besuchte sowohl den angeordneten Sprachkurs als auch die informellen, die von den Ehrenamtlichen angeboten wurde. Er konnte sich sehr gut verständigen und diente sogar manchmal als Dolmetscher für die Sozialarbeiter. Er hatte eine angenehme Art, verstand sich mit jedem gut.

Henke näherte sich der Unterkunft und sah nun das Blaulicht des Polizeiwagens zwischen den Bäumen vor dem Heim leuchten. In diesem Moment vibrierte das Telefon in seiner Tasche.

„Thomas, ist alles in Ordnung?“, meldete sich Ulrike, seine Kollegin, mit besorgter Stimme.

„Der Sicherheitsdienst hat mich eben angerufen, eine schwangere Frau wurde von ihrem Mann krankenhausreif geprügelt.“

Er hörte, wie Ulrike scharf die Luft einsog.

„Sag nicht, dass es...?“

„Doch, es ist das neue Paar.“

„Scheiße. Ist sie okay?“

„Ich weiß noch nichts.“

„Was sollen wir jetzt machen? Wir müssen...“

Thomas unterbrach sie.

„Wir müssen gar nichts. Ein Mann hat seine Frau geschlagen, das kommt tagtäglich vor.“ Sie schwieg.

Henke stand nun fast vor der Unterkunft.

„Kommst du? Ich bin jetzt da und muss auflegen. Die Polizei ist hier.“

„Die Polizei?“, flüsterte Ulrike.

„Sie werden mit uns reden wollen.“

„Ich bin unterwegs.“

Henke legte mit zitternden Fingern auf. Er musste versuchen, sie abzufangen, bevor sie die Möglichkeit hatte, mit der Polizei zu sprechen. Er erblickte Rossmann vom Sicherheitsdienst und seinen Mitarbeiter, die im Eingangsbereich vor der offenen Tür standen. Sie sprachen mit drei Bewohnern, die ziemlich aufgebracht wirkten.

### 00:30 Uhr

Henke hatte es irgendwie geschafft, die Bewohner wieder dazu bewegen, in ihre Zimmer zu gehen und ihre Familien zu beruhigen. Er saß nun im Büro der Sozialarbeiter und wartete. Ulrike war immer noch nicht da. Sie wohnte weiter von der Unterkunft entfernt und da sie kein Auto hatte, war sie auf die öffentlichen Verkehrsmittel angewiesen, die um diese Zeit nicht mehr regelmäßig fahren. Die Polizei sprach gerade mit dem Sicherheitsmann, der den Vorfall gemeldet hatte. Als nächstes würde er an der Reihe sein.

„Thomas!“

Ulrike kam durch die Tür, verschwitzt und außer Atem.

„Weißt du was Neues?“

„Nein. Das Krankenhaus wollte sich melden, sobald sie aus der OP raus ist.“

„Sie musste operiert werden?“

Ulrike ließ sich auf ihren Bürostuhl fallen und schloss die Augen.

„Was ist mit dem Kind?“

„Es muss raus.“

„Es ist viel zu früh.“

„Ich weiß.“

Kurz hingen sie schweigend ihren Gedanken nach, dann ergriff Henke weder das Wort.

„Ulrike, die Polizei wird jeden Moment hier sein.“

Sie nickte.

„Was willst du ihnen sagen?“, fragte sie ihn.

„Dass wir die Bewohner fragen sollten, ob sie etwas mitbekommen haben.“

„Und wenn sie dich direkt fragen, ob du etwas gehört hast?“

„Dann sage ich die Wahrheit, dass nichts Ungewöhnliches vorgefallen ist.“

„Das ist nicht die Wahrheit.“

„Doch.“

„Thomas, du weißt ganz genau, dass...“

„Frau Stein? Herr Henke?“

Ein Polizist unterbrach die beiden. Hinter ihm stand ein weiterer Beamter und Rossmanns Mitarbeiter, der eben befragt worden war.

„Haben Sie einen Moment für uns?“

Henke setzte sich auf.

„Natürlich. Sollen wir hier sprechen?“

„Gern. Es stört Sie nicht, wenn Herr Taub anwesend ist?“

Mit einer Handbewegung zeigte er auf den Sicherheitsmann.

„Natürlich nicht. Bitte.“

Die beiden Polizisten und der Sicherheitsmann setzten sich auf die Stühle, auf denen normalerweise die Bewohner saßen, wenn sie ihre Anliegen mit den Sozialarbeitern besprachen.

„Herr Taub hat berichtet, dass es ein ruhiger Abend war, bis er Schreie im zweiten Stock gehört hat. Als er dort ankam, lag die junge Frau bewusstlos vor der Tür.“

Ulrike schluckte hörbar, Henke nickte.

„Es scheint ein einmaliger Fall zu sein“, fuhr der Beamte fort, während sein Kollege Notizen machte. „Zumindest hat Herr Taub das berichtet.“

Taub nickte bestätigend.

„Ich bin ab 8 Uhr abends da und in den letzte Wochen war alles ruhig. Wie ich Ihnen ja schon gesagt habe.“

Der Polizist nickte.

„Dann stellt sich nur noch die Frage, ob Sie etwas tagüber mitbekommen haben.“ Der Polizist sah von Henke zu Ulrike und dann wieder zurück.

Bevor Ulrike etwas sagen konnte, ergriff Henke das Wort.

„Wir sollten am besten mit den Bewohnern sprechen. Vor allem mit den Nachbarn des Paares. Die werden am ehesten etwas gehört haben. Ich helfe Ihnen gern beim Fragen, die meisten können nicht sehr gut Deutsch.“

Der Polizist nickte wieder.

„Da wären wir Ihnen sehr dankbar, eventuell können wir auch einen Dolmetscher organisieren.“

„Dolmetscher können wir Ihnen auch sehr gute vorschlagen, wenn es Bedarf gibt“, sagte Henke.

„Vielen Dank“, antwortete der Polizist. „Aber nun zurück zu meiner Frage: Haben Sie etwas mitbekommen?“

„Nichts Ungewöhnliches“, sagte Henke ruhig und vermied es, in Ulrikes Richtung zu sehen.

„Keine Indizien dafür, dass eine Frau geschlagen wird?“

„Wissen Sie, der Ehemann ist ein sehr respektierter Mann hier. Man hätte nicht ahnen können, dass so etwas passiert.“

Der andere Polizist sah nun von seinem Notizblock auf und fixierte ihn.

„Das sagt man immer im Nachhinein über den Mörder“, sagte er trocken. „Dass keiner jemals damit gerechnet hätte.“

„Mörder?“ Ulrike starrte den Polizisten an.

„Das ist nur eine Redewendung“, sagte der erste Polizist schnell und warf seinem Kollegen einen strengen Blick zu. Dieser vertiefte sich wieder in sein Notizbuch.

„Was ist mir Ihnen?“, wandte er sich nun Ulrike zu. „Haben sie etwas gehört oder gesehen?“

Die Pause die nun folgte, kam Henke endlos vor.

„Nein“, antwortete sie schließlich. „Nichts Ungewöhnliches.“

## 1:48 Uhr

Die Polizei war gegangen. Sie hatte beschlossen am nächsten Morgen wiederzukommen, um mit den Bewohnern zu sprechen, es war heute Abend zu spät. Der Ehemann würde die nächste Zeit in Untersuchungshaft verbringen und was mit ihm geschehen würde, hing sehr davon ab, wie die Operation seiner Frau verlaufen würde.

Immer noch keine Nachricht aus dem Krankenhaus.

Henke und Ulrike saßen schweigend im Büro.

„Wir sollten nach Hause gehen“, sagte Henke irgendwann. „Morgen wird ein langer Tag, wir müssen mit den Bewohnern sprechen und die Polizei bei den Befragungen unterstützen.“

„Ich kann jetzt nicht schlafen“, sagte Ulrike. „Nicht, wenn ich nicht weiß, was mit der Frau und dem Kind ist. Du etwa?“

Henke erwiderte nichts. Natürlich konnte er nicht schlafen.

„Es war nicht richtig, dass wir die Polizei angelogen haben“, sagte Ulrike leise.

„Das Privatleben unserer Bewohner geht die Polizei nichts an.“

Ulrike fixierte ihn.

„Das Privatleben? Er hat seine schwangere Frau fast zu Tode geprügelt!“

„Das hätten wir nicht ahnen können.“

„Du hast die blauen Flecken genauso gesehen wie ich. Und die Wunden.“

„Was sagen die schon aus?“

„Dass er seine Frau fast zu Tode prügeln wird.“

Henke schlug nun auf den Tisch.

„Verdammt, das hätten wir nicht wissen können.“

Er merkte, dass er lauter geworden war und versuchte seine Stimme zu senken.

„Ulrike, diese Menschen kommen aus einer anderen Kultur. Du kennst die Stellung der Frau dort. Es ist normal, dass die Frau hin und wieder... gezüchtigt wird. Das kannst du nicht mit Deutschland vergleichen.“

Sie sah ihn ungläubig an.

„Gezüchtigt?“

Henke merkte, dass er zu weit gegangen war.

„Du hast doch die ganzen Fortbildungen auch gemacht“, sagte er nun beschwichtigend und versuchte seiner Stimme einen sanften Ton zu geben. „Natürlich ist es nicht toll, dass der Mann seine Frau schlägt, aber es ist auch nicht unsere Aufgabe, ihnen ihre Sitten und Bräuche auszureden. Wir bemühen uns doch so, dass sie Kontakt zu ihren Landleuten haben, dass sie die Möglichkeit haben, ihr Essen zu kochen und ihre Feiertage zu feiern. Wir können ihnen nicht einfach unsere Kultur aufschwätzen, nur weil das, was sie tun, in unseren Augen falsch ist. Das nennt sich interkulturelle Sensibilität.“

„Es nennt sich interkulturelle Sensibilität, wenn wir zulassen, dass ein Mann seine Frau und seine ungeborenes Kind ins Krankenhaus prügelt?“

Henke seufzte.

„Natürlich nicht. Nochmal: Das konnten wir doch nicht ahnen.“

Ulrike lehnte sich zurück, ihr Gesicht war nun wie versteinert. Henke bekam es mit der Angst zu tun. Was, wenn sie nochmal mit der Polizei sprach?

„Wenn wir gewusst hätten, dass das hier passiert, hätten wir natürlich gehandelt.“

Ulrike schwieg.

„Das weißt du doch?“

Wieder sagte sie nichts.

„Ulrike, du weißt, dass wir beide unseren Job verlieren, wenn wir der Polizei sagen, dass es Anzeichen gab, dass das hier passiert? Wir machen uns zu Mittätern. Wer weiß, was das für juristische Folgen für uns haben kann. Ob wir jemals wieder irgendwo einen Job bekommen. Außerdem können wir es so auch nicht rückgängig machen. Ulrike?“

Sie startete einen Moment lang ins Leere und dann seufzte sie.

„Du hast recht. Wir konnte es nicht ahnen und wir können es nicht rückgängig machen. Lass uns nach Hause gehen.“

Henke atmete auf.

„Okay. Ich sage Rossmann, dass wir gehen.“

„Okay.“

## 2:24 Uhr

Henke ging zurück ins Büro, nachdem er mit Rossmann gesprochen hatte. Dieser hatte sein Bedauern über die Situation geäußert und die beiden hatten kurz darüber gesprochen, dass die anderen Bewohner überraschend ruhig gewesen waren trotz der Geschehnisse der Nacht.

„Sie machen das gut hier“, hatte Rossmann gesagt und ihm auf die Schulter geklopft. „Wir sehen ganz andere Sachen an den anderen Unterkünften. Sie wissen, dass das was passiert ist, nicht ihr Schuld war, richtig?“

Henke wusste das. Er hätte es nicht wissen können und er hätte es nicht verhindern können. Er war sich sicher. Trotzdem musste er schlucken, als er an dem Zimmer des jungen Ehepaars vorbeiging.

Als er die Tür des Büros öffnete, erblickte er Ulrike, wie sie mit dem Telefon in der Hand am Schreibtisch stand.

„Danke“, flüsterte sie ins Telefon. „Danke, dass Sie uns benachrichtigen. Gute Nacht.“

Sie legte auf. Henke sah sie fragend an, fürchtete sich jedoch vor dem, was sie sagen würde.

„Das Krankenhaus. Die Frau wird es schaffen.“

Ulrikes Gesichtsausdruck war alles andere als erfreut.

„Das Kind“, sagte Henke mit rauer Stimme. Es war keine Frage.

Ulrike nickte mit Tränen in den Augen.

Er senkte den Kopf. Ulrike ließ sich wieder auf ihren Stuhl fallen und vergrub ihr Gesicht in den Händen. Sie begann leise zu schluchzen, während er hilflos an der Tür stand.

„Lass uns nach Hause gehen“, sagte er dann sanft und machte einen Schritt auf sie zu, um ihr seine Hand auf die Schulter zu legen. Bevor er das jedoch tun konnte, hatte sie sich ruckartig aufgesetzt und funkelte ihn mit tränennassen Augen wütend an.

„Ich gehe zur Polizei und sage die Wahrheit. Es ist mir egal, was du sagst.“

„Sei doch vernünftig. Das ändert doch jetzt auch nichts.“

„Das ist mir egal. Thomas, ein Kind ist tot.“

„Ulrike...“

„Nein!“ Sie unterbrach ihn und sprang auf. „Es ist das Richtige. Ich werde nicht ein ungeborenes Kind auf meinem Gewissen haben.“

„Auf deinem Gewissen? Du hast es doch nicht umgebracht.“

„Ich hätte es retten können.“ Ulrike griff nach ihrer Handtasche und ging auf Henke zu. Er rührte sich nicht.

„Lass mich durch, Thomas.“

„Ulrike, lass uns doch erstmal reden.“

„Lass mich durch. Ich werde morgen mit der Polizei sprechen, du kannst mich nicht davon abbringen.“

Sie machte einen Schritt zur Seite, um an ihm vorbeizugehen. Er bewegte sich schnell und versperrte ihr erneut den Weg. Ungläubig sah sie an ihm hoch. Er war mindestens einen Kopf größer als sie.

„Ich lasse nicht zu, dass du meine Karriere zerstörst“, sagte er fest.

Ulrike sah ihm in die Augen.

„Lass mich durch.“

„Nein.“

Sie bewegte sich wieder zur Seite, doch jetzt griff er nach ihrem Handgelenk und hielt sie fest. Sie schrie auf vor Überraschung und Schmerz.

„Thomas, du tust mir weh, lass mich los!“

„Erst wenn du versprichst, dass du nichts sagst.“

Ulrike beschlich Panik. Ihr wurde bewusst, dass sie kaum etwas über ihren Kollegen wusste. Zu was war er zustande?

„Was tust du da?“, flüsterte sie.

Henke starrte sie an, in seinen Augen flackerte etwas. „Du wirst mir nicht mein Leben zerstören, nur weil du meinst, ein paar blaue Flecken gesehen zu haben.“

„Thomas, ich schreie, wenn du mich nicht loslässt.“

Henkes Griff wurde fester. „Es tut mir leid, Ulrike. Das kann ich nicht zulassen.“

Dann passierte alles ganz schnell. Henke hob die Hand, um ihr den Mund zuzuhalten, doch Ulrike hatte schon instinktiv gehandelt und ihm das Knie mit aller Kraft zwischen die Beine gerammt. Sein Gesicht nahm einen seltsamen Ausdruck an und der Griff um ihr Handgelenk lockerte sich augenblicklich. Ulrike riss sich los, stieß ihn zur Seite und rannte los. Henke sank wimmernd gegen die Wand.

### 3:15 Uhr

Der pochende Schmerz hatte nachgelassen, doch Henke stand immer noch gegen die Wand gelehnt im Büro, dort wo Ulrike ihn zurückgelassen hatte. Als er wieder klar denken konnte, war ihm klar geworden, was er getan hatte und mit der Klarheit kam das Bewusstsein, dass Weglaufen nicht viel Sinn machen würde. Die Tür war bei Ulrikes Flucht zugefallen, doch er hörte trotzdem Stimmen von draußen. Er erkannte Rossmann und Taub. Das Wort „Polizei“ fiel und fast war ihm, also konnte er das Blaulicht des Polizeiautos sehen, das zum zweiten Mal in dieser Nacht den Weg zur Unterkunft fand. Er schloss die Augen.

**2:24 a.m.**

**Maria Tramountani. Germany**

**11:36 p.m.**

Thomas Henke had just brushed his teeth and was about to go to bed when his mobile phone rang. An unknown number. He got a funny feeling. Calls at this hour normally meant nothing good. He answered the phone.

“Henke.”

“This is Rossmann. Sorry for bothering you but something’s happened.”

Rossmann directed the security company responsible for night surveillance at the residence where he worked.

“The couple that’s been here since last month, the one with the pregnant woman. The ones from Afghanistan.”

“What about them?”

“My colleague Taub called the ambulance. The young woman was lying unconscious at the doorstep to her room. Her face was all bloody.”

Henke went cold.

“The police are here. I thought you’d like to know.”

“Yes, thank you. Have you called Ms. Stein yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be there in 15 minutes.”

Henke hung up. He quickly looked up his colleague’s contact number on his mobile phone, tapped her name and heard the ring tone start.

“Come on, pick up...”

He was sent to voicemail. Maybe she was already in bed. He sent her a brief message telling her to call him back as soon as

possible and then put on his shoes, grabbed his jacket and the keys and left his flat.

His place was a mere ten minutes on foot from the comparatively small residence hall where the 80 refugees that Henke was responsible for were housed. They had all integrated into the neighbourhood without a problem, there were hardly any incidents and only a few old ladies complained about the “foreigners”. The atmosphere was good in the residence hall as well. It was a former student residence, not a temporary modular building like the ones that had sprung up all over the city. Henke had had luck with this residence. Before this he had worked at a shelter where incidents had been commonplace.

The Afghan couple had not lived long in this residence, but had already been in Germany for eight months. Henke seldom saw the young woman but, when he did, she was reserved, never looked him in the eye and made no attempt to speak German. Her husband was the complete opposite. He took both the official language courses and the informal ones offered by volunteers. He could speak quite well and was even used as an interpreter by the social workers at times. He was very pleasant and got on well with everyone.

Henke was approaching the residence and could now see the police car’s blue lights flashing between the trees in front of the building. At this point his telephone vibrated in his pocket.

“Thomas, is everything alright?” his colleague Ulrike asked in a concerned voice.

“Security just called me – a pregnant woman’s been beaten by her husband to the point of hospitalisation.”

He heard Ulrike draw a sharp breath.

“Don’t tell me it’s...?”

“Yes, it’s the new couple.”

“Shit. Is she okay?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“What should we do now? We should...”

Thomas interrupted her.

“We don’t have to do anything. A man beat his wife – it happens every day.”

She was quiet.

By now Henke had nearly reached the residence.

“Are you coming? I just got here; I have to hang up now. The police are here.”

“The police?” Ulrike whispered.

“They’re going to want to talk to us.”

“I’m on my way.”

Henke hung up, his fingers trembling. He must try to catch her before she had the opportunity to talk to the police. He saw Rossmann from the security firm and his colleague, who were standing at the entrance in front of the open door. They were talking to three residents, who looked quite upset.

### 12:30 p.m.

Henke had somehow managed to get the residents to go back to their rooms and calm their families down. He now sat in the social worker’s office and waited. Ulrike still hadn’t arrived. She lived further from the residence and since she didn’t have a car, she had to rely on public transport, which at this time of night did not run so often. The police were now speaking to the security guard who had called the incident in. Henke was next.

“Thomas!”

Ulrike entered the room, perspiring and out of breath.

“Any news?”

“No. The hospital said they would call as soon as she was out of the OR.

“She needed an operation?”

Ulrike collapsed onto her chair and closed her eyes.

“What about the child?”

“It has to be taken out.”

“It’s much too early.”

“I know.”

They briefly dwelled on their thoughts, then Henke continued to speak.

“Ulrike, the police will be with us any minute.”

She nodded.

“What are you going to tell them?” she asked.

“That we should ask the residents if they know anything about this.”

“What if they ask you directly if you’ve heard anything?”

“Then I’ll tell them the truth – that nothing out of the ordinary has happened.”

“That is not the truth.”

“Yes it is.”

“Thomas, you know very well that...”

“Ms. Stein? Mr. Henke?”

A police officer interrupted them. Behind him was another officer and Rossmann’s colleague, who had just been questioned.

“Do you have a minute?”

Henke sat down.

“Of course. Shall we speak here?”

“That’s fine. Do you mind if Mr. Taub sits in?”

He gestured towards the security guard.

“Of course not. Please sit down.”

The two officers and the security guard sat down in the chairs where the residents normally sat when they had to discuss their issues with the social worker.

“Mr. Taub reported that it was a quiet evening until he heard screaming coming from the second floor. When he got there, the

young woman was lying unconscious in front of her door.”

Ulrike gave an audible gulp, Henke nodded.

“It seems to be an isolated incident,” continued the officer while his colleague took notes. “At least that’s what Mr. Taub stated.”

Taub nodded agreement.

“I’m here from 8 p.m and in the past few weeks everything has been quiet. As I said before.”

The officer nodded.

“Then we need to ask whether you’ve noticed anything during the day.” The officer looked from Henke to Ulrike and back.

Before Ulrike could say anything, Henke started talking.

“The best thing would probably be to talk to the residents. Above all with the couple’s neighbours. They’ll be the ones most likely to have heard anything. I’d be glad to help you question them, since most of them don’t speak very good German.” The officer nodded again.

“We would appreciate that, though we might get an interpreter to come.”

“We could also give you some very good interpreters’ contacts, if you’d like,” stated Henke.

“Thank you very much,” replied the officer. “But now, back to my question. Have you noticed anything?”

“Nothing unusual,” Henke said calmly while he avoided looking in Ulrike’s direction.

“No signs that a woman was being beaten?”

“You know, the husband is a very respected man here. No one could have imagined something like this happening.”

The other officer now looked up from his notebook and stared at him.

“That’s what everyone says in hindsight about the murderer,” he said dryly. “That no one could ever have imagined such a thing.”

“Murderer?” Ulrike stared at the policeman.

“It’s only a manner of speaking,” said the first officer quickly, casting his colleague a stern look. The latter immersed himself again in his notebook.

“What about you?” he now turned to Ulrike. “Have you heard or seen anything?”

The pause that followed felt eternal to Henke.

“No,” she finally answered, “nothing out of the ordinary.”

#### 1:48 a.m.

The officers had gone. They had decided to come back in the morning to question the residents, since it was so late. The husband would be taken into custody for the time being and what would happen to him depended greatly on how his wife’s operation went.

Still no news from the hospital.

Henke and Ulrike sat silently in the office.

“We should go home,” said Henke at some point. “Tomorrow will be a long day; we have to speak with the residents and help the police with their inquiries.”

“I can’t sleep now,” said Ulrike. “Not when I don’t know what’s happened to the mother and child. What about you?”

Henke didn’t answer. Of course he couldn’t sleep.

“It wasn’t right to lie to the police,” Ulrike said softly.

“Our residents’ private lives are none of the police’s business.

Ulrike stared at him.

“Private lives? He nearly beat his pregnant wife to death!”

“We couldn’t have foreseen that.”

“You saw the black and blue marks just as well as I did. And the wounds.”

“What were they supposed to mean?”

“That he was going to beat his wife half to death.”

Henke hammered his fist against the table.

“Damn it, we couldn’t have known that.”

He noticed he had gotten louder and tried to lower his voice.

“Ulrike, these people come from another culture. You know the status of women there. It’s normal that wives are... chastised now and then. You can’t compare it to Germany.”

She looked at him incredulously.

“Chastised?”

Henke realised he had gone too far.

“You went through the whole training too,” he now said in a conciliatory tone, trying to make his voice sound soothing. “Of course it’s not great that a husband beats his wife, but it’s also not our job to talk them out of their customs and traditions. We strive to ensure they can have contact with their fellow countrymen, that they can cook their dishes and celebrate their holidays. We can’t just push our culture on them just because we consider what they do wrong. It’s called intercultural sensitivity.”

“It’s called intercultural sensitivity to allow a man to hospitalise his wife and unborn child?”

Henke sighed.

“Of course not. Again, there was no way we could have imagined something like this.”

Ulrike leaned back, her face now stone cold. Henke started getting scared. What if she spoke to the police again?

“If we had known that this was going to happen, we would naturally have done something.”

Ulrike remained silent.

“You know that, right?”

Again she said nothing.

“Ulrike, you know that we’ll both lose our jobs if we tell the police there were signs of that happening here? We’ll become accomplices. Who knows what legal consequences that could have for us. Whether we could ever even get a job again. Besides, we can’t exactly undo what’s done. Ulrike?”

She stared off into space for a minute and then sighed.

“You’re right. There was no way we could have known, and we can’t undo it. Let’s go home.”

Henke breathed a sigh of relief.

“Okay. I’ll tell Rossmann we’re going.”

“Okay.”

### 2:24 a.m.

Henke went back into the office after speaking with Rossmann. The latter had expressed his regret about the situation and they had briefly talked about how the other residents had been surprisingly calm despite the night’s events.

“You’re doing a good job here,” Rossmann had said, patting him on the shoulder. “It’s completely different at the other residences. You know what happened wasn’t your fault, don’t you?”

Henke knew. There was no way he could have known or prevented it. He was certain. Nonetheless, he still swallowed hard as he passed the young couple’s door. When he opened the office door, he saw Ulrike standing at the desk with the telephone in her hand.

“Thank you,” she whispered into the phone. “Thanks for informing us. Good night.”

She hung up. Henke looked at her inquiringly, fearing what she had to say.

“The hospital. The woman’s going to make it.”

Ulrike’s expression was anything but overjoyed.

“The child,” said Henke in a husky voice. It was not a question.

Ulrike nodded with tears in her eyes.

His head sank. Ulrike again slumped down in her chair and buried her face in her hands. She began to sob softly while he stood helplessly at the door.

“Let’s go home,” he said softly and took a step towards her in order to put his hand on her shoulder. Before he managed, however, she sat up abruptly and furiously glared at him through tearful eyes.

“I’m going to the police and telling them the truth. I don’t care what you say.”

“Be reasonable. It won’t change anything anyway.”

“I don’t care, Thomas, a child is dead.”

“Ulrike...”

“No!” she interrupted him and jumped up. “It’s what’s right. I won’t have an unborn child on my conscience.”

“On your conscience? But you didn’t kill it.”

“I could have saved it.” Ulrike grabbed her handbag and went towards Henke. He didn’t move.

“Let me by, Thomas.”

“Ulrike, let’s talk about this first.”

“Let me through. I’m going to speak to the police tomorrow; you can’t talk me out of it.”

She stepped to the side to go around him. He moved quickly and blocked her way again. She looked up at him incredulously. He was at least a head higher than her.

“I won’t allow you to destroy my career,” he said firmly.

Ulrike looked him in the eyes.

“Let me through.”

“No.”

She again moved to one side, but now he seized her wrist, holding her back. She cried out in surprise and pain.

“Thomas, you’re hurting me! Let me go!”

“Only if you promise you won’t say anything.”

Panic crept over Ulrike. She realised she hardly knew anything about her colleague. What was he capable of?

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

Henke stared at her. Something flickered in his eyes. “You are not going to ruin my life just because you think you saw a few black and blue marks.”

“Thomas, I’ll scream if you don’t let me go.”

Henke’s grip grew tighter. “I’m sorry, Ulrike, I can’t allow that.”

Then everything happened very quickly. Henke raised his hand to cover her mouth, but Ulrike had already reacted instinctively and hit him between the legs with her knee with all of her strength. A strange expression crossed his face and his grip on her wrist loosened momentarily. Ulrike tore herself free, shoved him aside and ran away. Henke sank whimpering against the wall.

### 3:15 a.m.

The throbbing pain had eased, but Henke was still leaning against the wall in the office, right where Ulrike had left him. When he could think straight again, he realised what he had done, and with this realisation came the knowledge that running away wouldn’t make much sense. The door had closed behind Ulrike as she fled, but he could still hear the voices outside. He recognised Rossmann and Taub. The word “police” was pronounced and he could almost see the police car’s blue lights flashing as they made their way to the residence for the second time tonight. He closed his eyes.

## Alex / Alexandra

### Mirsini Tramountani. Deutschland

Sie war eine Erscheinung.

Jeden Abend, bevor er sich aus seiner leeren, verdreckten Wohnung schleppte und bis zur Besinnungslosigkeit betrank, musste er an sie denken. Jedes Mal redete er sich aufs Neue ein, dass der Absinth verantwortlich für die gottgleichen Bilder war, die ihm nach jeder Nacht ins Gedächtnis gebrannt waren. Dass solch ein Mensch nicht in der Realität existiert.

Jedes Mal musste er sich eingestehen, dass er sich getäuscht hatte.

Ihre Haut hatte die Farbe von cremigem Milchkaffee. Die widerspenstigen Haare waren stets zu einem Knoten nach hinten gebunden und sie trug auch heute ein hautenges, kurzes Kleid. Figurbetont, als müsste sie beweisen, dass keine Fantasie an die Wirklichkeit herankam. Ihre Augen funkelten wie ein lodernes Feuer in der spärlich beleuchteten Bar, wenn sie ihn fragte, ob er das Übliche trinken wollte.

Er war sich sicher, dass sie ihn absichtlich reizte. Es war ihm egal, ob sie deutlich jünger war als er. Sie gehörte ihm schon von Anfang an, als er sie das erste Mal hinter dem Tresen entdeckt hatte. Es ärgerte ihn nur ein wenig, dass sie so viel Macht über ihn zu haben schien. Seit sie hier zu arbeiten begonnen hatte, waren seine Besuche immer häufiger und immer länger geworden. Er schlief inzwischen kaum mehr als zwei Stunden, bevor er in dem eintönigen Bürogebäude am Ende der Stadt seine Schicht antrat.

Sein Vater hatte ihn schon von früh an gewarnt. „Nimm dich vor ihnen in Acht“, hatte er ihm eingebläut. „Sie treiben dich mit ihrem Äußeren in den Wahnsinn, aber im Grunde steckt nie mehr dahinter. Du musst sie erziehen, ihnen zeigen, dass sie ihre Spielchen mit dir nicht abziehen können, sonst wickeln sie dich um den Finger und ehe du dich versiehst, bist du blind vor Begehren und liest ihnen jeden Wunsch von den Lippen ab.“

Sein Vater hatte natürlich Recht behalten. Keine Frau war zu mehr als zu seinem körperlichen Vergnügen zu gebrauchen. Alles, was sie beherrschten, war Manipulation und den schönen Schein zu wahren. Früher hatte er sich noch bemüht, sie mit Komplimenten und Geschenken überhäuft, aber diese Zeiten waren längst vorbei. Sie waren sich inzwischen zu gut für ihn. Sie betrachteten ihn nur noch mit einer Mischung aus Mitleid und Spott, wenn er sie einladen wollte.

Es war unbedeutend. Die Mühe war es sowieso nie wirklich wert. Die meisten hatten erst nach unzähligen Treffen mit ihm geschlafen, nachdem er sich durch ermüdende, stumpfsinnige Gespräche gequält hatte.

Er ließ sich schwerfällig auf dem Barhocker in der hintersten Ecke fallen. Der Laden war gut gefüllt, doch trotzdem dauerte es keine Minute, bis sie vor ihm auftauchte. Sie schenkte ihm ein strahlendes Lächeln und er bemühte sich darum, seine Fassung zu bewahren.

„Einen Absinth?“, rief sie ihm zwinkernd über die Lautstärke der Musik und der lebendigen Gespräche hinweg zu.

Er nickte lediglich und leckte sich über die Lippen, während er sie dabei beobachtete, wie sie die Flüssigkeit in ein Glas goss und bereits den nächsten Kunden ansprach. Ihr Lächeln war

ebenso einladend wie bei ihm vor wenigen Augenblicken und es machte ihn wütend. Sie waren alle gleich.

„Bitteschön!“

Sie stellte ihm sein Getränk auf den Tresen und er sah die Schweißtröpfchen, die sich auf ihrem Dekolletée gebildet hatten, als sie sich ein wenig vorbeugte, um weitere Gläser hervorzuholen.

Er nickte knapp, während seine Gedanken verrücktspielten. Was er alles mit ihr anstellen könnte ... Sie gehörte ihm. Und wenn es sein musste, würde er es ihr beweisen.

Er war schließlich ein Mann. Das Stärkste, was die Schöpfung je hervorgebracht hatte.

Was war sie schon im Vergleich zu ihm?

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Ich liebte diese Stadt. Ich liebte das Gefühl, durch die belebten Straßen zu laufen, das Meer zu riechen, die Blicke auf mir zu spüren und zu wissen, dass ich endlich so gesehen wurde, wie ich mich fühlte.

Aber vor allem liebte ich die Anonymität. Niemand stellte meine Feminität in Frage. Oder fragte meine Eltern, was bei meiner Erziehung falsch gelaufen war. Niemand kannte mein Gesicht und rief mir Beleidigungen hinterher, wenn ich lediglich in den Supermarkt eine Straße weiter wollte.

Hier wurde mir natürlich auch hinterhergerufen, aber es war die Art, die mein Inneres vor Stolz explodieren ließ. Die mich stärkte und mir dazu verholfen hatte, selbstbewusster zu werden. Mich in meiner eigenen Haut wohlfühlen, auch wenn es noch ein paar Jahre dauern würde, bis ich vollständig zufrieden sein konnte.

Es war ein Neustart für mich und auch wenn mein Alltag alles anderes als entspannt war – meine zwei Jobs hielten mich rund um die Uhr auf Trab –, wusste ich, dass es das Richtige war. Ich hatte ein Ziel vor Augen und ich war ich selbst. Zum ersten Mal in meinen fünfundzwanzig Jahren hatte ich diese vollkommene Gewissheit.

Ich liebte selbst die Nachtschichten in dieser verrauchten Bar.

„Zwei Kurze bitte“, wurde ich aus meinen Gedanken gerissen und schaute lächelnd auf.

„Welche Sorte?“, rief ich zurück und mein Lächeln vertiefte sich, als ich sah, wie die zwei jungen Männer vor mir mich eindeutig von oben bis unten musterten.

„Überrasch uns“, kam es als Antwort.

Ihre Blicke zeigten mir, dass ihnen gefiel, was sie sahen.

Ich wusste, dass diese Aufmerksamkeit nicht alles war. Mir war durchaus bewusst, dass ich mein Selbstwertgefühl nicht davon abhängig machen sollte und dass ich schon vollkommen gewesen war, bevor ich so ausgesehen hatte wie jetzt. Aber ich konnte nicht leugnen, dass das Verlangen in ihren Augen mich glücklich machte. Wenn man sich jahrelang nicht einmal getraut hatte, sexuelles Interesse an einem anderen Menschen vor sich selbst einzugestehen, war diese Aufmerksamkeit ein Geschenk.

Von meiner besten Freundin hatte ich mir mehrfach anhören müssen, wie entwürdigend es war, wenn einem andauernd hinterhergepfiffen wurde oder die Männer ihr im Gespräch ständig auf die Oberweite starrten. Ich hatte ihr immer beigeplottet, aber ich hatte es nie verstanden.

Ich war jahrelang so eifersüchtig auf sie gewesen. Diese weiche Haut. Ihr blumiger Duft. Die Kurven und die glockenhelle Stimme. Ich hätte alles dafür gegeben, sie zu sein.

„Ich bin übrigens Finn“, rief mir einer der beiden zu, als er mir ein paar Scheine in die Hand drückte. „Das stimmt so.“

„Danke“, erwiderte ich und stellte die Shots vor ihnen ab. Er musste ungefähr in meinem Alter sein. Seine Augen hatten die Farbe von flüssigem Karamell.

„Dürfen wir dich auf unsere WG-Party einladen? Sie wird die ganze Nacht gehen, also du darfst gerne kommen, sobald du fertig bist.“

Ich lachte geschmeichelt. „Ihr könnt mir ja mal eure Adresse geben.“

Das Angebot war verlockend, aber ich wusste, dass es unmöglich war. Ich musste nach meiner Schicht unbedingt nach Hause, um ein wenig Schlaf abzubekommen, bevor ich weiterarbeiten musste.

Es passierte nicht zum ersten Mal, dass ich eingeladen wurde. Es versetzte mir immer einen kleinen Stich, wenn ich absagte, aber ich wusste, meine Geduld würde sich auszahlen. Wenn ich genug Geld angespart und die Operation hinter mir hatte, hatte ich alle Zeit der Welt für die schönen Dinge des Lebens. Bis dahin würde ich mich mit ihrem Interesse begnügen. Und mit dem Gefühl, das diese neue Freiheit in mir auslöste.

Die Stunden vergingen an diesem Abend noch schneller als gewöhnlich. Ich hatte mich in nur einem Monat an diesen Rhythmus gewöhnt und es machte mir weniger aus, als ich erwartet hatte. Als meine Kollegen und ich um kurz nach vier die letzten Barbesucher rausgeschmissen und alle Tische geputzt hatten, holte ich meine Tasche aus der Umkleidekabine und rief ihnen einen Abschiedsgruß zu, bevor ich aus dem Hintereingang in die Dunkelheit lief. Ich öffnete meine Haare und schüttelte sie im angenehm kühlen Nachtwind. Erneut erschien ein Lächeln auf meinen Lippen, als ich an die Einladung heute denken musste. Finn hatte mir, bevor er und sein Freund den Laden verlassen hatten, noch einen Zettel mit der Adresse und seiner Nummer zugesteckt. Ich würde den Fetzen aufbewahren. Für danach.

Ich war fast am Ende der Straße angelangt, als ich Schritte hinter mir wahrnahm. Der Weg war eben noch wie ausgestorben gewesen und die Schritte klangen verdächtig nah. Bisher hatte ich mir nie Gedanken gemacht, wenn ich nach einer weiteren Nachtschicht nach Hause gelaufen war. Ich fühlte mich in dieser Metropole so viel sicherer als in der beengenden Kleinstadt, die ich vor langer Zeit einmal mein Zuhause genannt hatte.

Automatisch drehte ich meinen Kopf, um mich umzusehen. Ich konnte den Reflex noch immer nicht ganz unterdrücken. Das Misstrauen.

Die Umstände hatten mir beigebracht, immer wachsam zu sein, wenn ich vor die Tür ging.

Es passierte alles in Sekundenschnelle. Ich nahm die dunkle Gestalt nur wenige Augenblicke wahr, bevor ich mit voller Wucht nach hinten gepresst wurde. Ich spürte am Rande, wie ich vor Schreck meine Tasche fallen ließ. Ein überraschter Schrei entwich meinen Lippen, aber er wurde sogleich von einer kalten Hand gedämpft, die mir auf den Mund gedrückt wurde.

Mit aufgerissenen Augen starrte ich in ein entfernt bekanntes Gesicht. Es war einer der Stammgäste aus der Bar. Er kam jedes Mal, wenn ich arbeitete und verließ die Bar nicht, ohne mindestens sechs Drinks bestellt zu haben. Sein heruntergekommenes Aussehen hatte sofort mein Mitleid erregt. Er hatte immer einsam ausgesehen. Hilflos.

Eine starke Alkoholfahne stieg mir in die Nase und mir wurde übel, während mein Herz heftig zu rasen begann.

„Hallo, Schönheit. Du weißt nicht, w-wie lange ich auf diesen Moment ...“ Seine Stimme verlor sich im Nichts.

Seine freie Hand wanderte über meinen Körper abwärts und ich fühlte, wie ich augenblicklich erstarrte.

Es dauerte einen Moment, bis ich realisierte, weshalb ich mich nicht wehrte.

Der Grund dafür war nicht etwa, dass ich so erschrocken darüber war, auf offener Straße belästigt zu werden.

Ich hatte längst den Überblick darüber verloren, wie oft ich in meinem Leben Schläge eingesteckt hatte. Ein blaues Auge war noch das Harmloseste gewesen, zwei Mal war ich bereits mit einer Gehirnerschütterung und Prellungen ins Krankenhaus eingeliefert worden.

Nein, der Grund für meine Passivität war ein anderer.

Ich war noch nie in *solch* einer Situation gewesen. Ich wusste genau, was hier gerade geschah. Was dieser Widerling im Begriff war zu tun.

Ich hätte nur niemals gedacht, dass ich auf diese Weise zu einem Opfer werden konnte.

Seine ekelhaft fordernde Hand war bei meinem Bauch angelangt und trotz seines Alkoholpegels hielt er mich mit stählernem Griff gegen die Hauswand hinter uns gedrückt.

Doch er spürte nicht den Zorn, der mich mit einem Mal durchfloss und mir einen klaren Kopf verschaffte. Er konnte nicht wissen, dass ich mir geschworen hatte, nie wieder die Kontrolle zu verlieren. Mich nie wieder aufgrund meines Körpers in die Opferrolle stecken zu lassen.

Und was er auch nicht ahnen konnte, war, dass ich genau deswegen drei Selbstverteidigungskurse hinter mir hatte.

Einen kurzen Moment überlegte ich, ob ich ihn weitermachen lassen sollte. Es konnte nicht mehr lange dauern, bis ihm trotz seiner Betrunkenheit auffiel, dass etwas an dem Körper der zierlichen *Schönheit* nicht stimmte.

Doch dann siegte die namenlose Wut in mir, die Adrenalinstitute durch mein gesamtes Inneres schickte.

Ich wusste nicht, ob es daran lag, dass ich so oft schon gepeinigt worden war und er der Tropfen war, der das Fass zum Überlaufen gebracht hatte, oder ob ich zum ersten Mal das Gefühl hatte, dass ich meine Weiblichkeit vor jemandem verteidigen musste, der mich nur als Mittel zum Zweck betrachtete.

Aber in diesem Moment sah rot.

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Er gab kaum mehr ein Wimmern von sich, als ich mit ihm fertig war.

Als ich in dieser Nacht in meinen Schlafanzug schlüpfte und mich im Badezimmer vor den Spiegel stellte, wurde mir langsam bewusst, dass ich nie ganz verstanden hatte, was es bedeutete, eine Frau zu sein. Ich war so fixiert auf die Äußerlichkeiten gewesen, die bei mir immer eindeutig falsch waren, dass ich nicht hinter die Fassade geblickt hatte.

Es waren weder die Geschlechtsteile noch die fehlende Körperbehaarung. Es war nicht die Anmut oder die Verletzlichkeit.

Es war das Wissen jahrhundertelanger Unterdrückung. Es war ein niemals endender Kampf.

Und es war nun auch meine Verantwortung.

Denn egal in welcher Hülle ich auf die Welt gekommen war, eine Frau war ich immer gewesen.

## Alex / Alexandra

**Mirsini Tramountani.** Germany

She was a vision.

Every evening before he dragged himself out of his empty, filthy flat and drank himself senseless, he thought of her. Every time, he convinced himself that the absinthe was responsible for the goddess-like image that was etched into his memory after every night. That such a person could not really exist.

And every time, he had to admit he was mistaken. Her skin was the colour of creamy milk coffee. Her unruly hair was always gathered in a bun and today, as usual, she wore a short, skin-tight dress. Slinky, as if she were trying to prove that no fantasy could match reality. Her eyes sparkled like a blazing fire in the dimly lit bar when she asked him if he wanted his usual drink.

He was certain that she was deliberately provoking him. He didn't care if she was much younger than him. She belonged to him from the very beginning, when he discovered her behind the bar for the first time. It only made him slightly angry that she seemed to have so much power over him. Since she had begun working there, his visits had become more and more frequent and longer. Eventually, he was only sleeping just over two hours before his shift started in the dreary office building at the city outskirts.

His father had warned him early. "Watch out for them," he had drummed into him. "They drive you mad with their looks, but there's basically nothing else there. You have to teach them, show them that their little games don't work on you, otherwise they wrap you around their little finger and before

you know it, you're blind with desire and anticipating their every wish."

His father was right, of course. No woman was good for anything other than providing physical pleasure. All they knew was manipulation and keeping up their good looks. Earlier he had made an effort to shower them with compliments and gifts, but these times were long since over. They were too good for him, looking at him with a mixture of pity and scorn when he asked them out.

It didn't matter. It was never really worth the effort anyway. Most of them had only slept with him after countless dates, after they tortured him with tedious, mindless conversation.

He plumped down onto a barstool in the farthest corner. The place was quite full but, nonetheless, it was just a minute before she popped up in front of him. She gave him a dazzling smile and he made an effort to keep his composure. "An absinthe?" she yelled over the loud music and the sound of lively conversation, winking. He merely nodded and licked his lips while he observed her pouring the liquid in a glass and taking the next customer's order. Her smile was just as inviting as it had been for him a few seconds ago, which infuriated him. They were all the same.

"Here you are." She placed his drink on the counter and he could see the drops of sweat that had accumulated on her cleavage as she leaned forward slightly to get more glasses. He nodded curtly while his thoughts ran wild. What he could do to her... She belonged to him. And if he had to, he would prove it to her.

He was a man, after all. The strongest thing that creation had ever produced. What was she in comparison?

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I loved this city. I loved the sensation of walking through the streets, smelling the sea, feeling people's gazes on me and knowing that I would finally be seen as I felt myself to be. But above all, I loved the anonymity. No one questioned my femininity. Or asked my parents what had gone wrong with my upbringing. No one knew my face or shouted insults after me when I simply wanted to walk a block away to the supermarket.

Here people still shouted things after me, of course, but they were the type of things that made me burst with pride. That made me stronger and helped me become more self-assured. Feel good in my own skin, even though it would still be a couple of years before I could be completely satisfied.

It was a new beginning for me, and even if my day-to-day was anything but relaxed – my two jobs kept me busy round the clock –, I knew it was the right thing to do. I had a goal and I was myself. For the first time in my twenty-five years, I was perfectly certain.

I even loved the night shifts at this smoky bar. "Two shots, please," I was torn from my thoughts and looked up with a smile. "What of?" I shouted back and my smile grew wider as I saw how the two young men in front of me were clearly looking me up and down. "Surprise us," came the answer. Their looks showed me that they liked what they saw.

I knew that such attention wasn't everything. I was well aware that I couldn't let my self-esteem depend on that and that I was already whole before I looked like I do now. But I couldn't deny that the desire in their eyes made me happy. When for years, you haven't dared acknowledge having a sexual interest in another person, this atten-

tion was a gift. I had had to listen to my best friend telling me repeatedly how degrading it was to be constantly whistled at or when men constantly stared at her bust when talking to her. I had always agreed, but I'd never understood it. I had been so jealous of her for years. That smooth skin. That floral scent. Those curves and that melodious voice. I would've given anything to be her.

"I'm Finn, by the way," one of them shouted as he pressed a few notes in my hand. "Keep the change." "Thanks," I replied and placed the shots on the counter. He must have been about my age. His eyes were the colour of liquid caramel. "Can we invite you to our flat party? It'll last all night, so you're welcome to come as soon as you're done here." I smiled, flattered. "You could give me your address." The invitation was enticing, but I knew it was impossible. I really had to go home after my shift to get in some sleep before I had to go to work again. It wasn't the first time I had been invited. It always gave me a small twinge to refuse an invitation, but I knew that my patience would pay off. When I'd saved up enough money and had the operation behind me, I'd have all the time in the world for the nice things in life. Until then I would have to settle for their interest. And with the feeling that this new freedom gave me.

The hours went by even quicker than usual this evening. I had gotten used to this rhythm in just a month and it bothered me less than I expected. As my colleagues and I threw out the last barflies and cleaned all the tables just after four, I got my bag from the staff room and shouted goodbye before walking into the dark through the back door. I let my hair loose and shook it in the pleasantly cool night breeze. Again a smile crept over my lips as I remembered today's invitation. Before he and his friend had left the bar, Finn had slipped me a piece of paper with his ad-

dress and phone number. I'd keep that scrap of paper. For later.

I had nearly reached the end of the street when I heard steps behind me. The streets were deserted and the footsteps sounded suspiciously close. Until now I had never had any misgivings about walking home after a night shift. I felt so much safer in this big city than in the stifling small town I had called home until recently. I automatically turned my head to look around. I still couldn't quite repress the reflex. The mistrust. Circumstances had taught me to always be wary when I went out the door.

Everything happened in a matter of seconds. I had only just discerned the dark figure seconds before I was pushed backwards with full force. I felt myself drop my bag from the fright. A scream of shock escaped my lips, but it was immediately smothered by a cold hand over my mouth.

Eyes wide, I was looking straight at a faintly familiar face. It was one of the regulars from the bar. He came every time I was working and didn't leave until he'd ordered at least six drinks. His shabby appearance had immediately elicited pity in me. He always looked lonely. Helpless. His overwhelming alcohol breath hit me, nauseating me while my heart started racing.

"Hello, gorgeous. You have no idea h-how long I've waited for..." His voice trailed off. His free hand was wandering down over my body and I felt myself freeze up momentarily. It was only a second before I realised why I was not defending myself. The reason was not that I was so shocked at being attacked on the street. I had long lost track of how often I had taken a beating. A black eye was the least of those; twice I had been taken to the hospital with a concussion and bruises.

No, the reason for my passivity was another. I had never been in quite *such* a situation. I knew exactly what was happening

here. What this repulsive creep was about to do. I had simply never imagined I could become this manner of victim. His revolting exploratory hand had reached my stomach and despite his alcohol level, he pressed me with iron force against the wall behind me.

But he did not notice the rage that suddenly flooded me, clearing my mind. He couldn't have known that I had sworn never again to lose control. Never again to let myself become a victim because of my body. And what he also couldn't possibly know was that, precisely because of this, I had already completed three self-defence courses.

For a brief minute, I considered letting him go on. It couldn't be long now before he realised, despite his drunkenness, that something about this gracefully *gorgeous* body wasn't right. But then an indescribable rage took me over, sending an adrenaline rush through my body. I don't know if it was because I had been tormented so often and this was the last straw, or because it was the first time I had the feeling I had to defend my femininity from someone who only saw me as a means to an end.

But at that moment, I saw red.

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He was hardly even whimpering when I was through with him.

That night, when I slipped into my pyjamas and stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, I slowly realised that I had never fully understood what it meant to be a woman. I was so obsessed with the outer appearance, which in my case was clearly always wrong, that I had never looked behind that façade. It was neither the genitals nor the lack of body hair. Nor was it the elegance or fragility.

It was the awareness of centuries of repression. It was a never-ending struggle. And it was now also my responsibility. For regardless of what shell I had come into the world in, I had always been a woman.

## Di madre in figlia

**Federica Ponza. Italia**

La prima volta che ho scoperto cosa fosse il dolore avevo poco più di cinque anni.

Difficile credere che a quell'età si possa davvero capire una cosa "da grandi" come la sofferenza, eppure ne ho un ricordo preciso. Un attimo di consapevolezza, di lucidità. Uno solo e già ti senti un po' meno bambina.

In realtà a rivelarmelo sono stati gli occhi di mia madre.

Sapete, il dolore è così a volte. Si nasconde negli angoli degli occhi, come una lacrima che non è ancora caduta, e rimane lì: immobile, pesante, appena visibile.

Alcune volte li riempie quegli occhi. Come un'ombra che li rende opachi, scuri, vuoti. Ed è già un po' più facile riconoscerlo.

Quando, però, è una lacrima agli angoli degli occhi ci vuole molto più impegno. Devi essere allenato, al dolore. A vederlo negli occhi dell'altro anche quando è solo una lacrima nell'angolo o un'ombra.

Io non lo ero. Ma si sa che ai bambini le cose davvero importanti devi spiegarle raramente.

Alcuni adulti, invece, non riescono proprio a capirle, neppure quando gliele spieghi.

Neanche quando quelle lacrime rigano le guance e quell'ombra rabbuia tutto il viso in un'espressione di disperazione. Neppure quando quella disperazione l'hanno causata loro.

E così, quel giorno in cui ho visto una lacrima non caduta agli angoli degli occhi di mia madre, non conoscevo neppure la parola per esprimere cosa fosse, ma dentro di me, in qualche modo, lo sapevo.

"Mamma, perché non ho un papà? Io voglio un papà. Credi che se lo chiedo a Babbo Natale me lo porterà?"

Un attimo di lucidità e già ti senti un po' meno bambina.

La seconda volta che ho incontrato il dolore è stato qualche anno dopo, a scuola.

Uno spintone, lo sguardo di un bambino su di me.

"Sei solo una puttana, proprio come tua madre!"

Una fitta al centro dello stomaco, come un pugno.

Per tutto il resto della giornata quella parola è rimasta dentro la mia testa.

Ronzava, girava, sbatteva. Si insinuava fra una sottrazione ed un predicato verbale.

*Puttana.* Sapevo vagamente il significato di quella parola. Mi era stato spiegato che era una donna che vendeva il proprio corpo in cambio di denaro.

Ma come si vende un corpo?

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"Buongiorno, come posso aiutarla?"

"Salve, cercavo un braccio ... Sa com'è, no? Fa sempre comodo un braccio in più. Oh sì, quello mi sembra perfetto. Per favore, mi dia uno di quelli di quella bambina laggiù.

Ottima scelta, signore. Glielo faccio subito incartare. La volevo anche informare che oggi c'è un'offerta speciale. Due occhi al prezzo di uno. Guardi che belli quelli di questa bambina! Un vero gioiello, non trova? La sua signora li apprezzerrebbe molto ... a proposito, come sta?"

"A meraviglia, grazie. In effetti, questi occhi sono un vero splendore! Massì, con un'offerta così ... me li dia! Ogni tanto queste donne bisogna anche viziarle!"

"Assolutamente d'accordo. Bene, mi dia un secondo e torno da lei".

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Ma io di negozi così non ne avevo mai visti.

Dunque, come potevo essere una *puttana*? E mia madre, la mia mamma ... No, non capivo. *Puttana. Pu-tta-na*. No, non si sillaba in questo modo. *Put-ta-na*. Ecco, adesso è giusto.

Tornando a casa, durante tutto il viaggio in macchina, mi sono domandata se avessi dovuto chiedere a mia mamma cosa significasse quella frase. Per quanto ci rimuginassi, non riuscivo a darmi una risposta.

Io, però, sapevo di non poterla dire quella parola. Come potevo dire a mia madre che un bambino mi aveva detto quella parola se io non potevo pronunciarla?

Era una brutta parola, una di quelle che i bambini non dovrebbero mai dire. Tutte le bambine lo sanno, ad un certo punto. *Non devi permettere ai maschietti di dirti quella parola, mai*. Lo senti come un monito interiore, come una consapevolezza che arriva da sé e che non se ne va più.

Una parola che sembra insozzare tutto ciò che tocca. Quindi adesso, forse, ero sporca anche io.

Io, però, non avevo fatto nulla di male. Avevo tirato un calcio ad una palla che aveva colpito proprio la testa di quel bambino. Non lo avevo fatto di proposito, non volevo che gli altri ridessero di lui.

Stavo per chiedergli scusa, ma era arrivata prima la spinta. Le parole erano rimaste ferme in gola, insieme ad un misto di umiliazione, lacrime e rabbia.

Non dovevo permettere a nessuno di dirmi quella parola. Lo sapevo. Eppure lo avevo permesso e non avevo fatto nulla per difendermi. Mi sentivo impotente e, in qualche strano modo, sbagliata.

Crescendo ho cominciato a capire davvero. Una ragazza fa i conti presto con quella parola e li continua a fare per tutta la vita. Non solo con quella. Anche con tutte le molteplici sfumature di significato che può assumere.

"Chissà con chi avrà fatto sesso per arrivare dov'è ..."

"Ho sentito dire che fa sesso ogni volta con un uomo diverso ... una troia!"

"Devi avere rispetto del tuo corpo ... sei una ragazza."

"La picchiava e lei non è andata via ... in fondo è anche colpa sua."

"Era ad una festa da sola, chissà cosa avrà bevuto e si lamenta che l'abbiano stuprata."

"E lei cosa indossava? Cosa ha fatto per provocarlo?"

"Certo, le persone dovrebbero essere libere di andare dove vogliono, ma questo è un mondo brutto, avrebbe dovuto saperlo e non uscire da sola la sera tardi."

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Finché ti sembra quasi normale.

Finché non ti offendi di più.

Finché fai solo finta di nulla.

Finché a quell'apprezzamento volgare non reagisci, ma semplicemente tiri dritto.

Perché forse, in fondo, è meglio così.

Ingoi l'umiliazione, la rabbia, l'orgoglio, cerchi di non incrociare il loro sguardo e tiri dritto.

E tutto è esattamente come quella volta da bambina. Ti senti altrettanto fragile e piccola.

*Non devi permettere ai maschietti di dirti quella parola, mai.*

Ti insegnano ad evitare la catastrofe, a prevederla per giunta, a stare attenta, ad essere sempre pronta, a non andare in certi posti, a comportarti in certi modi, a non comportarti in altri, a non vestirti in certi modi.

*Perché sei una ragazza ... devi avere cura del tuo corpo.*

Così, la sera, quando cammini da sola in un luogo isolato, ti sorprendi ad accelerare il passo e a stringere tra le dita le chiavi della macchina.

E quel presagio di catastrofe imminente ti accompagna, latente, per tutta la vita. Ogni tanto riemerge e si impone prepotente alla tua attenzione. E tu, per quanto ti sia sempre reputata una donna forte, devi abbandonarti ad esso.

Perché sei il sesso debole e non devi mai, mai dimenticarlo.

Il prezzo da pagare potrebbe essere più caro del previsto, potrebbe anche essere la tua vita e non solo quella biologicamente intesa.

Sì, perché per una ragazza ci sono tanti modi di morire.

E anche questo me l'hanno rivelato gli occhi di mia madre.

Quando dentro di essi ho letto chiaramente che un giorno, molti anni prima, le era capitato di morire.

Un attimo di lucidità e non sarai mai più bambina.

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*A vent'anni credi di sapere tutto sulla vita.*

*Ti senti straordinariamente forte, straordinariamente vivo, straordinariamente giovane.*

*Quanti progetti, quante cose belle pensi ti riservi la vita. Alle cose brutte, invece, pensi raramente.*

*O almeno io non ci pensavo molto. Pensavo che la mia vita sarebbe stata piena di scoperte e che ognuna di esse sarebbe stata un'esperienza unica, una di quelle che poi sarebbe valsa la pena raccontare.*

*Poi, un giorno, capita qualcosa di brutto. E capisci in un attimo che ci sono alcune esperienze che, invece, non avrai mai voglia di raccontare.*

*Ti ricordi quella volta che mi hai detto di volere un padre?*

*Io la ricordo bene. Avevi poco più di cinque anni e quella domanda è stata una doccia fredda per me.*

*Non fraintendere, amore mio, tu ne avevi tutto il diritto.*

*Il diritto di chiedere, di essere curiosa, di conoscere.*

*Da parte mia sapevo benissimo che prima o poi me lo avresti domandato e ho passato tutti gli anni precedenti a quella domanda a chiedermi come avrei potuto risponderti, cosa avrei potuto dirti, quali parole scegliere.*

*Il giorno che è arrivata, quella domanda, io ancora non le avevo trovate le parole. E così è stato per gran parte della mia vita.*

*Sai, mi è capitato spesso di fermarmi a riflettere proprio sulle parole. Quanto possano essere ambivalenti.*

*Come a volte ti sembrano troppe e invece altre mai abbastanza. Come in certi momenti esse si nascondano e per quanto tu possa cercarle, proprio non riesci a trovarle.*

*Ma la cosa che più di tutto mi ha tormentato nella vita è la potenza delle parole.*

*Prima di quello che sto per raccontarti, io credevo fermamente nella potenza delle parole.*

*Credevo nella potenza di un "NO" per esprimere ciò che non vuoi, per far capire agli altri dove debbano fermarsi. Credevo che le persone non potessero violare i "NO", quelli espliciti, quelli chiari, pronunciati con convinzione e ben scanditi.*

*Più di tutto, però, credevo nelle persone. In seguito sono riuscita a crederci ancora, è vero. Ma con gran fatica e molto impegno.*

*Vent'anni quindi. I miei vent'anni.*

*Era primavera inoltrata e le giornate cominciavano ad essere più lunghe.*

*Io amavo le ultime giornate della primavera. Quel tepore che comincia a somigliare a quello estivo, ma non ne ha la aggressività. No, il tepore primaverile è delicato, dolce e ogni volta sembra prenderti per mano ed accompagnarti passo dopo passo verso l'estate.*

*Io, all'epoca, ero iscritta all'università e avevo appena chiuso una storia.*

*Circa un anno e mezzo prima avevo conosciuto un ragazzo. Era qualche anno più grande di me e la sera che l'ho conosciuto tutto mi era sembrato perfetto e, a fine serata, ci eravamo scambiati i numeri per vederci ancora.*

*Poi, il primo appuntamento. Il primo bacio. La prima volta che abbiamo fatto l'amore. Il primo ti amo.*

*Un anno insieme.*

*Ad un certo punto i litigi, sempre più frequenti. Le sue gelosie, le mie insicurezze. La sua presunzione, la mia testardaggine. Finché, un giorno, ti accorgi che non lo ami più. E così finisce. Il dolore, certo, ma dentro di te sai che è la cosa giusta.*

*Pensi sia la fine, è solo l'inizio.*

*Lui che si fa trovare spesso nei posti che frequenti abitualmente: sotto casa, all'università, nei locali in cui vai di sera. All'inizio non pensi nulla, solo che non riesca a rassegnarsi. Poi le chiamate, i messaggi. Sempre più frequenti, sempre più aggressivi.*

*Tu non capisci. In cuor tuo, però, ti dici che forse è solo arrabbiato, che gli passerà, che ti ha amato molto e non ti farebbe mai del male.*

*Finché un giorno ti ferma per strada. Tu hai appena salutato un amico. Lui non vuol sentir ragioni.*

*"Chi cazzo era quello? Non sei altro che una troia!". Uno schiaffo.*

*Il mondo intorno a te si ferma. La guancia pulsa forte e brucia, ma a bruciare di più è una zona non ben precisata nel tuo petto.*

*Lui piange, si scusa, ti implora. Pensi che tutti possano sbagliare, che in fondo vi siete amati tanto, non ti farebbe mai del male.*

*Infine un messaggio.*

*“Devo parlarti. Ho bisogno di te.”*

*Lo incontri. Sali a casa sua. Gli chiedi quale sia il problema.*

*Lui ti implora, ancora. Vuole stare con te. Vuole solo te.*

*Ma tu non lo ami. Non più. E gli dici che, per quanto gli vorrai sempre bene, non puoi stare con lui.*

*Crack.*

*Qualcosa si rompe. I suoi occhi cambiano. Un lampo li attraversa. Ti prende per un braccio e lo stringe con forza.*

*“Mi fai male! Ti prego, lasciami!”.*

*Non lo fa. Si getta sopra di te. Il suo peso non ti permette di muoverti. “NO, lasciami!”.*

*Con una mano ti chiude la bocca, con l'altra ti sbottona i pantaloni.*

*Provi a dimenarti. Non riesci a muoverti. Ti senti fragile come non lo sei mai stata. I tuoi occhi lo implorano. Non farlo, ti prego. Ci siamo amati così tanto.*

*Crack.*

*Qualcosa si rompe. Stavolta è il tuo cuore. Perde un battito. Poi due. Poi vorresti li perdesse tutti.*

*Chiudi gli occhi. La testa all'indietro. Voglio solo che finisca. Lui dentro te. Un corpo estraneo in un altro che cominci a non sentire più tuo.*

*Ti alzi, raccogli i brandelli della tua anima e te ne vai senza dire una parola.*

*E poi il vuoto. Dentro e fuori. La testa ronza. Vorresti che si aprisse un cratere sotto i tuoi piedi e ti inghiottisse per sempre. Ti siedi in macchina. Gli occhi vacui, pieni di lacrime.*

*Fissi un punto lontano, ma non ci sei.*

*Non ci sei e non ci sarai per molto tempo.*

*Non ci sarai e non vuoi nemmeno esserci. Vuoi solo dimenticare.*

*Ed ora? Cosa faccio? Chi mi crederà? Se lo denuncio ... domande, giudizi, dover ripercorrere tutto. Ancora e ancora.*

*“Se è andata a casa sua evidentemente lo voleva. Prima fa la puttana in giro e poi si lamenta se la stuprano.”*

*E poi la vergogna. Sono sporca, sono debole.*

*Sono stata stupida, sono stata ingenua.*

*È stata tutta colpa mia.*

*Voglio solo dimenticare tutto.*

*Ma si può davvero dimenticare?*

*Come una ferita che brucia continuamente, così quel ricordo.*

*Lo ripercorro nei minimi dettagli. Domandandomi se avrei potuto evitarlo, se in qualche modo l'ho spinto a fare ciò che ha fatto.*

*A volte il ricordo arriva all'improvviso e si insinuava nella mia testa come un parassita, fino a coprire tutto il resto. Allora mi blocco, incapace perfino di respirare.*

*Il suo corpo che continua a schiacciare il mio, come se non fosse passato un giorno.*

*Il tuo di corpo che è diventato quasi un peso ormai. Un corpo che vorresti prendere e buttare via.*

*Per cancellare i segni. Per non sentire più quel vuoto allo stomaco. Per non avere più gli incubi la notte. Per quei momenti in cui ti manca il respiro e ti senti paralizzata dal terrore.*

*Pochi mesi dopo un test di gravidanza.*

*Il mondo si ferma, di nuovo. Ancora il vuoto. Dentro e fuori. La testa ronza. Le lacrime sul viso.*

*Lasci andare le braccia su un corpo che non è più tuo da tempo.*

*Hai paura. Di nuovo.*

*Pensi di abortire. E ti senti in colpa. Il respiro manca. La testa gira. Di nuovo le lacrime.*

*La pancia cresce e gli occhi puntati costantemente addosso. Di chi si domanda dove sia il padre.*

*Ma mentre crescevi dentro me, in qualche modo riempivi anche il vuoto nella mia anima. Rimettevi a posto i pezzi.*

*L'odio diventava amore. La paura, coraggio. E poi sei nata e non ho più smesso di amarti.*

*Così, quando mi hai chiesto " perché non ho un papà", avrei voluto dirti che tuo padre non esiste.*

*Avrei voluto dirti che grazie a te sono rinata, ma che tuo padre mi aveva uccisa.*

*Avrei voluto solo dirti che non tutti gli uomini sono esseri umani. Non tutti gli uomini sanno essere umani.*

*Mamma ... e il dolore agli angoli degli occhi diventa lacrime sul viso.*

## From Mother to Daughter

**Federica Ponza. Italy**

My first encounter with pain came when I was not much older than five.

Difficult to believe that at that age you can really understand something “grown-up” like suffering, and yet I have a very clear memory. An instant of awareness, lucidity. Just one and you have already lost some of your childhood innocence.

In actual fact the revelation came to me from my mother’s eyes.

Pain is like that at times. It hides in the corners of eyes, like a tear that has not yet fallen and stays there, not moving, heavy, just visible.

Sometimes it fills those eyes. Like a shadow that makes them dull, dark, empty. Then it’s a little easier to recognise.

However, when it is a tear in the corner of the eyes it takes much more effort. You must be trained to recognise pain. To see it in the other person’s eye, even when it is just a tear in the corner or a shadow.

I wasn’t. But everyone knows little children rarely need an explanation when it comes to really important things.

Some adults, on the other hand, just can’t understand this, even when you explain it to them.

Not even when those tears roll down cheeks and that shadow darkens all the face in desperation. Not even when they were the cause of all that despair.

And so, that day when I saw that unwept tear in the corner of my mother’s eyes, I didn’t even know the word to express what it was, but inside me, somehow, I knew anyway.

“Mummy, why don’t I have a daddy? I want a daddy. Do you think that if I ask Father Christmas, he’ll bring me one?”

A moment of lucidity and already you feel your childhood slipping away.

The second time I met pain was a few years later, at school.

A push and the eyes of a boy towering over me.

“You’re nothing but a whore, just like your mother!”

A blow to my stomach, as if he’d punched me.

For the rest of the day that word echoed in my head.

It buzzed, flipped and crashed. It wormed its way between a subtraction and a predicate.

*Whore.* I vaguely knew what it meant. I had been told that it meant a woman who sold her body for money.

But how do you sell a body?

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“Good morning, how can I help you?”

“Oh, hello. Yes, I was looking for an arm... you know... An extra arm is always useful. Yes, that looks perfect. Give me one from that little girl down there, please.”

“Excellent choice, sir. I’ll have it wrapped for you right away. You might also be interested in today’s special offer. Two eyes for the price of one. Look how lovely this little girl’s eyes are! Real gems, don’t you agree? Your wife would really like them... how is she, by the way?”

“Wonderful, thank you. You’re right, these eyes are lovely. Oh go on then, it’s a

good offer... I'll take them! We need to spoil these ladies every now and again!"

"I couldn't agree more. Ok, give me a second and I'll be right with you."

\*\*\*\*\*

But I had never seen any shops like that.

So, how could I be a *whore*? And my mum, my mum... No, I didn't understand.

*Whore... hore? hoor?* I didn't even know how to spell it. *Whore*. That's it, that's how you spell it.

On the way home, all the way home in the car, I wondered if I should ask my mum what it meant. Because as much as I tried, I couldn't work it out.

What I did know, however, was that I shouldn't use that word. How could I tell my mum that a boy had said a word to me if I wasn't allowed to say the word?

It was a bad word, one of those that children should never say. All little girls know it, sooner or later. *You mustn't ever let boys say that word to you*. You hear it like an inner warning, like an awareness that arrives on its own and never goes away.

A word that seems to dirty everything it touches. So now, perhaps I was dirty too.

I hadn't done anything wrong though. I had kicked a ball that had hit that boy's head. I hadn't done it on purpose, I didn't want them to laugh at him.

I was about to say sorry, but he pushed me before I could. The words stuck in my throat, together with a mixture of humiliation, tears and anger.

I wasn't to let anyone say that word to me. I knew. And yet I had let him say it and I hadn't done anything to defend myself. I felt powerless and in some strange way, wrong.

As I grew up, I started to really understand. A girl soon has to deal with that particular word and that's how it is for the rest of

her life. Not just that one, either. Also with all its many other implied meanings.

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"Who knows who she slept with to get where she is..."

"I've heard that she has sex with a different man each time... slut!"

"You must respect your body... you're a girl."

"He beat her and she wouldn't leave him... she was just as much to blame."

"She was at a party on her own, goodness knows what she must have drunk and then she complains that she was raped."

"And what was she wearing? What did she do to provoke him?"

"People should be free to go where they want, but this is an ugly world, she should have known that and not go out on her own late at night."

\*\*\*\*\*

Until it almost seems normal.

Until you aren't even offended any more.

Until you just pretend nothing is wrong.

Until you don't react to that vulgar comment, you just keep walking.

Because maybe, really, it's just better like that.

You swallow your humiliation, your anger and pride and try not to look them in the eye and just keep going.

And it is all exactly like that time when you were a little girl. You feel just as fragile and small.

"You mustn't let boys say that word to you, ever."

They teach you to avoid catastrophe, to foresee it even, to be careful, to always be ready, to not go to certain places, to behave in a certain way, and not in others, and not to wear certain clothes.

"Because you are a girl... you have to look after your body."

So, at night, when you walk alone in an isolated area, you find yourself walking faster and clenching your car keys in your hand.

And that sense of imminent catastrophe accompanies you, dormant throughout your life. Every now and again it awakens and rudely calls for your attention. And, although you have always thought yourself to be a strong woman, you have to give in to it.

Because you are the *weaker sex* and you must *never, never* forget it.

There could be a higher price to pay than you expected, it could even be your life and not in a strict biological sense.

Yes, because there are lots of ways a girl can die.

And this too was revealed to me by my mother's eyes.

When I clearly read in them that one day, many years before, she had died.

A moment of lucidity and you will never be a little girl again.

\*\*\*\*\*

*At the age of twenty you think you know everything about life.*

*You feel so strong, so alive, so young.*

*How many projects, how many wonderful things you think life holds for you. You rarely think about the bad things.*

*Or at least I didn't think about them much. I thought that my life would be full of discoveries and each of them would be a unique experience, a tale worth telling.*

*Then, one day, something horrible happens. And you understand in an instant that there are some experiences that you will never want to talk about.*

*Do you remember that time you told me you wanted a daddy?*

*I remember it well. You were not much older than five and that question was a real cold shower for me.*

*Don't misunderstand me, darling. You had every right to ask.*

*The right to ask, to be curious, to know.*

*On my part, I knew all too well that sooner or later you would ask me and I had spent all the years before you asked wondering how I would answer; what I could say, what words to choose.*

*The day the question came, I still hadn't found the right words. And that was how it went for most of my life.*

*You know, I have often stopped to reflect on words. On how ambivalent they can be.*

*How at times they seem to be too many and other times hardly enough. How sometimes they hide and no matter how much you look for them, you just can't find them.*

*But what has tormented me more than anything in my life has been the power of words.*

*Before what I am about to tell you happened, I firmly believed in the power of words.*

*I believed in the power of a "NO" to express what you didn't want, to make others understand when they should stop. I believed that people couldn't violate your "NOs", those explicit, obvious ones, pronounced clearly and with conviction.*

*More than anything though, I believed in people. Later I managed to believe again, it's true. But it took a lot of effort and strong will.*

*Twenty years of age. Me at twenty.*

*It was late spring and the days were starting to get longer.*

*I loved the last days of spring. That warmth that starts to feel like summer, but has none of the aggressiveness of summer heat. No, spring warmth is delicate, gentle, and each time seems to take you by the hand, leading you step by step towards the summer.*

*At the time I was at university and had just finished with a boy.*

*I had met him about a year and a half before. He was a few years older than me and the evening I met him everything seemed perfect and, by the end of the evening, we had swapped phone numbers so we could see each other again.*

*Then our first date. Our first kiss. The first time we made love. The first "I love you".*

*A year together.*

*At a certain point we started to argue more and more often. His jealousy, my uncertainties. His presumption, my stubbornness. Until, one day, I realised I didn't love him anymore. And that's how it finishes. Painful, yes, but inside you know it is right.*

*You think it's the end, but it's only the beginning.*

*You often bump into him in the places you normally hang out: outside your home, at university, in nightclubs. To start with, you think nothing of it, just that he's finding it hard to let go. Then the phone calls, the texts. More and more frequent, more and more aggressive.*

*You don't understand. In your heart, however, you tell yourself that perhaps he is just cross, that he'll get over it, that he loved you a lot and would never hurt you.*

*Until one day he stops you in the street. You have just said goodbye to a friend. He won't listen to reason.*

*"Who the fuck was that? You're nothing but a slut!" A slap.*

*Everything around grinds to a halt. Your cheek really stings and throbs, but there is something somewhere in your breast that burns even more.*

*He cries, apologises, begs you. You think, we can all make mistakes, that when it comes down to it, you loved each other so much and he would never hurt you.*

*Then, finally, a text.*

*"I have to speak to you. I need you."*

*You meet him. You go to his house. You ask him what the problem is.*

*He begs you again. He wants to be with you. All he wants is you.*

*But you don't love him. Not anymore. And you tell him that, although you will always be fond of him, you don't want to be with him.*

*Crack.*

*Something breaks. His eyes change. You see a flash in them. He grabs you by the arm and squeezes it tight.*

*"You're hurting me! Let go, please!"*

*He won't. He throws himself on top of you. He is too heavy for you to get up. "NO, leave me"!*

*With one hand he shuts your mouth, with the other he undoes your trousers.*

*You try to struggle. You can't move. You feel more fragile than you have ever done. Your eyes plead with him. Don't do, I beg you. We loved each other so much.*

*Crack.*

*Something breaks. This time it's your heart. It misses a beat. Then two. Then you want it to miss all of them.*

*You shut your eyes. Throw your head back. All you want is for it to be over. He is inside you. A foreign body inside another that you are starting to feel is no longer yours.*

*You get up, gather the shreds of your soul and leave without saying a word.*

*And then the emptiness. Inside and out. Your head buzzes. You want the earth beneath your feet to open up and swallow you whole, forever. You sit in your car. Your vacant eyes full of tears.*

*You stare at a point in the distance, but you're not really there.*

*You're not there and you won't be for a long time.*

*You won't be and you don't even want to be. You just want to forget.*

*And now? What do I do? Who will believe me? If I report him... questions, judgement, having to go through it all again. Again and again.*

*"She went to his house, she was obviously up for it. First she screws around and then she complains that she was raped."*

*And then the shame. I am dirty, I am weak.*

*I was stupid, I was naïve.*

*It was all my fault.*

*All I want to do is forget.*

*But can you really forget?*

*The memory is like a wound that burns continually.*

*I go over and over it, even the smallest details. Asking myself if I could have avoided it, if in some way I encouraged him to do what he did.*

*At times the memory arrives unexpectedly, creeping into my head like a parasite until it covers all the rest. Then it paralyses me, leaving me incapable even of breathing.*

*His body continuing to squash mine, as if it were yesterday.*

*Your body that has become almost a burden now. A body you would like to take and throw away.*

*To cancel the signs. To not feel that emptiness in your stomach anymore. To not have nightmares any more. For those mo-*

*ments when you can't breathe and you are paralysed by terror.*

*Just a few months later, a pregnancy test.*

*The world stops turning, again. That emptiness, again. Inside and out. A buzzing head. Tears on your face.*

*You place your hands on a body that has not been yours for a while.*

*You are scared. Again.*

*You consider abortion. And you feel guilty. You can't breathe. Your head spins. Tears again.*

*Your tummy grows and everyone looks at you. They are all asking themselves who the father is.*

*But while you were growing inside me, you somehow also filled the emptiness in my soul. You put the pieces back together again.*

*Hate became love. Fear, courage. And then you were born and I have never stopped loving you.*

*So, when you asked me "why don't I have a daddy," I wanted to tell you that your father doesn't exist.*

*I wanted to tell you that thanks to you I was reborn, but that your daddy had killed me.*

*I just wanted to tell you that not all men are human beings. Not all men know how to be human.*

*Mummy... and the pain in the corner of her eyes becomes tears on her face.*

## جميلة

لندا احمد عبيدات. الاردن

اشتدّت وطأة القصف، وأصبح لزاماً علينا مغادرة المنزل، لم يُترك لنا أي خيار آخر، فبعد أن هُدم العديد من المنازل في حيننا فجر الأمس، انتظرنا ضوء الفجر كسجين تحت الأرض منذ دهر، وها هي حقائبنا تحمل الأكثر أهمية من متاعنا، فلم يكن هناك أي وقت أصلي ولا إضافي، غادرتُ أنا وأبي وأمي وأخي الصغير، لتبدأ رحلة لم نكن نتوقع أن تكون أكثر جنوناً من قصف الليلة السابقة.

كان علينا بحكم قربنا من دولة مجاورة أن نذهب إليها دون تردد ولذلك لأن الإنسان حينما يفقد طعم الأمان لا يعد بإمكانه أن يتذوق طعاماً للراحة، أو حتى الطعام!... ومع كثرة الحواجز الأمنية بسبب تردي الأوضاع، والابتزازات التي تعرضنا لها على الطريق، والنقود التي دفعها أبي تحت وطأة الابتزاز كما المههد بالفضيحة، كل ذلك كان خوفاً علينا، وبالذات كان يلمسني ذلك الشعور الخفي بأنه خوف عليّ أنا بالذات، حتى وصلنا إلى حدود الدولة المجاورة، ولن أسرد عليكم طول الانتظار تحت الخيم البالية في انتظار استكمال اجراءات الدخول، ليدخل أبي علينا بعدها بيومين مستبشراً يحمل الأوراق كمن فاز بتذكرة سياحة إلى لندن!...

وها نحن ندخل إلى بلد جديد وجيران جدد، لا يفصلنا سوى ستائر الخيام عن بعضنا، فالخيمة أصبحت المأوى والسكن، بعد بيتنا الجميل الذي كان يتربع وسط ضيعة جميلة، محفوف بالورود، وشجر الرمان، وشجرة الاجاص التي كان يسرق منها الأطفال فلا أحاسبهم على ذلك، والنافورة العتيقة التي تتوسط ساحة المنزل، وزهور أمي التي كانت تسقيها كل صباح، يقتلني الحنين إلى بيتنا حينما أنظر إلى أهلي وهم نيام بجوار بعضهم بسبب ضيق المساحة، ليقاطع شرودي استيقاظ أمي وندائها لي: "جميلة" لماذا لم تنامي بعد؟ لأرد على الفور: سأنام تصبحين على خير.

وها قد نفذ المال الذي أحضره أبي وكان كل ما ادخره في وطننا، وبدأ مزاجه بالانتقال نحو الطابع العصبي جداً، وبدأ يدخن السجائر بشراهة بالغة، ولم نعد نجرؤ على طلب أي شيء أو فتح أي موضوع معه خوفاً من غضبه الشديد، لأضطر يوماً أن أقول له: أبي أريد ملابس جديدة فمذ أكثر من عام ونحن هنا وهذه الملابس أصبحت بالية، أنا لم يكن في قصدي أن أضغط عليه أكثر من كل الظروف الزبئقية المحيطة به وبنا، لأتفاجئ بردّ أقرسى من المتوقع: " أن اغربي عن وجهي فوراً"، صدقوني أنها انغرزت سكيناً في حلقي وشرقتُ بدمعي يوماً كاملاً.

بدأت الأمور تسوء أكثر، فالأزمة في وطننا يبدو أن طريقها طويل، والعودة أصبحت تحتاج لوقت أطول كما طريق المغادرة الطويل الذي لن أنساه، وها أنا أسمع أبي وأصدقائه من خلف باب الخيمة خلسة وهم يشكون لبعضهم سوء الحال، لكن ما لفت انتباهي هو جملة أربعتني بالرغم من عدم تأكدي

بأنها تعينني: " هذه التي في الداخل لا أعلم ماذا أفعل بها؟! " ، فخلت نفسي أريكة أو شيء من هذا القبيل، وبوادر توجي بطواف أسراب الغربان في سماء مخيمنا.

ليدخل علينا في صبيحة أحد الأيام رجل أربعيني من الدولة التي استضافتنا، ليحيب وجه أبي ولسانه بالترحاب وأن تفضلت بالجلوس، فألحظ وجه أبي بأنه يعرف ماذا يريد الرجل وليس باللقاء الأول بينهما، فيبدأ الرجل بالتحدث وأنا وأمي وجميل نجلس معهم في نفس المكان، لأنه لا مكان إلا هذا يتسع لنا، أرايتم الأرض بفسحتها وفضائها، لم تتسع لنا سوى في خيمة! فيقول الرجل: أن يا أبا جميل أنا أريد أن أطلب يد ابنتكم للزواج، متمنياً الموافقة، لنقول أمي على فورها: موافقة، لينعقد لساني ويدخل سيل من الهواء البارد في عيني، لم أنطق بكلمة واحدة من الصدمة، زواج؟ متى وأين؟ أنا جميلة الجميلة التي سأ تزوج؟ لكني أحب نادر وهو يحبني، وعاهدني على الزواج، لكن شاءت الظروف أن نفترق، من قال أنني متعجلة الزواج؟ ومن هذا الذي يكبرني بأكثر من عقد ونصف؟ سيل من الأسئلة الجارفة التي خرقت رأسي كقذائف الطائرات في ذلك اليوم المشؤوم، لأستيقظ من شرودي والضيف قد رحل وأمي مبتهجة تدعو وتبتهل بالتمام، لأنفجر مباشرة بالبكاء: لا أريد الزواج، من هذا الذي ستزوجوني به؟... لأتلقى هزة عنيفة من أبي وهو يرتجف غضباً، وشفته السفلية متدلّية مرتجفة، كلوح القفز في السباحة، فيقول لي: لم يعد بوسعي أن أقوم بواجبي تجاهكم، وما العيب في الزواج؟ وما العيب في الرجل المتقدم لطلب يدك؟ لأستجمع الجراءة وأجيبه على الفور: لا عيب في الزواج، العيب في تزويجي لرجل يكبرني بأكثر من عقد ونصف، العيب في تزويجي لمن لا تعرف، العيب في تزويجي لضيق ذات اليد، هذا بيع وليس تزويج، ليضربني بعدها ضرباً مُبرحاً ويتوعدني، حتى حال بيننا جميل وأمي كالستار المنسدل بعد نهاية العرض، لينتهي عرض يوم مليء بالضرب والسب واللعن...

تمت مراسم الزفة البسيطة، ورحلت لحي الزوج الجديد، بيته المكتنف في حي متوسط، نظرات الجيران الفضوليين إلي ونحن ندخل من مدخل البيت، لأنتبه على صوته الخشن المليء برائحة السجار وهو يناديني: هنالك وعاء في المطبخ بالداخل، املاي الوعاء بالماء الساخن وأحضريه، لأقوم بالتلبية على الفور، فوجهه حاد الملامح يحتوي العديد من الخطوط، كمحراث خطّ بشكل عشوائي في أرض حمراء التربة بعد مطر وفير، فيقول لي اخلعي لي حذائي ودلكي قدمي، لأطيع لا حول لي، فاختلط بخار الماء بدموعي ونشيجي، تذكرت نادر ووجهه المُبتسم، وكيف كان في الجامعة لا يطيق أن أتعب في أي مهمة، ليقاطعني وجهه على الفور بالإقتراب مني كالذئب المفترس، فيحملني كالذبيحة إلى غرفة النوم، لأتلقى ليلةً مليئةً بالدماء والدموع...

لم يدم الحال طويلاً، فبعد شهرين رجعتُ إلى بيت أبي أحمل هالةً زرقاء حول عيني وآثار الضرب تملأ جسدي الذي فقد من وزنه بمقدار ما حمل من حقد وضغينة، ليسألني أبي على الفور: ما الذي أتى بك إلى هنا؟ لأرد بصوت أنهكه النشيج: لقد طلقني، ليرد أبي على الفور: ماذا تعنين؟ أجيبني، ماذا فعلتي؟ لأبدأ بالبكاء ويبدأ بضربي تزامناً مع ذلك، ليأتي جميل الوحيد الذي أجد به عزائي فيحول بيني وبين أبي كموج البحر بين السفينة وغريق بأنفاسه الأخيرة، ليقول له مع ملاحظتي خشونة صوته

المختلطة بالنعومة: دعها وشأنها! ليغادر أبي المكان حاملاً علبه سجائره وبركاناً من الغضب فوق رأسه، لتبدأ أسئلة أمي المختلطة بالدموع ما الذي حدث؟ لأجيب بجرأة: لم يحدث شيء يا أمي، لم يأخذني زوجة، يريد استعبادي، لقد ضربته نعم ضربته، أبت علي كرامتي أن أقبل هكذا حياة ذليلة، لتعود أمي وتبكي على الحال.

لست نادمة، ولو عاد بي الزمن لرفضت لو تم ذبحي أن أذهب دون إرادتي، سأدرّس في مدرسة المخيم ولو بأجر زهيد، فشهادتي الجامعية تؤهلني لذلك، وبالفعل لم يمر الكثير من الوقت بعد تقديم طلب تدرّس، ليقابلني المسؤول عن المدرسة، فيقول لي: اجلسي، ففعلتُ، فيقول: الاسم جميلة وأنتِ مثل اسمك، فلا أرد على ذلك بأي شيء، تعلم أن لا تجامل أحداً تشك بأنه يريد أن يستغلك أو يريد الاستهانة بذكائك! ليدور الحديث وبعض الأسئلة الروتينية، ليقول لي بأن أراجع الإدارة بعد أسبوع لمعرفة النتيجة النهائية لطلب التوظيف، ورغم الوسيلة البدائية لتلقي النتيجة لأنه لا هاتف لدينا ولا حاسوب ولا شبكة، ذهبتُ في الموعد المحدد لأتلقى نبأ قبولي في الوظيفة، لأفرح فرحاً غامراً، وأعود لأهلي لأزف البشرى لهم، فأبي وأمي فرحوا بسبب المبلغ الي سأقتاضاه، أما جميل فقد فرح من كامل قلبه فقط لأنه شاهدني في غاية السعادة، لأتوقف أمام المرأة قبل أول يوم دراسي، فألاحظ وجهي الذي كدث أنساه مع الزمن، عينا الخضراوان أنفي الأبيض المنمش وجهي المستدير، أهدابي الطويلة، شعري الأشقر المائل إلى لون سوار أمي الذي تخفيه ولا يعلم عنه والدي، لأبدأ بتجربة أداء متواضعة لحصّة علوم للصف السادس، وتحديثي عن التكيف وعلاقة الحيوانات مع بعضها، من تكافل وتعايش ولم يلفت انتباهي سوى علاقة الإفراس، لأتذكر شريطاً أسوداً في حياتي قررتُ أن أنساه، فأشرق بدمعي ثم أبتسم وأعود التمثيل أمام المرأة.

كان اليوم الأول مليئاً بالمغامرات والأحداث الجميلة، والإنطباع الطيب الذي تركته في نفوس الطلاب، حتى أتى طالب إلي وقال لي: معلمة جميلة أنا أحبك فأنتِ تشبهين أختي سمية التي ماتت في الحرب، لتخفني العبرات وأقوم باحتضانه بروحي وجسدي، بكينا سوياً وكثيراً...

بعد ثلاثة أشهر استدعاني المدير إلى مكتبه، فمقتُ بالذهاب، لأرى نظرات متفحصة لجسدي ووجهي أثناء تقديمه كلام وطلبات غير واضحة، فعرفتُ أنه لا يريد شيئاً سوى أن ينظر إلي، ليتكرر المشهد لكن كل أسبوع أو أسبوعين، طلبات وأسئلة غير واضحة، فيقول لي: كيف مستوى الطلاب؟ فأجيب، ثم ينظر إلى جسدي، فيقول هل قمت بتسليم العلامات إلى الإدارة؟ لأقول له قبل يومين قمت بتسليمك العلامات، ثم يأمرني بالإنصراف.

في نهاية العام الدراسي، وبعد اجتماع المدرسين والهيئة الإدارية الأخير، أمرني المدير بالبقاء بعد انتهاء الاجتماع، فانفضّ الجميع من المجلس عدا أنا، ليقترّب ويجلس بجانبني، ثم يقول لي: يا معلمة جميلة لقد كان أداؤك ممتازاً، وبتغذية راجعة من جميع الطلاب، لذلك سأرفع كتاباً لإدارة المخيم التعليمية لرفع راتبك في العام الدراسي القادم، لتمتد يده نحو صدري ببطء، فأقطع له الطريق بضربه على أنفه بقبضتي فيسيل منه الدم كالشلال، وأجري مسرعة من الباب وأهرب من المدرسة إلى البيت،

حتى وصلت البيت مقطوعة الأنفاس، ليسألني والذي ماذا حدث؟ لأجيبه دون خوف – تعلم أن لا تخاف ولو كلّفك ذلك حياتك- بما حدث، ليضع يده على رأسه ويقول سنأتي الشرطة لا محالة، هذا ابن بلده ولن ينصفنا أي قانون هنا، ليصرخ علي بعدها: ماذا تريدان منّا اغربي عن وجهي...

لنأتي سيارة الشرطة بعدها إلى قلب المخيم، وتأخذنا أنا وأبي إلى القسم، فتبدأ التحقيقات لتنتهي بدفع أبي كفالة مالية وتوقيعي على تعهد بعدم تقديم أي طلب وظيفي داخل الدولة، فوَقَّعت غير أسفة وغير مهتمة، لأن شرفي أثن من أي دولة وأي رجل!

تحت جنح الظلام قمتُ بالهرب ودون سابق إنذار لألتقي بصديقتي المعلمة راما التي قامت بالحجز والدفع المسبق بعد أن أعطيتها كل ما قمت بتوفيره طيلة العام لمن سيقلنا إلى الساحل، هذا وتمت مراعاتنا بعد طول رجاء لهذه الرحلة المصرية، فسركب القارب الذي سيأخذنا نحو غدٍ أفضل، وبقيتُ أسيرة الدهشة واللهفة طوال الطريق، ترى ماذا سيحدث؟ هل سنصل بسلام؟ ليقطع حبل تفكيري المتصل سيف القوارب المترامية على الساحل والتي كنت أظنها لصيد الأسماك، لأكتشف بعدها أننا سنبحر في إحداها! ماذا دهامهم هل يظنوننا علب سردين؟! لينادي بعدها السمسار الذي ركبنا معه أن لا وقت لدينا ويجب علينا الصعود لأننا سنغادر تحت جنح الظلام، ترددت كثيراً لكن كل ما تذكرت المخيم والخيمة وأبي وزوجي السابق وآهات اللجوء تقدمت خطوة ثابتة إلى الأمام، لنركب أنا وصديقتي راما مع أول الذين صعدوا على متن القارب، القارب لا يتسع إلى لبضع مئات، لكن بدأ الكثير في التهافت والصعود، لأكتشف بعدها أننا أضعاف ما سيسئوعب هذا القارب المثالك، ومؤنساً نفسي بالأمني بحياةٍ أفضل، عقدتُ العزم وتوكلت، لا يوجد إلا العشرات من سترات النجاة لهذا الكم الهائل من المهاجرين.

وأبحر القارب وأبحرت معه آلاف الأمنيات، وانتظار الغد المشرق، ومع التوغل داخل بطن البحر المتلاطم، بدأ الخوف يدب في أطراف الجميع، خاصةً تأرجح القارب مع الأمواج المجنونة والمتلاطمة، أغمض عيني وأدعو، ليضربنا موج كملاكم بالضربة القاضية، فيهنز القارب ويرتعد الجميع، بكاء الأطفال والنساء وصراخ الرجال اختلط ببعضه كسكر سريع الذوبان في كأس من الشاي، فسارعوا في الحركة العشوائية، مما زاد النار سعيراً، وها هي يد راما أفقدها في الزحام، انقلب القارب على رؤوسنا كما كانت البيوت تقلب فوق رؤوس ساكينا تحت وطأة القصف، فلا أجد نفسي إلا سقطت في البحر، أحاول عبثاً السباحة، لا أستطيع، بدأت يداي بالخدر، الماء المالح يتعثر في حلقي، من هذا؟ إنه "إيلان" بردائه الأحمر نهض من غفوته على الشاطئ، ونفض رماله عن ساقيه، ابتسم لي ودعاني فاتحاً ذراعيه، غمرته بدفي وغمّرنا السلام...

## Jamila

**Linda Ahmad Obeidat. Jordan**

The bombing got heavier and we no longer had any choice but to leave the house. After a day that saw many houses in our district destroyed, we waited for dawn like prisoners confined for ages underground. Then we picked up the suitcases we had packed with our most important items. There was no extra time; in fact there had been no normal time. We left, my father, my mother, my little brother and I, on a journey that, little though we knew it, would be madder still than the bombing of the night before.

We were near the border of a neighbouring country, so we headed there without hesitating. When you cannot taste safety, you lose your appetite for rest or even food. The worsening situation meant that there were many security checkpoints, and we were extorted many times along the way. Fearing for our safety, my father paid the money as if he was in the hands of blackmailers. I felt a creeping sense that he was afraid, above all, for me. We reached the border. I won't talk about the long wait in the fraying tents for the paperwork to be concluded. My father came back two days later with our entry papers, as delighted as if he had won a tour to London.

So we entered the new country, where our new neighbours were separated from us only by the walls of the tents. The tent became our refuge and our residence, replacing our beautiful house in the beautiful village surrounded by roses and pomegranate and pear trees that the children would steal from without any reproof from me. There had been an ancient fountain in the middle of the courtyard, and my mother's flowers that she wa-

tered every morning. Nostalgia for our house stabbed me as I watched my family sleeping side by side in the tight space.

I was called back to the moment by my mother waking up and calling me.

"Jamila, why haven't you gone to sleep yet?"

I replied at once: "I will now. Good-night."

Then the money my father had brought – all his savings from our own country – ran out. He became more and more highly strung, sucking greedily on cigarette after cigarette. We no longer dared to ask him for anything or broach any topic with him for fear of the rage that would overcome him. Eventually I was forced to say: "Father, I want some new clothes. We've been here for more than a year and the clothes I have are worn out."

I hadn't intended to increase the pressure he was already under in the straitened conditions we were all suffering. But I was taken aback by his reply, so much harsher than I had expected: "Get out of my sight at once!"

Believe me, those words pierced my chest and I spent the rest of the day choked by tears.

Yet things got even worse, and the crisis in our country looked destined to continue for a long time. By now it took longer to go back than it had taken us to leave on that long unforgettable journey. Surreptitiously listening to my father and his friends from behind the door of the tent as they complained about how bad the situation was, I was terrified by one phrase even though I couldn't be sure it

referred to me: “I don’t know what I’m going to do with that one inside!” I felt as if I was some awkward piece of furniture, and I had a feeling that flocks of crows were beginning to circle over our camp.

One morning, a man in his forties, from the country where we were staying, came into our tent. My father looked pleased to see him. He welcomed him and asked him to sit down. It was plain from my father’s face that they had met before and he knew what the man wanted. The man began speaking, with me, my mother and Jamil all sitting there: there was nowhere else we could all go. Have you seen how wide the earth is and how high the sky! But there was no space for us except this one tent!

He said: “Abu Jamil, I’d like to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage. I hope you’ll agree.”

My mother immediately said: “It’s agreed!”

I felt a knot in my tongue and a chill on my face. In my shock, I didn’t say a word. Marriage? When and where? I, the beautiful Jamila, was to be married? But I loved Nadir and he loved me. He had promised to marry me, but circumstances drove us apart. Who said I was in a hurry to get married? And to this man, who was more than fifteen years older than me? A storm of questions assailed my mind, like the bombs dropped from the planes on that ill-fated day. I came back to the present to find that our guest had left. My mother, in delight, was fervently praying that the marriage would come to pass. I burst out in tears at once.

“I don’t want to get married! Who’s this man you want me to marry?”

My father grabbed me and shook me roughly. He was shaking with anger, his lower lip dangling and trembling like a diving board in a swimming pool.

“I can’t do my duty to you anymore! And what’s wrong with getting married? What’s wrong with the man who asked for your hand?”

I summoned my courage and quickly replied: “There’s nothing wrong with getting married. What’s wrong is marrying me to someone who’s more than fifteen years older than me. What’s wrong is marrying me to someone you don’t know. What’s wrong is marrying me to someone because we’ve run out of money. That’s selling me, not marrying me!”

My father beat me fiercely and threatened me until at last Jamil and my mother intervened, like the theatre curtain closing on a day of blows and curses.

There was a simple wedding and I moved to my new husband’s house. It was in a middle-class area. The neighbours looked at me curiously as we went inside. I noticed my husband’s rough voice and the reek of cigarettes as he said to me: “There’s a basin in the kitchen. Fill it with warm water and bring it here.”

I did as he said at once. His sharp-featured face was covered in lines, as if someone had drawn a plough at random across a field of red soil after heavy rain.

“Take off my shoes and massage my feet,” he said.

I had no choice but to obey. The steam from the water mixed with my tears and sobs. I remembered Nadir’s smiling face, and how when we were in university he couldn’t bear to see anything tire me. He broke into my memories, looming towards me like a slavering wolf. He bore me as his prey to the bedroom where I passed a night of blood and tears.

It didn’t last for long. Two months later I went back to my father’s house with a blue circle around my eye and the marks of blows

all over my body, which had lost weight as if to compensate for the spite and hatred it had been loaded down with.

My father at once asked me: “What brought you here?”

In a voice worn out by sobs, I replied: “He divorced me.”

“What do you mean? Answer me! What did you do?”

I began to weep and he began to hit me, until Jamil appeared, the only one who could comfort me and come between me and my father, like a wave coming between the ship and the drowning man as he breathes his last.

I noticed the mixture of roughness and tenderness in his voice as he said: “Leave her alone!”

My father left, carrying his pack of cigarettes and his towering rage. My mother, her questions mingling with tears, began to ask me what had happened.

I boldly replied: “Nothing happened, mother! He didn’t take me as a wife, he wanted me as a slave. I hit him. Yes, I hit him! My honour wouldn’t let me accept such a life of humiliation.”

My mother immediately started crying again.

I have no regrets, and if time could be turned back, I would refuse to go with him against my will even if they cut my throat for it. I decided then that I would teach in the camp school, despite the paltry salary. My university degree meant that I was qualified, and indeed not long after I applied, the head of the school called me for an interview.

“Sit down,” he said, and I sat down.

“Jamila, your name is as beautiful as you are,” he said.

I said nothing in reply. Never respond to complements from someone you suspect of trying to exploit you or insult your intelligence!

After some routine questions, he told me to come back in a week to find out whether my application had been accepted. It was a primitive way of communicating the decision, but we had no landlines or mobile phones or computers.

I went there on the appointed day and found to my joy that I had been accepted. I went back to tell my family the good news. My father and mother were delighted because of the meagre sum I would earn, but Jamil was as delighted as I was, with all his heart, just because he saw how happy I was.

Before the first day of class, I stood in front of the mirror and observed my face, which I had forgotten for so long: my green eyes, my freckled white nose, my round face, my long eyelashes, my hair that was blond shading to the colour of the bracelet my mother had kept hidden and my father didn’t know about. I began an undistinguished rehearsal of the science lesson I would give to the sixth class. It was about adaptation and animal relationships, co-dependence and symbiosis, but the only one that caught my attention was predation. It brought back a dark period of my life that I had determined to forget. I choked on my tears, then smiled and began acting in front of the mirror again.

My first day was full of adventures and beautiful experiences. I felt I had made a good impression on the students. One boy came up to me to say: “Miss Jamila, I love you because you look like my sister Samia who died in the war.” Lost for words, I hugged him tightly with all my soul. We cried in each others’ arms for a long time.

After three months, the headmaster called me to his office, where he met me with searching looks at my face and body accompanied by vague requests. I realised that all he really wanted was to stare at me. The scene began to repeat itself every week or

two. There would be vague questions and requests; he might ask about the standard of the students. I would reply, and he would look at my body and say: "Have you handed the marks in to the office?" "I handed them in to you two days ago." And he would tell me to leave.

At the end of the school year, after the final meeting of the teachers and administrators, the headmaster ordered me to stay behind. Everybody else left. He came over, sat beside me, and said: "Miss Jamila, all the student feedback confirms that your performance has been excellent. I am going to send a memo to the camp's educational committee to raise your salary next year."

Then he stretched his hand slowly towards my breast. I intercepted him with a punch to his nose that sent cascades of blood flowing down. Then I ran out the door and fled home. I arrived out of breath and my father asked: "What happened?"

Without any fear – for you have to learn not to be afraid, even if it costs you your life – I told him, and he put his hand to his head. "The police are bound to come now! That man is from here and the law here won't treat us fairly." Then he screamed at me: "What do you want from us? Get out of my sight!"

The police car came into the heart of the camp. They took me and my father to the station, and their investigations ended with my father paying bail. I had to sign an undertaking not to seek any employment in that country, and I signed it without any regret, without even paying attention, because my honour was worth more than any country or any man.

Under cover of darkness and without telling anyone, I fled with my friend from the school, Miss Rama, who had booked and paid for our transport to the coast with all my year's savings. We had finally got an

answer after months seeking a place on the fateful voyage, and we were to board a boat that would carry us towards a better future. I was held captive by astonishment and regret all the way. What might happen to us? Would we make it there safely? The thread of my thoughts was cut short by the line of boats on the shore – I thought at first they were fishing boats, before I found that we were to sail in one of them! What had come over them – did they think we were sardines? Then the middleman who had brought us there yelled out that there was no time to waste: we had to board the ship at once because we would leave under cover of darkness. I hesitated for a long time, but then I thought of the camp, the tent, my father, my ex-husband, the sighs of the refugees... and with each memory I took another step forwards, until with my friend Rama we were among the first to board. The ship could only fit a few hundred, but many more rushed on board, and we soon realised that the rusting old vessel was full several times over. But I kept my mind occupied with my hopes for a better future, steeled my resolution and placed my trust in God. There were only a few dozen life jackets for the hundreds on board.

The ship set sail and with it thousands of dreams, of hopes for a brighter dawn tomorrow. As it pressed on across the breast of the turbulent sea, fear stole into all our hearts. The waves rose madly and crashed around us and the ship rocked from side to side. I closed my eyes and started praying, and at that moment a wave hit us with a blow like a boxer's punch. The ship shook and everyone on it trembled. The crying of the women and children and the shouts of the men mixed together like sugar dissolving fast in a glass of tea. They rushed about at random, and that made matters worse. Rama's hand slipped from mine. The ship turned over on our heads like

the houses had collapsed on the heads of their owners during the bombing. I fell into the water. I tried in vain to swim but could not. My hands grew numb. The salt water slipped down my throat. But who is this? Aylan in his

red jumper has risen up from his slumber on the beach. He has shaken the sand from his trousers and he is smiling at me. He calls me and holds out his arms. I cover him in warmth and peace is all around us.

## ذئاب لا تكره اللحم

مرام عبيدات. الأردن

لم تع بداية حياتها الجديدة ولكنني استطيع اخباركم مقدار سعادتها، كن ت تلك المراقبة من بعيد والتي ستروي التفاصيل كما سترها القلوب الطاهرة.

كان نيسان، يوم زفافها يوما يتجاذب مع أذوبة الأول من نيسان، وهو اليوم المبتكر للدعابة المؤذية أو البسيطة، لا أذكر أول أذوبة لي به أو حتى الأخيرة وسأل ت والدتي كثيرا ما إذا استخدم ت هذا اليوم للدعابة مع أحدهم ودوماً كانت لا تذكر. تتجذر الذكريات السيئة في عقولنا والجميلة منها تزول بأول نكسة.

صفت شعرها الأسود الطويل وأنزلت جزءا منه على جبينها ووضعت طرحتها البيضاء وأسدلتها على وجهها كي يرفعها داخل غرفة مغلقة ومعتمة في ليلتهما الأولى.

لم أكن أقتنع أن هناك أطفالا يقعون ضحية الفقر فيتخلى أهلهم عنهم مقابل كسرة خبز خالية من كرامة محفوظة فتتكسر جدرانها المبنية لبنة وراء الأخرى مقابل مهر فتاة يبدأ بدرهم ولا ينتهي. فلم أكن من عائلة غنية بل كن ت من عائلة متوسطة، محدودة الرغبات ال منفذة رغم إدراكي أن والذي يستطيع أن يحقق لنا كل ما نتمناه ولكن ما كل ما يتمناه المرء يدركه. أنا في الخامسة والثلاثين وهي في الخامسة عشر. الأسماء في سردي هذا لا تهم فأوجاعنا لا تقترن باسم ولكنها تمتزج بأعمارنا فتسلبنا إبتسامة طفولة وقلب عاشق حد الثمالة.

لا يقع اللوم دوما على الأب بل أيضا على طبقية جعلت من كرامته مرعى حجر غايته اختراقها بسلاسة، وهكذا يتخلص الأب من جلد الكرامة لجسده الهش وتأنيب قلبه للعقل. وبكثرة محاولات الإقناع بالتراجع الفاشلة، تسقط الكرامة أمامه لبنة وراء الأخرى. وحتى الأم لا تونب على فعائل زوجها فعندما تزوجا لم يكونا في زماننا، هي اعتادت تقديم الطاعة لزواج مزاجي ومتطلب...

كان هذا الزواج المتطلب عام . 1990 الخيار الأول؛ هو ابن عمك والثاني فلتنق عانسا فمزل والدك يحتاجك. هي تختاره لأنه الأول والوحيد، يكبرها بعشرة أعوام وقد يزداد أعواما كثيرة أخرى وهي تصغره ببلوغها المبكر. تكبر حميدة في بيت زوجها وعلى يديه ف ي علمها كيف تجيد أي شيء حسب شهواته فهو يريد ما كما ي فكر لكي يكون أبناءه النسخة المصغرة عنه مما يجعل أي أحد من المارة وعابروا السبيل بمجرد النظر إليهم يشيرون ويتهامسون بأنهم أبناءه. ومن شهرها الثاني في بيته تبدأ بمسلسل الحمل، حميدة حامل... حميدة أنجبت طفلها الأول ... علي أصبح أبو أحمد وأحمد هو الطفل المدلل الذي يقضي يومه بالبكاء وحميدة تبكي معه عل ها الطفلة أو الأم المرهقة! وأنا أرجح الخيار الأول...

لم يكن أحمد الطفل الوحيد، كبر أحمد مع أمه، هو يكبر عاما وهي تكبر عشرة، تلك الطفلة الصغيرة أنجبت بعد أحمد خمسة ذكور وفتاة رقيقة. في عام 2001 كانت الصرخة الأخيرة، الصرخة التي أخرجت لى للحياة. الولادة كانت في المنزل وكأي ولادة حدثت منذ عام 1990 ، ربما يجب وصف تفاصيل الولادة بحذافيرها ولكنني

أعجز عن نطق الألم الذي استحوذ على حميدة، علي رفض رفضا قاطعا أخذها للمشفى بحجة أن والدته كانت تعمل داية (قابلة)، لم يع اختلاف الأزمنة والحاجة الملحة للمشفى وخطر الموت بسبب انقلاب الرحم والإرهاق الذي كان يرافق والدته ال مسنة وكعادته وجبروته فعل ما أراد دون رافة ورحمة بزوجته.

هل الأرض هي من أوجدت الجبروت وعدم الرحمة في قلبه؟ ولكن لطالما أعطتنا الأرض طيبة وحب يوازي ثمارها، فالماذا الجبروت؟ علي هو الفلاح الوارث لأرضه عنوة عن إخواته البنات فولده لم يرى أن الحقوق في الميراث توزع بالعدل ولم ير أن عدم توريثه له ن اضطهاد لحقوقهن كإناث. والأرض تعني عملا متواصلًا كي تعطينا ثمارها، تماما كالعلاقات الإنسانية أو الحيوانية فكل العلاقات تحتاج لتواصل" الكيمياء". انقطاع الفلاح عن أرضه يعني انهيار موسم كامل وعلي يعي تماما هذه التفصيصة التي جعلته ينسى حاجة حميدة له بعض الوقت فقد كان ي ملي عليها لائحة الأوامر ويغادر حتى مغيب الشمس.

الأرض أعطت علي ومدته طوال سنين حياته مذ كان طفلا في المهدي بحاجاته واستمرت على ذلك حتى عام 2013، "عام احتراق المحاصيل". والأرض ت نذر م لأكها بعطشها ومرضاها وت رس ل لهم رسائلاً من كل حدبٍ وصوب كي تحمي نفسها من الانهيار ولكنها لا تستطيع إنذارهم بالحريق . في الأول من آيار استيقظت القرية على نداءات الألم، شبَّ حريقٌ التهم نصف بيارات وحقول المنطقة. أن تنظر من بعيد إلى الحادثة يعني أنك لا تتألم بحجم الألم الذي استحوذ على الفلاحين . واحتراق ها يعني بداية جديدة ولم نعتد في حياتنا أن تكون البدايات سهلة.

الأنثى تماما كالأرض فعندما تحترق تصبح بحاجة لبداية تجعلها ت ثمر من جديد. أما لى فتبل غ من العمر خمسة عشر عاما. حادثة الحريق قد مضى عليها سنتان، وعلي يعمل في الأرض بين الحين والآخر فالزرع مازال صغيرا ولا بوجود أي مردود مادي منها وبقي وقته يعمل عند اقطاعي كبير في المنطقة، أغل ب الفلاحين يعملون عنده الآن، لم ت غلق قضية الحريق المفاجئ وخاصة أنه قد راح ضحيتها شبابٌ في مقتبل العمر كانوا نانمين في أراضيهم خوفاً من السرقة وأحمد كان هناك . الفاجعة المزدوجة تخفف وطأة إحداهما ولكن عند الاستيقاظ من الأولى ستقع في الثانية، دار العزاء لأن لم ي غلق في القرية...

جاء الموت فجأة والفقر بغتة، لم يكن علي يعلم أن النهايات المباحثة مؤلمة والفقر المدقع يستقر في الأحشاء. فيبدأ يومه بالبحث عن حلول وينتهي بدموع تودي به إلى الهاوية، الضحية لأي شيء طفل أو طفلة. الساعة السابعة مساءً والتحضيرات على قدم وساق والنفير العام يطغى على الأجواء. لى

ترتدي ثوبها القصير مجبرة وليست مخيرة فالثوب ليس من اختيارها وتصفف شعرها. تدخل غرفة كبيرة ومليئة بالنسوة ال محدقات بها وهي التي لم ولن تعرف معنى للتحديق إلا في الخمسين من عمرها أو قبل حسب حجم الكارثة. لازل ت متابعة أروي ما أراه ويزداد خوفاً على طفلي وقدرها.

تحديق النساء يعني فحفا كاملاً لجميع" الموصافات " المرغوبة لعروس ابنهم...

الأم ت كثر التحديق وتبدأ ببحر اسئلتها الموجهة وغير المتوقعة، عمركِ، بأي صف أنت؟ تاري خ مولدك وبرجك؟ وكأن البرج سيزيد من" موصافاتنا " كفتاة... وبالرغم من سخافة الأسئلة واضطرارية لمى وحميدة للإجابة، كان هناك السؤال الأغرب الذي جعلهما يقعان في فجوة اللحظة... أمه: متى بلغتي يا صغيرتي؟

فاحمرّت وجنتا فتاتنا وحميدة ت جيب: قبل ثلاثة شهور...

لمى في الخامسة عشر الآن، ونحن في القرن الواحد والعشرين.

ايقت تماماً أن الوقت لا يهم، سيبقى لدينا متسع منه لرواية النص الذي نفكر به بصوت دواخلنا، والقرن لا يعني التطور. لمى تشع ر بالصمم، حليلة تموت ب حرقه قلبها بسبب علي، وهو في الأربعين من عمره يعمل تاجراً ويملك من المال ما يقي علي وأسرته ما تبقى لهم في الحياة، كل شيء سار على ما يرام عدا رغبة لمى ونكرانها له وعدم تقبل والدها لقرارها. المهر؛ ليرة ذهبية وال معجل وال مؤخر خمسون ألف ديناراً أردنياً لكل منهما ومنزل وسيارة وكلهم غير مؤجلين.

بعد حداد دام عامين سيعود الفرح للقرية، النساء يتزين بالكحل والفتيات ينثرن العطر على فساتينه ن، التهليلات تعم الأرجاء والزفة طالت وكان الجميع كان يقصد إطالة الفرح الذي سينتهي ليلاً بدموع الأمهات على أبنائهم المفقودين. النسوة ي رددن إحدى الأغاني الشعبية القديمة:

"بالهنا يا ام الهنا يا هنية  
التوت عيني على العريس بالأول  
صاحب الوجه السموح المدور  
قالتلو يا عريس يا ابن الكرامي  
عيرني سيفك ليوم الكوان  
سيفي مخلوف عليه ما بعير  
سيفي ماصل من بلاد اليماني  
بالهنا يا ام الهنا يا هنية  
شيعوا لولاد عمو يجولو  
عددوا المهرة وشدوا عليها  
تيجي " زكريا " ويركب عليها  
عددوا المهرة وهاتو الشبرية

زفولي" زكريا "الباب العلية  
 زفولي" زكريا "الباب العمود  
 ايويها...ريتو هالفرح مبارك"

دخلا غرفتهما ورفع عن وجهها طرحتها البيضاء، يرتفع صوت تنفسها خوفاً ويزداد تعرقها فجأة. هي القاصر الصغيرة التي لا تعلم ما سيحصل معها الآن وهو الرجل الجاف الذي قدم ر بنسوة بعدد شعر رأسه. يتتعد عنه وتدخل إلى الحمام وت ب دل ثيابها منفذة تعليمات والدتها بحذافيرها، تخرج لتجده مازال ينتظرها على سريرهما الأبيض، تسأله ما إذا كان يرغب بأن يأكل، يضحك أو ي قهقه من طفلته القاصر.

يقتر ب منها لي مسك يدها ويسحبها إليه، يرتفع صوت نفسها وتبدأ بالبكاء دون وعي، عدم اكترائه أ ك دلي مأساوية اللحظة، يرمي بها على السرير مستغلاً طفولتها وأ نوثتها لي طفي شهوته الذكورية. أنتهت الطفولة هنا، كل الضحايا تقدم في العيد الكبير إلا لمى فقد ق دمت في الأول من نيسان، لم يكن عيداً لها بل كان عيد القرية كاملة وعيده هو. بدا لي أن لمى ستعيش الحياة كباقي نسوة المنطقة. ولكنني مازلت المراقبة عن ب عد أروي ما أراه فيزداد غضبي هنيهة وأبدأ بثتمه أو أبكي عليها أخرى، وما أراه جعلني أركض كل ليلة إلى سرير ابنتي لأطمئن على قربها مني وبدأ خوفاً يزداد عليها يوماً بعد يوم. فبت أشعر أنني أ قيد حريتها ولكنني لم أكن أع أي شيء يتعدا غريزة الأمومة ورغبتي باستمراريتها ومنع أحد من سلمي طفلي الصغيرة. صرخاتي للمي

ومحاولاتي لإنقاذها منذ البداية لأن لم ت جد وكانني شخص على الورق ولس ت الحقيقة الناطقة.

حمل بابنته إلى هاوية لم يكن يتوقعها. منزل لمى يبتعد مسيرة ساعتين عن القرية الخالية من الحافلات، زيارات حميدة لابنتها كانت قليلة جداً بل تكاد تكون معدومة وزيارات لمى الأسبوعية كانت مقتصرة على الإبتسام والصمت المدقع وحديثها مقتصر على إجابات مختصرة والتي تبدأ بلا وتنتهي بنعم وبالتأكيد الزيارة تنتهي بتلبية لمى لحاجة أهلها من المال فتترك دوماً القليل من الدنانير التي تفوق دخل والدها خلال أسبوع كامل لتعود إلى منزلها محملة بخيبات الطفلة.

مفاجآت زكريا لم تكن منقطعة فهو بكل ليلة كان يغادر المنزل ويترك الباب مفتوحاً ليسمح بعابري الطريق والذين تم الاتفاق معهم بالدخول إلى غرفة زوجته، مقدماً جسدها لهن وكأنها " سلعة للبيع " ليعود بعد منتصف الليل ويطلب جراح جسدها من وحشية العابرين. لم يكن انتقائي ل " كأنها " صحيحاً فهي بالفعل كانت " طفلة للبيع بكل جوارحها وجسدها الجميل."

الأنثى ليست جسداً منحوتاً وحكاية من الشهوة، الأنثى حكاية طفولة وروح طير يحب الحرية.

في كل ليلة كان زكريا ي قدم لها كوباً من العصير وحبناً دواء إحداهما منوماً والثانية مانعاً للحمل.

كان ي تاجر بجسدها وفق استرتيجة مدروسة حتى أنه لم يقع في فخ أعماله، وبمجرد استغراقها في النوم ي كب ل يدها بعد إلباسها ثوبا يفي بإثارة الشهوة لدى أي ذكر دخيل ويغادر المنزل لتستيقظ هي في كل ليلة وتجد بالقرب منها رجلا غريبا وفمها دام وثوبها ممزق وتبدأ بالبكاء وبالصرخ فتكون ردة فعل أي دخيل الاستيقاظ مذعورا والبدء بضربها كي تصمت أو كي تفقد الوعي ليرتدي هو ثيابه ويترك المبلغ ال م نفق عليه ويغادر المنزل، وبعد أقل من نصف ساعة يعود زكريا ويرمي على وجهها الماء البارد كي تستيقظ أو لتتوقف عن البكاء .علامات السعادة المرسومة على وجهه تفي بإبلاغها دناءة الموقف .فالمبلغ غالبا يكون أكثر من ال متفق عليه .بيدأ

بتطبيب جراحها ومن ثم يفك القيود عن يديها لتركضْ خانفة إلى الحمام وتقل الباب وتبدأ بالصرخ وتعذيب نفسها بعد كل اغتصاب غير واعية عليه أو حتى واعية، ففي الكثير من الأحيان كان الغريب ينتظرها لتستيقظ ليبدأ بإشباع رغبته بنذالة.

لم أكن واعية للحروف التي كتبتها سابقا فأنا لا أقوى على وصف الحالة منفصلة سواء كانت نائمة أو مستيقظة ولذلك لجأت للغباش بالكلمات فأنا أيضا أنثى وأعي تماما حجم المعاناة التي تعيشها لى . ولكن لماذا لم تلجأ لى لأهلها في الفترة السابقة ولماذا لم تخبرهم أن ما يحصل معها لا ي صدق ! هل سيقنتعون؟ وهل حاولت إخباره أن عليه التوقف عن بيع جسدها؟ كن ت على يقين أنها ستجد الحل.

تفاصيل ليلتهما الأولى؛ غرفة معتمة والنوافذ مغلقة، يشدها إليه، تبدأ بالصرخ والبكاء .ي مزق ثوبها ويرمي بها على السرير، ت حاول إبعاده عنها ولكنه عنصر القوة، لم يحاول زكريا تقريب لى منه أو جعلها تحبه فهو لا يكثرث لهذه التفصيلة الصغيرة بنظره والكبيرة في نظري.

وبتصرفاته العشوائية واسترجاله المقصود، هي فقدت عذريتها وطفولتها بعنف " شهوة ذكر ."

وهو لم يعطها فرصة لفهم الحدث .كل الأحداث التي نعيشها يجب علينا فهمها والخوض في تفاصيلها وعدم جعلها حدثا عابرا فليس كل ما نعيشه يتمثل بالعبثية وغالبا ما تتجذر في قلوبنا وتستولي على نهايات تمسكنا بالحياة.

ما حصل، بدايةً لتستمر الحكاية بنفاسيلها من أول يوم لآخر يوم حيث سيكون الحل...

هي بدأت تفكر بالنهاية فترسم بمخيلاتها كل الأحداث التي جعلتها تصل إلى هنا .منزل زكريا، منزل والدها الجديد وسيارته وحقله المزدهر حديثا، وفاة أحمد ودموع والدتها وبالطبع كانت تفكر بجرأتها وشجاعتها فعلى الرغم من اجبارها على التترك المدرسة إلا أنها لم تكن ضعيفة.

جمعتُ القليل من الأغراض ووضعتهم في حقيبة يدها وطلبت سيارة الأجرة وذهبت لمنزل أهلها . فهناك لى تصطنع الضحك والصرخ وتداعب وجنتي أمها .لن أ خفيكم محاولات حميدة لمعرفة عدم حمل لى للآن ولماذا زكريا لا يشاركها زياراتها؟ ودوما كانت لى تتهرب بإبتسامة مندرجة

بقاموس الحزن. لم يب دلي أن قلق حميدة سخيفا علما أنها لا تعلم شيئا عن حياة ابنتها إذا ما قورن بعذابات لمى اليومية ورغبتها الدائمة بالموت ال منجي لها. ألسنا محاطين بالموت! لماذا عندما نحتاجه يتغييب عنا؟ ألم نعش كل نكبات الحياة ونكساتها وجمعنا الموت في كل مرة؟ بعد فترة قررت لمى العودة إلى منزلها وكالعادة قدمت المال لوالدتها وقد كان ضعف المبلغ

ال معتاد. سألتها حميدة لماذا المبلغ مضاعف! ولمى تهربت من السؤال وهي على يقين إنه المبلغ الأخير وأهدت والدتها قطعة من الذهب كان زكريا قد وضعها لها على الطاولة بالقرب من سريرهما في ليلتهما الأولى والأخيرة.

غادرت وهي على يقين أن الرحيل هو الحل الصحيح والفناء الأزلي للذاكرة الملتخة بالدم هو البدء من جديد. لتصل بعد ساعتين إلى مركز أمن المدينة. دخلت مكتب قائد الأمن وهي تستجمع قواها ورغبتها في الخلاص. استقبلها الضابط سالم وكأنه والدها، فهو في حقيقة الأمر ذعر من دخول طفلة لمكتبه وعلامات الشحوب والزجع يشاركا تفاصيل جمالها. بدأت تروي له الحكاية ورأسها مطأطأ في الأرض ودموعها تنهمر من عينيها. لم ترَ منه أي ردة فعل اتجاه ما روته. طلب منها أن تهدأ وتنتظره أقل من ساعة...

في قاعة الإنتظار، أربعة جدران دون أي نافذة، تجلس وتضع يديها على الطاولة المدورة وهناك أربعة كراسي وهي تتخيل شخوصها على الكراسي؛ حميدة وعلي، زكريا وهي والضابط سالم. اختلاق الشخوص يعني بداية وعرة على طريق جبلي، لمى لم تجدني في مخيلتها ولكنني وجدت نفسي أفق على الزاوية اليمنى من القاعة بالقرب من الباب وأنظر إليها وعينا مغرورقتان بالدموع. ماذا لو سمح لي بالحديث؟ وأين أنا في الدفاع عنها؟ هل هناك من يسمعي؟

أو حتى من أنا بينهم؟ في خضم ضجيج الأسئلة التي بدأت تراودني وشعوري السيء اتجاه نفسي والقلق الذي أعيشه على ابنتي بداية وعلى لمى أخرى وجدت نفسي أصغي لأسئلتي الداخلية والتي لن يسمعها أحد سواي وأبتعد عن الإستماع إلى لمى والتي تعتقد أيضا أن ما من أحد يسمعها وأنها ارتكبت جريمة بقدمها للشرطة.

ي طرق الباب، حميدة من سيفتح الباب هذه المرة هي من ستتلقى الصفعة الأولى فهي الأم الحنون التي هربت من أوجاعها بأوجاع ابنتها وركبت سفينة الحياة الرغيدة مقابل جسد أنثى دون أن تعلم. الشرطة تسأل عن علي وعن زكريا. وحميدة تقف مصدومة فقد أدركت أن ابنتها بمكروه وبدأت مسلسل اللطم والنحيب، فهي اتقنت ذلك ولكنها لم تتقن المواجهة.

في المركز الأمني، كلهم مجتمعون وعلي يقدم الولاء لزكريا وزكريا يهدد بطلاق لمى، دخلوا

جميعا إلى قاعة انتظار ولكنها هذه المرة لم تكن فارغة بل كان هناك مستقبلين للمنتظرين الجدد وهما مندوبان من منظمتي "حقوق الطفل" و"حقوق المرأة".

دخل الضابط سالم وبدأ بسرد الحكاية التي سمعها والتي أخبرتكم عنها بتفاصيلها الصغيرة والكبيرة . وصوتي كان قد هرب مني وكل الكلمات وال مداخلات التي حاولت المشاركة بها كانت صامتة فأنا لس ت سوى مراقبة من بعيد.

حميدة لم تنطق وزكريا ينكر وعلي يلطم، كان يلطم " فضيحة الطلاق . " سمح للمندوبين بالمشاركة وأفهما زكريا ما سيحصل عند الحصول على الإثباتات.

أين لمتى؟

كان الضابط سالم قد أرسلها بعد الإنتظار إلى المشفى ليقوموا بالتأكد من السرد الذي سمعه . جسدها المزرق ومن الحمض النووي الموجود في أحشائها ومن تفاصيل الاغتصاب المتتالي الذي عاشته وهي لم ترفض وهذا ما شجع الضابط على إرسال عناصره لإحضار عائلتها.

تعيش لمتى الآن حرة وقد انتصرت على وجعها، هي لم تحتج لأعوام كي تقرر الحل وكل حكايتها انتهت في شهرين من الألم، وعادت للمدرسة ولكن في المدينة .فالمجتمع الذي قد يرحم أي شيء يرتكبه الشاب لم ولن يترك حكاية " انتصار فتاة " على أنها انتصار بل سيحاول بكل ما استطاع كسرها من جديد وهذا ما لم تسمح به عائلتها .وزكريا يقضي سنين انتهاكاته لجسد الفتاة في إحدى السجون .كن ت قد أخبرتكم أن الأسماء في سردي هذا لا تهم فأوجاعنا لا تقترن باسم ولكنها تمتزج بأعمارنا فتسلينا إبتسامة طفولة وقلب عاشق حد الثمالة .ولكنني لم أخبركم أن كل قضايانا لها الحل فلنبحث بين حنايا قلوبنا وزوايا عقولنا عن الحل الذي يرسم الإبتسامة وي جذرها حيث نحن.

انتهت

## Wolves Do Not Hate Meat

Maram Obeidat. Jordan

“Give me what you will; my only wish has been to utter my contradictions, my defeat and the pangs of my sorrow in my own words. Everything written here is a story of pain that I offer to you. Perhaps it will be a beginning for me, or perhaps yet another of the failed attempts I have become accustomed to and that have made me an expert on starting my life again. I will persist until I achieve what I want.”

(From my collection *Graffiti in a Time of Love and War*, 2014)

She did not realise that her new life was beginning, but I can tell you exactly how happy she felt. I was that distant observer who will relate every detail as it appears to those of pure heart.

It was the first of April. Her wedding day coincided with April Fool’s Day, a day for simple pranks or hurtful jokes. I don’t remember what my first April Fool’s joke was, nor even my last one. I’ve asked my mother many times whether I used to play jokes on that day, but she can never remember. Our bad memories take root in our minds while the good ones are driven out with the first setback.

She combed her long black hair and let some of it fall over her forehead. Then she lowered her white veil over her face, to raise it later in a closed dark room on their first night together.

I had not believed that there were children whose families were driven by poverty to hand them over in return for a plain crust

of bread robbed of honour. Families who had protected themselves with a wall of honour that crumbled brick by brick in the face of a dowry that started with a silver dirham and kept increasing. I was not from a rich family myself: we were merely comfortable, with modest wishes. I knew that my father could get us everything we wished for, but at the same time I realised that you can’t always have everything you want.

I was thirty-five and she was fifteen. Names are not important in this story. Our wounds are not related to our names, but they are mixed up with our ages and they can rob us of our childhood smile or of a heart drowning in love.

The father is not always to blame. There’s also a class system that makes his honour an easy target. And so the father shakes off the cloak of dignity that had shielded his fragile body. He ignores the reproofs that his heart directs at his head and all its failed attempts to make him reconsider. The wall falls, brick after brick. Even the mother does not reprove her husband’s deed. For they wed in a different time, and obedience was her portion in a moody and demanding marriage.

That demanding marriage was in 1990. Back then, the choice was between marrying your first cousin or staying a spinster: you would always be needed in your father’s house. She chose him because he was the only one. He was ten years older than her, though those ten years barely hinted at the gap between them given how young she was at puberty.

Hamida grew up in her husband's house. He raised her and taught her how to excel in satisfying all his desires. He wanted to mould her to his thoughts so that she could raise sons in his image, sons that passers-by would point to, whispering: you can see they're his. The succession of pregnancies began in the second month of their marriage. Hamida was pregnant; Hamida gave birth to her first child.

Ali became the father of a son, the father of Ahmad, a spoilt child who spent all day crying. Hamida cried too, and who knows if it was the weeping of an exhausted mother or of a child? But I think it was the latter.

Ahmad was not the only child. He and his mother grew up side by side. For every year that he grew, she grew by ten. That small child bore five sons after Ahmad, and a tender daughter.

The last scream came in 2001. It was the scream that brought Lama into the world. She was born at home, just like all the babies since 1990. Maybe I should describe the birth in detail, but I have no words for the pain that overwhelmed Hamida. Ali had refused to even consider taking her to hospital on the grounds that his mother was the midwife. He did not realise how times had changed, or how necessary the hospital was. He did not realise the mortal risk from inversion of the womb and his own aged mother's exhaustion. In his habitual arrogance he did as he wished, without compassion for his wife.

Was it the land that had planted that arrogance and lack of compassion in his heart? But the land has always given us love and goodness along with its fruits, so why such arrogance? Maybe it was because Ali had inherited the smallholding at the expense of his sisters. His father had not considered that inheritances should be dealt out fairly, or that dispossessing his daughters was any kind of

violation of their rights as women. Holding the land means constant work to bring forth its fruits, just like relations between humans or among animals. Every relationship needs its special chemistry. If a peasant is taken away from his land, the whole season's harvest is at risk. Ali was well aware of that and it made him forget Hamida's need for him at times. He would give her a list of orders and leave the house until sunset.

The land had provided for Ali since he was in the cradle and it kept giving until 2013, the year the harvests burned. When the land is sick or thirsty, it sends its owner warnings from every inch, seeking to save itself from collapse. But it cannot forewarn him of fire. On the first of May the village woke to cries of pain. Half the fields and plantations of the district were in flames. Looking at the scene from a distance, you cannot feel the pain that wracked the peasants. That fire meant beginning again in a life that had not accustomed them to easy starts.

Women are just like the land: if they are burnt, they need a new beginning to make them bear fruit again. Lama was fifteen years old. It was two years since the fire. Ali was still working the land from time to time, but there were not many crops yet and it was bringing no money in. The rest of the time, like most of the other peasants in the district these days, he worked for a big local landowner. The mysterious fire was still under investigation. It had robbed the village of young men in the prime of their life who had been sleeping out in the fields to guard the harvest. Ahmad had been one of them. One loss almost lessened the pain of the other, yet the moment you recovered a little from the first the second would strike you down again. The village's funeral hall had yet to shut its doors.

Death struck without warning and poverty took them unawares. Ali had not known

how painful sudden endings were. Their grinding poverty took root in his innards. He would start the day by searching for solutions and end it in tears that brought him to the edge of an abyss. There was no way out except by sacrificing either a boy or a girl. At seven in the evening preparations were well afoot amid an atmosphere of high alert. Lama unwillingly put on a short dress in accordance with her instructions. She combed her hair and went out into the big room full of women who were staring at her. She would not know the meaning of the stares for decades, or at any rate until she grasped the scale of the catastrophe. I was still watching, to narrate what I could see, and my fear for my girl was growing ever greater.

The women's stares were a comprehensive examination of how far she complied with the desired specifications for their son's bride. His mother stared even more intensely and launched a barrage of pointed and unexpected questions – "How old are you? What class are you in? What's your birthday? What's your zodiac sign?" – as if her zodiac sign might help her meet the specifications. Stupid though the questions were, Lama and her mother had to answer them all, until finally the strangest question of all left them stumbling for words: "When did you reach puberty, my dear?"

Our girl blushed and Hamida replied: "Three months ago..."

Lama was fifteen, and we were in the twenty-first century.

I've become convinced that time doesn't matter. There will always be enough of it to tell the story our inner voice is thinking of, and the turn of a century doesn't mean progress. Lama felt determined. Halima was dying of heartbreak over him, who at the age of forty was working as a trader and had enough money to protect himself and his

family for the rest of their lives. It was fine that Lama didn't want him, but her father refused to accept her decision. The dowry was a golden sovereign, fifty thousand Jordanian dinars along with a house and a car at the time of the marriage, and another fifty thousand dinars in case of divorce.

After two years of mourning, the village would celebrate again. The women put kohl on their eyes and the girls sprayed perfume on their dresses. Cheers rang out all around and the procession went on and on, as if everyone wanted the wedding to last as long as possible before it ended with the inevitable tears of the mothers for their lost sons. The women sang an old folk song:

"Come here with the henna, Haniya,  
and God preserve the bridegroom,  
And his fair round face.  
I said to him, o bridegroom, son of  
honour,  
Lend me your sword for a day.  
My sword I've vowed will not be  
borrowed,  
My keen sword is from the land  
of Yemen,  
Come here with the henna, Haniya,  
Tell his cousins to come to him,  
Saddle the mare and put on her bridle,  
for Zakaria to come and ride her,  
Saddle the mare and bring the dagger  
to bring Zakaria to the bridal chamber,  
to bring Zakaria to the Damascus Gate,  
aywayhaaaa... to a lucky wedding!"

They entered their room and he raised the white veil from her face. Her breath trembled from fear and she suddenly began to sweat. She was a little underage girl who did not yet know what would now happen to her. He was a grim man who had been with as many women as he had hairs on his head.

She shrank away from him and went to the bathroom to change her clothes, in strict compliance with all her mother's detailed instructions. When she came out he was lying waiting for her on their white bed. She asked him what he would like to eat. He guffawed at his little girl.

He drew closer to her and grasped her hand to pull her towards him. Her breathing got louder and unconsciously she began to cry. His indifference told me how tragic the moment was. He threw her down on the bed, exploiting her youth and femininity to sate his masculine lusts. That was the end of her childhood. All the sacrifices are offered on the Feast of the Immolation, except Lama who was sacrificed on the first of April. It was no feast for her, but it was a feast for the rest of the village – and for him.

It seemed to me that Lama would live her life like all the women of the district. But I kept on observing her from a distance and recounting what I saw. Sometimes I would feel my anger rising and start cursing him; sometimes I would start crying for her and what I saw would make me run to my daughter's bed to make sure she was still there with me. With every passing day I feared for her more. I began to worry that I was stifling her freedom, but I knew nothing more powerful than my maternal instinct and I was determined no one should take my little girl from me. My screams for Lama, my attempts to save her, were all in vain, as if I were a mere character on paper and not a living, speaking reality.

He had carried his daughter to an abyss he had never imagined. Lama's house was a two hour walk from the village, and there were no busses. Hamida rarely if ever visited her daughter. Lama's weekly visits to Hamida mostly consisted of smiles and grating silence. When she spoke it was merely to

give short answers that started with no and ended with yes. Of course, the visit would end with Lama responding to her family's need for money. Each time she would leave them a few dinars that amounted to more than Ali had earned in the entire week. Then she would return home bearing with her the disappointments of childhood.

Zakaria had not run out of surprises for her. Every night he would go out of the house, leaving the door open for some passer-by he had agreed to let into his wife's room. He offered her body as if it was goods he had for sale and would return after midnight to treat the wounds left in her by the savagery of the passers-by. I should not have said "as if." She was a child for sale: body, limb and beauty.

A woman is not a sculpted body and a story of lust. A woman is a story of childhood and the soul of a bird that loves freedom. Every night Zakaria would bring her a glass of juice and two pills: a sleeping pill and a contraceptive. He sold her body according to a careful plan that meant he was never caught out. As soon as she fell asleep he would put her in a dress calculated to arouse the desire of any male who came in, tie her hands, and leave the house. Every night she would wake up to find a strange man beside her, blood on her mouth and her dress torn. She would start to weep and scream and inevitably the stranger would wake up terrified and start beating her until she fell silent or unconscious. Then he would get dressed, leave the agreed price, and go out. Within half an hour Zakaria would return and throw cold water on her face to make her come around or stop weeping. The look of happiness on his face in those moments was enough for her to understand how vile the situation was. The strangers usually left more money than they had promised. He would treat her injuries and then untie her hands, and she would

run cowering to the bathroom, lock the door and begin to scream and torment herself after the unfelt rape. If it had been unfelt: for often enough the strangers would not wait for her to wake up before they started sating their base desires.

I have not been paying attention to the words I have written. I really can't describe in detail what was happening, whether she was sleeping or awake, so I have resorted to vague expressions. I am a woman too, and I know exactly how much Lama was suffering. But why didn't she go to her family much earlier? Why didn't she tell them that he was doing unbelievable things to her? Would they have believed her? Did she try to tell him that he must stop selling her body?

I was convinced she would find a way out.

Their first night together in detail: a dark room with the windows shut. He pulls her towards him; she begins weeping and screaming. He throws her onto the bed. She tries to push him away but he's the stronger party. Zakaria didn't try to create any closeness between him and Lama or to make her love him. He didn't care about that detail, which he considered minimal and I consider vital. She lost her virginity and her childhood to a violent spasm of male lust accompanied by his arbitrary behaviour and calculated masculinity. He gave her no opportunity to understand what had happened. Yet we have to understand everything we live through; we have to plunge into its details and not let it be a mere passing incident. Not everything we live through is a frivolity: it can bury its roots deep in our heart and seize control of us in our final struggle to hang on to life.

What had happened was just the beginning of a story that would continue, in all its details, from the first day until the last day when the solution came.

She began to think about the end and to trace in her imagination all the events that had brought her to this. Zakaria's house, her father's new house and car and his newly blooming field; Ahmad's death and her mother's tears; and her own courage, because despite having been forced to leave school, she was not a weak person.

She got a few things together, put them in her handbag, called a taxi and went to her parents' house. She made them laugh and smile. She pinched her mother's cheeks. I won't deny that Hamida tried to find out why Lama wasn't pregnant yet and why Zakaria never came with her when she visited. Lama avoided the subject with a smile that hinted at depths of sorrow. Hamida's concern did not seem foolish to me, bearing in mind that she knew nothing of her daughter's torments or of how she longed for the release of death. How we are surrounded by death! Why does it never come when we need it? Have we not lived through all of life's defeats and disappointments and, each time, death brought us together?

After a while Lama decided to return home. As usual she gave her mother some money, but this time it was twice as much as usual. Hamida asked why. Lama evaded the question: she was certain it would be the last time she gave them money. She also gave her mother the gold that Zakaria had put on the bedside table for her on their first and last night together.

She set off, convinced that leaving was the right solution, the one that would banish her bloodstained memories for ever. It was her new beginning. After two hours she reached the police headquarters in the city. Gathering all her courage and all her desire to escape, she went up to the office of the chief of police. Salim, the chief of police, greeted her like a father. To tell the truth, he was alarmed

by the appearance of this beautiful child, pale and upset, in his office. She began to tell him her story, her head bowed towards the floor and tears streaming from her eyes. He didn't show any reaction to what she was saying. He asked her to be calm and wait for him, saying he would be back within the hour.

In the waiting room, four walls and no windows, she rested her head on the circular table. She imagined her characters sitting in the four chairs: Hamida and Ali, Zakaria, herself, and Chief Salim. Inventing the characters was a rough start on a mountain road. Lama did not see me in her imagination, but I found myself standing in the right hand corner of the room with my eyes swimming with tears. What if I had been permitted to speak? How could I defend her? Who would listen to me? Who am I, even, amongst them? Overpowered by the torrent of questions that assailed me, by my growing misgivings about myself and about my concern for my daughter and for the other Lama, I found myself listening more and more to my internal questions that nobody but myself could hear. I stopped paying attention to Lama, who was also thinking that nobody would listen to her and that she had committed a crime by going to the police.

There was a knock on the door. Hamida would be first to open it this time. She would receive the first slap, the fond mother who had fled from her own wounds using the wounds of her daughter, who had embarked on a life of luxury paid for, unbeknown to her, with a female body. The police asked where Ali and Zakaria were. Hamida stood transfixed. She realised that something had happened to her daughter. Then she began wailing and slapping her face; she could do that well, even if she could not manage a confrontation.

They all met in the security headquarters. Ali swore loyalty to Zakaria, who threatened to divorce Lama. They went into the

waiting room, but this time it was not empty. Waiting to meet the new arrivals were representatives from the Children's Rights Organization and the Women's Rights Organization.

Chief Salim came in and told them the story he had heard from Lama, the story I have told you in all its details. As for me, my voice failed me. All my remarks and interjections went unheard. For I am only a distant observer.

Hamida was silent, Zakaria denied everything, and Ali slapped his own face. He was lamenting the scandal of a divorce. The two representatives were allowed to speak. They told Zakaria what would happen if proof was found.

Where was Lama?

After her wait, Chief Salim had sent her to hospital to have her story confirmed by tests on her torn body, tests for the presence of DNA inside her and evidence of the repeated rapes she had suffered. She had agreed and at that point he felt confident enough to send his men for her family.

Lama is free now. She has overcome her wounds. It did not take her years to decide on a solution: the whole story involved two months of pain. Now she is back in school, but in the city. The society that can forgive anything a young man does cannot accept that a girl can win a victory. It tries with all its power to break her again. But Lama's family did not allow this. Zakaria is paying the price for his violations of a girl's body with years in prison. I have told you that names are not important in my story, because our wounds are not related to our names, but are mixed up with our ages and rob us of our childhood smile or of a heart drowning in love. What I have not told you is that every case has a solution. So let us search in the recesses of our minds and the depths of our hearts for the solution that can plant the seeds of a smile where we are now.

## لا شيء لهذه الليلة

مريم ترحيني. لبنان

شعرت بالضيق وهو يمسح بيده على كامل ملابسي، يتحسس المناطق النائية، يصعد هضابا ويهبط إلى أسفل. أردت أن أهرب لكنني لم أفعل. ظلّ يحاول أن يحشر جسده بجسدي في أماكن ضيقة. ينتشطني من بين مجموعة الأولاد التي تلعب الغميضة كما لو كنت شعرة. عرفت أنّ شينا ليس صحيحا يأخذ مكانه. لم أخبر أحدا. اسمي عليا. كانت أمني تنتظرني صبيبا. لكنني خالفت كامل قواعد اللعبة التي تعد المرأة بذكر في رحمها. أحببت الحامض ولم أتوقف عن ركلها طوال فترة الحمل. لكنني بالنهاية جئت البنت الخامسة على أربع بنات أخريات. " كمان بنات" قال أبي للداية التي ساعدتها في ولادتها العسيرة. أمني تقول أنني ملنت الحي بصراخي وسببت بهجر بيتين أو ثلاثة منه. " بنت وبتبكي" يصرخ وهو يصفق الباب خلفه في موعد خروجه إلى السهرة كلّ يوم.

لم أعرف يوما أين يذهب أبي، وأين تذهب الأموال التي يجنيها من محاله في السوق. سمعت أمني تقول لأخوها " هلكني هل الزلزمة الله وكيلك لوج الصبح، وبيرجع الريحه طالعة من تمو وجيابو فاضيين"

ليرد عليها "مش إنت بدك ياه، هيدا زلمتك بدك تتحملي".

"بدك تتحملي"، الجملة الأشهر في حياتنا نحن النساء، علينا أن نتحمل الخيانة والقرف والزوج المعنف والمختل. علينا أن نتحمل حتى لا يقع الهيكل فوق رؤوسنا، كأن العيش في هيكل مززع هو الخيار الوحيد.

ظلت أمني تبكي بصمت، تؤد لو أنّها تستطيع فعل أي شيء ليكون بيتها " بيت عيلة مرتبة". كانت لا تتكلم عن أبي أبداً. وتمارس مهامها اليومية كفريضة صلاة، لا يحتاج ليسأل حتى يكون أي شيء تحت إمرته. تدعك له قدماء، تحاول أن لا تخطأ في حضرته، كأنه السيد وهي الجارية. لم تعترض على هذا الدور بتاتاً. كان اعتراضها على خروجه اليومي إلى سهرات حمراء يعود أبي بعدها إلى البيت فاقد الوعي غير قادر على التمييز بين امرأته وابنته.

كتلة لحمية صغيرة وضعت حدا لآلامها تلك. تلاشت أمني كومضة. كان السرطان قد أكل جسدها بعد أن أتى أبي على الروح. وضع الرجل العظام الملفوفة بجلد في صندوق خشبي وانطلق به الى مسقط رأسها. وهناك أهال التراب عليها ودفن مع ذلك الصندوق مرحلة من حياته وصفها بالرتيبة وأسدلنا نحن معه الستارة على شيء كان يسمى عائلة.

أقبل أبي على متع الحياة. صارت السهرات تمتد والعودة إلى البيت فاقد الوعي أو حتى عدم العودة أمراً عادياً. إلى أن جاء ذلك اليوم الذي أدخل فيه إلى حياتنا تلك المرأة. كان من المفترض أن تكون خالنتنا. لكنها كانت في مثل عمرنا. زوجته الجديدة بشعرها الملون وحرركاتها المفعمة بالدلع أخذت عقل أبي ولم تعده إلى مكانه. تحوّل إلى طفل بين يديها. ربما أفقده السهر القدرة على الحسم والمهابة التي كان يتمتع بها في حياة أمي. مع هذه المرأة تغير كل شيء. أصبحت هي الأمر الناهي وسيطرت على كامل تفاصيل البيت ومدخوله وما يصرف فيه.

ونحن البنات الخمسة تحولنا إلى جنود محكومين بالطاعة العمياء للضابط. سمعتها ذات مرة تقول له، "لم يعد يكفيننا مدخول المحل، البنات لازم يشتغلوا"

"شو بدن يشتغلوا من البيت ما بيعرفوا يضهروا"

"ما عليك أنا بدبرلن شغل"

وكان أن وجدت لنا العمل الذي قالت لأبي عنه أنه سيضمن لنا العيش إلى ولد الولد. أرادت تحويلنا إلى بائعات هوى، كنا صفقة مربحة، خمس بنات جميلات لم يمسهن أنس ولا جان. قليل من الروش وستكون الليلة الحمراء الواحدة بمبلغ محترم. استدعت رجل سيغدو مدير أعمالنا، عرفناه باسم جمال، كان ضخم الجثة قاسي الملامح، قادر على حملنا نحن الخمسة بيد واحدة.

اشتريت لنا ملابس مثيرة علمتنا أن ندهن أجسادنا بالكريمات وأن نبقى على أهبة الاستعداد لأي استدعاء طارئ. علمتنا أصول المهنة كيف ندخل ونخرج كنسمة رقيقة من دون أن نزعج "الزبون" حتى ننال إكراميات إضافية. لم تكن تردنا رخيصات كانت تريدنا فتيات "VIP".

أختي الكبرى فاتن لم تحتل. أمي ربّتها على فكرة الشرف، زرعت فيها الخوف من كلام الناس. السمعة الناصعة وشرف البنات المرتبط ببيكارتها التي يجب أن لا تفض إلا بتبريكات إلهية. قررت أن تهرب من هذا الماخور. أعدت العدة، وقالت لا تنتظرني، سأكون بخير. لكنها لم تكن كذلك، بعد يومين جلبها جمال، وتوعدنا إن هي أعادت الكرة "وين مفكرة حالك عايشة". لكن فاتن أعادت الكرة، هذه المرة بطريقة نهائية وإلى مكان لن يقدر جمال على الوصول إليه. وضعت حدًا لحياتها، وجدناها غارقة بدماء معصمها دون حراك، جثة صفراء لا حياة فيها. مرة ثانية، كان على أبي أن يقود السيارة إلى مسقط رأسه حتى يدفن ابنته قرب جسد زوجته السابقة. لكن هذه المرة لم يعد أبي كما كان، لقد دفن روحه هناك إلى جنب جسد فاتن ابنته الكبرى وفرحته الأولى. عاد أبي ولم يعد ولم يمر إلا قليل من الوقت حتى كان علينا أن نذهب مرة ثالثة إلى مدافن العائلة ونهيل التراب عليه.

أصبحنا أربعة وزوجة أبي ولم يعد بيتنا يخلو من جمال. وأصبح العمل مكشوفاً أكثر، كأن وفاة أبي كانت إعلان مرحلة جديدة من البيزنيس، صرنا "شراميط" بالمعنى السوقي للكلمة. وصار العمل ضاغطاً مفتوحاً أمام كل من يرغب بالمتعة. كان علينا أن نفتح سيقاننا ما يقارب العشر مرات. وكان

العمل يشد في نهاية الأسبوع وفي الليل. واستقدمت قوادتنا فتيات جديدات. الطلب يزدهر والزبائن يزدادون وعليها أن تلبي احتياجات السوق.

سهى، امرأة من الشام، أرسلها زوجها إلى هنا لتعمل في البيوت، قبض عربونا من الرجل الذي قال أنه سيدبر لها المنازل التي ستعمل فيها. لكن البيوت التي عملت فيها سهى لم تكن بيوتا وسخة، كانت أوكارًا تُشبع النساء فيها رغبات الرجال. كما يريد ويرغب وأي اعتراض سيعرضها لحرمان من الأكل. ذلك أنّ الأجر كان مدفوعا سلفا.

لم تعرف سهى ماذا تفعل بعد أن باعها زوجها وعلقت هنا في هذا البيت، كيف تفتك من هذا العالم، ظلت فقط تحافظ على البقاء وتربي أملاً ضعيفاً بقصة حب تجمعها مع زبون ينتشلها من المستنقع. حتى أنا كان السجن يطبق عليّ أكثر فأكثر. صرت أشعر بالوسخ. كأنني قطعة نفايات كبيرة. يحوم حولها الذباب أكثر فأكثر. كان خوفنا يزداد يوماً بعد يوم، خاصة بعد أن فقدنا راما تحت عملية إجهاض أجراها لها طبيب جلبه جمال في الغرفة الضيقة جنب المطبخ. كتب لها وصفة طبية وطلب منها أن ترتاح. لكن راما كانت ذات قوام حسن ممشوق وعينان ملونتان وسحنة لوحتها شمس جبال سنجار. لم تستطع أيّ منّا أن تُرضي زبائن راما. كان عليها أن تتابع العمل بعد يومين من العملية. اختلاط الدم بالمنى لن يثير قرف الزبون ما دام الوجه الصبوح سيطالعه. يومان وغابت راما عن الوعي بعد نزيف دم مستمر لم تستطع الراحة لئمه. تركتها زوجة أبي تننّ وتنزف كانت الساعات كقيلة بأن تُحمد هذه الروح التي هربت من ترويع لتقع في خوف آخر. غطاها جمال ببطانية قذرة ورماها في نهر المدينة الضحل.

هل فكر هؤلاء الرجال أننا لسنا ماكينات، لأنهم كانوا يعاملوننا كذلك. مروى وصباح أختاي افتتح لهما جمال بيتاً جديداً. قال إنّ العين احمرت على هذه الشقة، علينا أن نخفف من أقدام الرجال. بقيت أنا وأختي ابتسام وامرأة أبي وسهى لنذير الشقة القديمة. كان العمل قد أضحى مملاً لدرجة أن تتحول إلى جيفة يضع فيها أحدهم قطعة مطاطية لا أكثر.

أردت أن أخرج، أن استأصل العفن المتأصل في هذا المكان. أردت أن أخلع ولو جلدي حتى أتخلص من لمسات الرجال ورائحتهم. كنت أسمع الهمسات ورائي، وأرى لنظرات نساء الحي التي تلومني على اختيار هذه الحياة. لو لم ترد هذا لهربت، هي ولدت لتكون بانعة هوى. هي اختارت هذا الطريق. واختارت أن تلوث سمعتها وسمعة أهلها الذين صاروا تحت التراب،

" الله يلعن هيك خلفه".

وصلت الشقة لأرى زوجة أبي مرعوبة، قالت لي "ضبي غراضك فالين من هون، كمشوا إخوانك".

زج بأختاي بالحبس بتهمة الدعارة غير المشروعة، لعب الحظ معي، لو أنا من اختاره جمال لإطلاق مشروع البيت الجديد لكنت بالحبس الآن. هذه فرصتي عليّ أن أرحل. أردت أن أهرب إلى أي مكان

لا أكون فيه حبيسة صفة. هذه فرصتي كي أثبت لنفسي أولاً أنني لا أريد هذه الحياة. جمعت أغراضي، تركت كل شيء خلفي، لم أنظر إلى الجدران، لم أنظر إلى أي أحد، أردت أن أفقد ذاكرتي، أن أتخلص من كل هذا العفن ومن نظرات الحي وسباب النساء على كوني أداة إلهاءٍ لصبيانهم، حملت حقيقتي الصغيرة، صفقت الباب كما كان يفعل أبي، وخرجت، وكان آخر ما بان مني هو انعكاس ظلي على رصيف الحي. انتهى.

## No Plans for Tonight

**Maryam Tarhini.** Lebanon

I felt upset as he ran his hand all over my clothes, feeling every curve of my body, running up its slopes and down into its hollows. I wanted to run away but I couldn't. He carried on trying to squeeze his body into mine in narrow places. He pulled me out from among the group of boys playing hide and seek, as if I was no more than a hair. I knew that something wrong was taking place but I didn't tell anyone.

My name is Alia. My mother had been expecting a boy. I broke all the rules of the puzzle that's meant to tell women whether they have a male in their womb. I liked citrus fruits and I kept kicking her all through her pregnancy. But in the end I turned out to be the fifth daughter. "More girls!" my father said to the midwife who was helping with the difficult birth. My mother told me that my screams rang through the whole neighbourhood and drove a couple of families out. "A girl, and a crying one too!" he would shout as he slammed the door behind him on the way to his nightly gathering.

I never learnt where my father used to go, or what happened to all the money he earned from his shops in the market. I heard my mother tell her brother once: "That man's out every night until the sun comes up, I swear to God! And then he comes back reeking of drink and not a penny in his pocket!"

He replied: "Well, you wanted him. He's your husband and you'll have to put up with him."

"You'll have to put up with him" – the guiding phrase in our women's lives! We have to put up with cheating, misbehaviour,

violence and disturbed husbands. We have to put up with them lest the temple collapses on our heads, as if living in an unstable temple is the only choice.

My mother kept weeping silently. She would have done anything to have a decent family home, as she thought of it. She never talked about my father. She would carry out her tasks as dutifully as if they were her daily prayers. He never had to ask: everything was at his command. She would massage his feet and try not to make any mistakes in his presence, as if he was the master and she a slave girl. She never objected to her role. All she objected to was his nightly drunken outings from which he would return barely conscious and unable to tell his wife from his daughter.

A small lump of flesh put an end to her suffering. My mother faded away in the blink of an eye. Cancer finished off her body after my father had done for her spirit. He put the bones in their leathery covering into a wooden box and headed off for his hometown. He heaped the earth over her and, along with the box, he buried a phase in his life that he would describe as monotonous. For us, the curtain came down on what we had called our family.

Our father set about enjoying life. The nights out went on for longer and, more and more often, he would come back senseless if he came back at all. Then the day came when he brought that woman into our lives. She was supposed to be our aunt, although she was the same age as us. His new wife, with her dyed hair and her sensual movements, stole my father's senses and never returned

them. He was as a child in her hands. Maybe all the drunken nights had robbed him of the willpower and dignity he had enjoyed while my mother lived. With the coming of that woman, everything changed. Her word was final and she took charge of everything to do with the house and our finances.

We five girls became private soldiers sworn to blindly obey their officer. One day, I heard her say to him: “The income from the shops isn’t enough anymore. The girls will have to work.”

“What kind of work are they going to do? They can’t leave the house.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll sort something out for them.”

And indeed, she sorted something out for us, a kind of work that would keep the family in funds for another two generations. She wanted us to sell our bodies. We were an attractive prospect: five beautiful girls who had never before been touched by a man’s hand. A bit of touching up and a single night with us would bring in a respectable sum. She brought in a man who would become our business director. We knew him as Jamal. He was heavily-built with harsh features, and could have lifted the five of us up with one hand.

She bought us revealing clothes, showed us how to rub our bodies with various creams, and taught us to be constantly at the ready for any summons. She taught us the fundamentals of the profession: how to come and go like a perfumed breeze so as to keep the customer pleased and garner some extra tips. She didn’t want us to be cheap sluts: she wanted VIP girls.

My oldest sister, Fatin, couldn’t handle it. My mother had brought her up to fear for her reputation and value her honour, the unsullied honour of a woman that depends on her virginity remaining untouched until it

is taken with divine blessings. She decided to run away from this brothel. She gathered her things together and told us not to expect to see her again: “I’ll be all right.” But she wasn’t all right. Two days later Jamal brought her back, threatening dire consequences if she tried it again. “Where do you imagine you’re living?” Fatin tried it again, and this time she went somewhere Jamal couldn’t follow her. She put an end to her life. We found her lying motionless in a pool of blood that had flowed from her wrists, a pale lifeless corpse. Once again, my father had to drive back to his hometown to bury his daughter beside his former wife. But this time, when he came back he was no longer the same man. He had buried his spirit beside Fatin, his eldest daughter and his heart’s delight. My father came back, yet he didn’t come back. And before long, we had to go to the family grave a third time and heap the soil over him.

Now there were four of us, along with my father’s wife and the constant presence of Jamal. The business became more obvious, as if my father’s death had paved the way for a new phase. We became whores, in the popular sense of the word. We were working under pressure, available to anyone looking for some pleasure. We had to open our thighs maybe ten times daily, and more at nights and at the weekend. Our madam brought new girls. Demand was rocketing, the customer base was growing, and she had to meet the needs of the market.

Suha was from Damascus. Her husband had sent her to Lebanon to work as a cleaner, and had got a down payment from the man who was to arrange the houses she would work in. But the houses turned out not to be dirty homes, but dens where women sated men’s desires, where they did as the men said without causing problems, on pain of going hungry. She had been paid for up front.

Suha didn't know what to do after her husband sold her and she ended up stuck in this house. She didn't know how to escape from this world, so she decided to stay, nurturing a faint hope that some client would fall in love with her and take her away from the place. I, too, felt the prison close ever tighter around me. I began to feel dirty, like a big piece of rubbish that more and more flies were constantly circling. We became more afraid every day, especially when we lost Rama to an abortion that a doctor brought in by Jamal carried out in the little room beside the kitchen. The doctor wrote her a prescription and ordered her to rest. But Rama had a lovely slender body, green eyes, and a face burnished by the sun of Mount Sinjar. None of the other girls could satisfy her clients. She had to get back to work two days after the operation. If blood ended up mixed with the semen, it wouldn't bother the client too much as long as that radiant face was gazing at him. After two days of persistent haemorrhaging that couldn't be cured by rest, Rama passed out. My father's wife left her to moan and bleed. A few hours sufficed to quench the spirit that had fled from terror to another kind of fear. Jamal covered her in a filthy blanket and tossed her in the shallow stream that ran through the city.

Did it ever occur to those men that we weren't machines? That was how they treated us. Jamal set up my sisters Marwa and Sabah in a new house. Our apartment had begun to attract too much attention, he said, and we would have to reduce the flow of customers. I stayed there with my sister Ibtisam, my fa-

ther's wife, and Suha. The work got so boring that you turned into a corpse that men stuck a piece of rubber into, nothing more.

I wanted to go out. I wanted to root out the foulness that had permeated the house. I wanted to cast off my very skin to be rid of men's touches and smells. I could hear the whispers behind my back and the looks of the local women who blamed me for choosing this life. "If she hadn't wanted to do that she would have run away... She was born to be a prostitute... She chose that path... She chose to drag her name and the name of her dead parents in the dirt.

"May God damn such ungrateful children!"

I got back to the house to find my husband's wife in a state of terror. "Get your things together and get out of here," she said. "They've rounded up your sisters."

My sisters ended up in prison on charges of illegal prostitution. My luck was in: if Jamal had chosen me for his new enterprise, I'd be in prison now. It was my opportunity to get away. I wanted to escape to somewhere I wouldn't be held captive by a word. It was my chance to prove that I never wanted this life. I gathered my things together and left without any goodbyes. I didn't look back at the house or any of its occupants. I wanted to lose my memory, to get rid of all this foulness, to be free of the looks of the local women who cursed me for being an instrument of pleasure for their sons. I picked up my small bag and went out slamming the door like my father used to. The last that anyone saw of me was my shadow on the footpath.

## Odjednom ništa

Jelena Đurović. Crna Gora

Kidali bi se kilometri i daljina bi stala na dlan. Iscrtane mape bi bile ljubomorne na duboke linije njenih bedara. Teške su ruke. Rade za druge, zaboravljaju na sebe. Cijepala bi svoju postavu, ispod vunene suknje koja je grijala ranjena koljena. Šila je od njih džepove svojoj djeci. Koliko pukotina je ispunjavalo njen život. Izniklo na odjeći prodrlo na duši. Ona je jedna pukotina, bez dna. A bolest je ispunila, vukla je na zaborav. Nije se sjećala prošlosti, a u prošlosti je živjela.

Govorila bi: “Rodila sam se za vas, a vi za mene.” Nego ko još sluša tiho trabunjanje mirne žene? A bila je sve osim žena, tako se i osjećala. Držale su se slabe konture nekad nebeskog lica. Amaterski poluofarbana kosa, krupne ali upale i zvjerski otvorene oči, tanak vrat, odličan za vješanje, usne napukle od vjetra. Visoka sijenka se lomila od struka ka gore. Kičma je padala pod teretom. Dugi prsti zavučeni u vodu i prsten, jedino što je sijalo na njoj. Prosto je grijeh kako nešto tako dopadljivo oku podere vrijeme, načini sliku očima ružnu. Širila je usne vještački svaki put kad bi lukavi gazda dotrčao. Dolazio je, kako je on govorio, “po kolač”. Praštajte joj, znala je što čini. Tačno u pet, svakog petka došepala bi gadna zvijer, žedna slatke krvi, da se napije sa izvora, utoli glad. Odvodila bi djecu u sobu za igru. A I teško da se to sobom moglo nazvati. Poveća drvena daska, postavljena u uglu, obložena prljavom zavjesom. Dok bi se djeca igrala šiškarkama po sobi brojeći nekoliko ostalih pločica, stiskala je usne zubima, a ukus “kolača” bi postajao sve gorči. Dok suvo tijelo je lebdilo iznad mesnate mase koja je gotovo pojela kosti, samo jedno joj je bilo na umu, sjećala se njene pjesme I djece čije je gukanje nadjačalo bol. A I sama je bila djeteta. Bilo joj je svega 23 godine. A mrzjela ih je, sanjala je često kako ih davi pokraj rijeke. Sjećala se svoje majke I prizora iz djetinjstva. Ruka, omča i batine, njene majke kraj. Bol pa pjesma, pjesma pa bol. Uzdah, njegov, čini se da ona i nije disala.

“Ranjiva ptica, podrezana joj krila,  
Mrvice kupi, malo joj treba,  
Sanja da odleti, dodirne mirise neba.”

“Evo, da peskočim ljubav. Drži. Stvorenju kao što si ti i ne treba”, govorio bi svaki put dok je zamišljala kako ga ubada.

Držala ga je pored kreveta ali ni za to nije snage imala, budala. I čim bi se tromo tijelo izgubilo, prestala bi i pjesma. Progutala je suze odavno, sada joj ne trebaju. Uzimala bi pare pokraj jastuka, navlačila haljinu i trčala bi kod svojih. Istog trena je odlazila do prodavnice iza ugla po ručak. Gledala ih je u oči, bezobrazno je pružala novac a svi su znali odakle, samo se ona pravila da ne zna. Nije hrana bila dovoljna za njenu glad, a i onako nije mnogo jela. Trebala je vazduha, da joj otvori tuđim dlanovima zatvorene pore. Minute tišine bi uskladila sa otkucajima izmučenog srca. Pokušala je, pokušavala je I pokušavaće, ali zar njih da ostavi? Ostavi sebi bolje mjesto a njima obezbjedi siguran kraj?

Masnoću znojavog tijela je zamijenila prljavim tanjirima. Gledala je kroz poluoškrnuti prozor lica ljudi koja su dolazila u gostinicu. Sunderom je prelazila brzo, režući se po prstima. Voljela je svoje rane, jedino joj je to bojilo njenu bjelinu. Tupe misli su podrezivale hodnike

zakrčjale lijeve strane, letjele su udarajući pamet. Sve manje je i ostajalo od nje, sve više je bilo ničega.

“Gde su sve te note obojene srećom?

Zašto ste pobjegle tako daleko?

Ostavile me pokorenu dok okrenula sam njemu leđa.

Hoću i ja zalogaj da sklizne u stomak, oživi dušu, kad tijelo je već nijemo.”

Kroz prozor je dopirao miris baruta I dima. Sagnula se da dohvati novu turu tanjira kad je obuze strah. Zakoraknu unazad, a sa sobom ponese tanjire, zadrža je gvozdeni sto dok napusti je dah. Ponovo je ostala bez glasa, ponovo je nastupio tutanj u ušima, poput teških bubnjeva, vriskala je utroba, čupala snagu. Zatvorila je oči. Nije htjela da udovolji, da pusti bijesnilu da je dotuče. Bol, pjesma, pjesma pa bol. Sjetila se ovog prizora, četvrti put, četvrti gad na putu da presjekne još jedan konac koji je držao za zemlju. Napokon otvori oči a ispred vrata se ukaza mladić koji je držao pištolj u ruci. Ali nije pogođena, pomisli, hica nije ni bilo. Opipala se i shvatila da je s njom sve u redu, makar se tako činilo. Nosio je nespreno izrezanu masku koja je krotila nemirnu kosu i držeći oči na rastojanju koje su izgledale kao da će se svakog trena potući. Gledala ih je čudno, nekako s nevjericom. Voljela je boje, nisu joj mogle umaći nijanse ali ovu nije mogla nikako sebi da objasni. Nisu ni tamne a ni svijetle, noj nekako pitome i čak su joj se u tom ludilu činile lijepe. Promrmljao je nešto ali od mučnine i bubnjeva nije razumijela ni riječ.

Kao dijete, ni najmanje bojažljivo je prošaputala: “Koralno sive”.

On je pokosi pogledom ali ga iznenadi njen pokret ruke koja kao da pokri usta, kazni se i lupi po gubici. Baš kao malo dijete. Činilo se da ga je to još više razljutilo. Podiže oružje, nasloni toplu cijev na hladno lice. Prijala joj je ta toplina. Ponovo pjesma. Pjesma pa...nema bola, samo pjesma. Odjednom se zakikota. Nevino, iz dna duše, kao labud kad ispušta svoj krik , kad doziva pjesmom kraj. Nije shvatao šta se dešava. Umjesto da plače, žena se smije, znači hrabra je, nije je briga. Ali, zašto? Toliko se tresla od smijeha da joj izmaknu groktaj. To je bio njegov okidač. Počeo je da se smije i sklonio je oružje. Pune usne su otkrile ne tako lijepe zube ispod gustih brkova što grilli su urednu bradu. Kvarili su tu sliku. Kad ih ugleda ona nesvjesno pokri svoje i nastavi smijeh. Ali ovaj nije bio ludački, nije se smijala smrti, već tuđem životu. Biće da ga je to uvrijedilo jer je istrčao. Vidjela je krupna, muževna leđa, sjetila se gazde i mirisa pokvarene duše što kidala je njenu. Vidjela je kosu, svezanu u rep, a pored lijepo oblikovane ruke i uz venu tetovažu. Mahinalno je uzela papir i nožem je precrtala. Znak vječnosti upleten u trnje priljubljen uz lice lobanje. I ona je bila siva, koralno siva. Negdje je to prije vidjela, možda sanjala ali sigurno da joj se urezalo zajedno sa poljuljanim zubima i ludačkim osmjehom. Dok je držala nož udoše i odvedoše je kući. Cijelim putem je zurila u trake na prozoru koje su poput pruge ostajale pod stopalima kiše. Taj voz, njegov odlazak, i sudbine šamar. Stiskala je papir i pokušavala da se sjeti odakle zna taj znak.

Čim je stigla kući, sjela je i zaspala. Trebala joj je snaga, da se pripremi za njega. Mrštilo se lice a vena na vratu se tresla. Izgledala je kao da će svakog trena pući, umiti je nečim slatkim, naliti malokrvne zenice, dati im boju. Nije podnosila svoj lik u ogledalu ali je nešto promijenilo tog dana. Pogrešni neznanac, slika poznatog, možda, nije mogla da se sjeti. Znala je jedno. Ponovo će ga sresti, mora. Hjela je da izazove svoju karmu, da joj prošlost podmetne nogu, obali I podnese pred njim. Ali zašto? Zašto se osjeća kao da ga zna, kao da zna taj urezani trag u koži I slike njene neosanjane budućnosti-lobanje. Sjeti se u neko doba djece i shvati da je čak uspjela da ne misli na njih.

“A i ne trebaju mi, ni najmanje, možda su se izgubila. Možda, nadam se. Ipak spavaju, ljepotani moji.”

Kako se nagnula da poljubi svog jedinca (imala ih je troje, ali jedino je mali David bio stvarno njen, jedino je on nahranjen njenom ljubavlju, ostale hrani, da eto ne umru od gladi) naglo se dijete trgnu i izbeći oči. Mrtvi mozak proradi, pregrize je misao, uhvati nespremnu trzaju, obali je na pod. Slika, crtež, koralno plave, on, njegov on. Kao napad pčela zakopana sjećanja su počela da nalijeću, ujedale su kosti glave, bušile joj nozdrve, puštajući nagli udar vazduha. Zagrljaj pored voza i poljubac za kraj. Ali kako je mogla da zaboravi? Da se ne sjeti jedine tačke na pustom horizontu što uklapala se u perspektivu svijeta poleglom pod prazninom papira. Nije jedina koju je vrijeme dotuklo, nije je ni prepoznao. A ne može ga ni kriviti. Često se i sama pitala ko je podmetnuo sliku iza ogledala? Hoće da je zbune, da učine da pomisli da je to nebiće ona. A i nije bila, bila je gora, to je znala.

Prošla je godina a bolnički krevet i držanje u naručju novorođenčeta je zamjenila ludačka košulja. Kuća u kojoj je dojila dijete je postajala njen kavez. Kupile su se gladne zvijeri, širile su usta da se nahrane. Na nagovor njenog gazed, odveli su djecu.

“Mama, obećaj da ćeš doći da mi zašiješ ponovo desni džep, obećaj”, pri odlasku iz kuće viknuo joj je David, njen David.

Od svog tog haosa koji je vabio iz tame, zaboravila je na njih. Jedino čega se sjećala je bio on, Davidov on i njegova tetovaža. Osjećala je prazninu ali nije mogla sebi da objasni taj nedostatak. Stizao je zaborav. Ista životinja koja se hranila njenim tijelom je potkupila doktore da je ne odvedu na liječenje. Koristio je njenu nemoć da dokaže svoju moć. Kako žalosno stvorenje, nečovjek, treba čovjek da bude da bi osobi nanio bol kojeg ni sama nije bila svjestna. Da nebo može da cilja i pogodi, već bi stotine puta ustrijelilo pokvarenjaka. No možda bi mu i smrt bila nagrada.

“Prekini da drhtiš I pušti me da dovršim. Prokleta da si, ne zaslužuješ ovaj život!”

Ovog puta su konačno zamijenili uloge. Nije bio svjestan da je postao plijen. Podigla je pogled i zaustavila se na njemu. Zurila je tako nekoliko minuta. Zaletio se rukom da je ponovo udari ali dočekala ga je spremno. Zamahnuvši mu odsječe prst. On se odgurnu I priljubi uz zid.

“Nemoj. Zar ne znaš da sam ti bio sve? Nemoj... molim te!”

Plakao je ali oči su drugo govorile. Nije osjećao ni bol ni strah, a kako da ga i osjeti.

“Evo da ti vratim kad si mi već sve dao. Nikom nisam ostala dužna pa neću ni tebi. A to izvini sačuvaj za nikad, evo brzo će ti doći.”

Vidjela je samo jednu tačku, na njegovom vratu. Počela je da pjeva. To je više ličilo na vrisak koji je odzvanjao u šupljini lobanje. Htjela je da mu ponovo vrati, da ga počasti još jednim rezom. Nije joj dozvolio, prokleti gad. Ponovo je uspio da je prevari, da je ostavi nepomičnu. Brzim prelazom zario joj britvu u srce. Stade pjesma, ponovo. Poput paučine na vjetru, izlomila se krhka sijenka i pade na pod. Disanje je kupovalo minute. Zbuni se na tren i htjede da joj se izvini ali istrča iz kuće I ostavi je samu. Dok je ležala omamljena, krhotina od srca je počela da tone. Spuštalo se niz rebra, grizlo je po grlu. Sjetila se Davida a i njegovog oca. Konačno je smrt podsjetila da je on umro, baš kao i njena majka. Čudno ali nije je zanimalo ni to. Postala je sebična. Ali kasno, previše kasno da izvuče taj ubod, da oživi, da ode pa se ponovo vrati. I ne ista, već sama. Uhvati je pjesma. Nije je mogla pratiti, previše brzo su stihovi skakali da bi ih stigla.

Porozjele su očne jabučice. Pokupile su svo crvenilo sa jagodica i usana. Bježale su linije ostavljajući bijeli dlan da stoji na crnom tijelu. Postade lijepa. Da sad sebe može vidjeti. Šteta. Biće da smrt pomladi, uljepša, i to ne zbog samog otpisanog, već zbog drugih. Da ga zapamte tako, boljeg nego ikad. A takva je ona sad bila. Pjesma pa bol. Bol pa pjesma. Samo bol. Samo pjesma. Odjednom ništa.

## Suddenly Nothing

### (The Long Shadow of a Short Life)

**Jelena Đurović.** Montenegro

Kilometers would be shredded and distances would fit into a palm. Drawn maps would be jealous of the deep lines of her thighs. Her hands were heavy. They worked for others, forgetting one. She would tear the lining of her woolen skirts which warmed her bruised knees. Sewing pockets for her children's clothes. So many cracks filled her life. Grew out from her clothes, penetrated her soul. She was a crack herself, a bottomless one. Disease filled her, dragged her towards oblivion. She did not remember the past, yet she used to live in it.

She used to say: "I was born for you and you for me." But who listens to the quiet ramblings of a restrained woman. And she was everything but a woman, that's how she felt. The faded contours of the once heavenly face were still visible. The amateurishly half-dyed hair, large but sunken and brutally open eyes, a thin neck, excellent for hanging, wind-cracked lips. A tall shadow broke from the hips upwards. The spine fell under its burden. Long fingers clad in water and a ring, the only thing that shone on her. It's really a sin how something so pleasing to the eye gets ripped apart by time, making the picture ugly to the eyes. She artificially spread her lips every time the wily boss came running. He came, as he used to say, for "the cake." May she be forgiven; she knew what she was doing. Exactly at five o'clock, each Friday, the nasty beast limped in, thirsty for the sweet blood, to drink from the spring, to satisfy his hunger. She would take the children to the play room. Well, barely a room. A large wooden board, set in a corner, covered by a

dirty curtain. While the children played with cones around the room, counting the few remaining tiles, she kept her lips shut with her teeth, while "the cake" became bitterer and bitterer. While the dried body hovered above the fleshy mass which almost ate away at the bones, there was only one thing on her mind – she remembered her song and the children whose cooing overcame the pain. And she was a child herself. She was only 23. And she hated them, she often dreamt of strangling them by the river. She remembered her mother and the scenes from her childhood. A hand, a noose and the beatings, the end of her mother. Pain, then the song, the song then pain. A sigh, his sigh, it was as if she wasn't breathing at all.

"Vulnerable little bird, her wings clipped,  
Gathers the crumbs, doesn't need much,  
Dreams of flying away, of touching the  
scents of the sky."

"There, I'll skip the love. Take this. A creature like you does not need it anyway," he'd say every time, while she dreamt of stabbing him.

She kept it next to the bed, but did not have the strength to do it, the fool she was. And the moment the bulky body went away, the song would stop. She had swallowed her tears long ago, no use for them now. She would take the money lying next to the pillow, pull on her dress and run to her people. She would immediately go to the shop around the corner to get some lunch. She looked them in the eye, brazenly handing them the money, and everyone knew where it came from, only she pretended not to. The food wasn't enough

to satisfy her hunger; she didn't eat much anyway. She needed air, the unknown palms to open her clogged pores. Minutes of silence to align with the beats of her tormented heart. She tried, she kept trying and she will keep trying, but how could she leave them? Find a better place for herself and provide them with a safe ending?

She replaced the sweaty fat body with dirty plates. She looked through the half opened window at the faces of people who came to the pub. She made quick swoops with the sponge, cutting her fingers. She liked her wounds; they were the only color to her paleness. Dull thoughts ate away at the halls of the atrophied left hemisphere, flying about and going to her head. Less and less of her was left, nothingness was ever increasing.

"Where are those notes colored with happiness?

Why did you run away so far?

Leaving me subdued until I turned my back to him,

I, too, want a bite to fill my stomach, revive my soul, if the body is silent."

The smell of gunpowder and smoke came through the window. She reached down for the new round of plates when the fear took over. She took a step back, taking the plates with her, and her breath escaped her as the iron surface supported her. She lost her voice once again, again her ears started roaring, her insides screamed, taking away her strength. She closed her eyes. She didn't want to let herself go, to let the raving madness finish her off. Pain, song, song then pain. She remembered this scene, the fourth time, the fourth son of a bitch on his way to cut another string that bound her to earth. Finally, she opened her eyes, and in front of the door a young man appeared, holding a gun. But she wasn't hit, there was no shot. She felt herself over and realized she was ok, or so

it seemed. He wore an awkwardly cropped mask which tamed the unruly hair and kept the distance between his eyes, which looked like they were about to start a fight. She was looking at them strangely, as if incredulously. She liked colors; she never missed a nuance, but this one she couldn't explain to herself. Neither dark nor bright, his eyes seemed to her somehow tame and beautiful even in that madness. He mumbled something, but nausea and drumming prevented her from understanding a word.

Like a child, without any fear she whispered: "Coral grey."

His look cut through her but she surprised him by a gesture – her hand seemed to cover her mouth to punish it, to shut the trap. Just like a child. This appeared to anger him even more. He raised his weapon, laying the hot pipe on the cold face. The heat felt good. The song again. The song then... no pain, only the song. Suddenly, she chuckled. Innocently, from the depths of her soul, like a swan song calling for the end. He didn't understand what was happening. Instead of crying, the woman is laughing, so she must be brave, she does not care. But why? She was laughing so hard that a grunt escaped her. That triggered him. He started laughing and put down the gun. Full lips revealed not so great teeth beneath his thick mustache which hugged the neat beard. They ruined the picture for her. When she saw them, she unconsciously covered her own teeth with her hand and continued laughing. But this laughter was not hysterical, she was no longer laughing at death, but at someone else's life. He must have been offended by it. She saw a large, masculine back, and remembered the boss and the smell of the putrid soul which ripped apart her own. She saw his hair, tied in a ponytail, and next to it, the nicely shaped arms and a tattoo traced by a vein. Mechan-

ically, she took a piece of paper and drew it with a knife. The eternity symbol intertwined with thorns and pressed onto a skull. It was grey too, coral grey. She had already seen it somewhere, maybe dreamt of it, but it was etched into her mind, together with cracked teeth and the big, crazy smile. She was still holding the knife when they came in and took her home. The whole ride back, she stared at the trails on the window which stayed behind like railways under the feet of rain. That train, his departure, and the slap of the destiny. She clutched the piece of paper, trying to remember why she knew that symbol.

As soon as she got home, she sat down and fell asleep. She needed strength to prepare for him. Her face grimaced and the vein on her neck trembled. It looked like it would burst any moment, washing her face with something sweet, coloring her poor anemic pupils. She couldn't stand her own reflection in the mirror, but something changed that day. The wrong stranger, a familiar image, maybe, she couldn't remember. One thing she knew. She'll meet him again, she must. She wanted to provoke her karma, to let the past plant a foot in front of her, making her fall before him. But why? Why does she feel as if she knew him, as if she knew that trace etched on his skin and the image of the future she never stopped dreaming – the skull. At one point she remembered the kids, realizing she even managed to not think about them.

“And I don't need them, not in the least, they might have got lost. Maybe, I hope so. No, they are sleeping, my pretties.”

As she leaned over to kiss her only child (she had three, but only little David was really hers, he was the only one fed by her love, others were fed so as not to die of hunger), he suddenly jerked and fiercely opened his eyes. A jumpstart to the deadened brain, a thought bit through her, the jerk caught her off guard,

throwing her to the floor. An image, a drawing, coral blue, he, his he. Like a bee attack, the buried memories started to flock together, biting at her skull, piercing her nostrils, letting in a sudden shock of air. An embrace next to a train and a kiss goodbye. But how could she forget? To not remember the only bright spot on the desert horizon that fit in the perspective of a world flattened under the blankness of paper. She wasn't the only one run down by time; he did not recognize her either. Well, it's not as if she could blame him. Even she often wondered who substituted the image behind the mirror. They want to confuse her, make her think that that non-being was her. And it was not, she was much worse, she knew that.

A year passed and the hospital bed, and holding a newborn in her arms, was replaced by a straitjacket. The house in which she breastfed the child was becoming her cage. Hungry beasts gathered around, opening their mouths for feeding. At the insistence of her boss, they took away the children.

“Mama, promise me you'll come sew back my right pocket, promise,” David, her David called out to her while leaving the house.

All that chaos preying from the darkness made her forget about them. The only thing she remembered was him; David's he and his tattoo. She felt emptiness but could not explain the feeling. Oblivion was catching up. The beast that fed on her body bribed the doctors not to take her away for treatment. He used her weakness to prove his power. How sad, how brute, does someone have to be to inflict pain on someone who was not even aware of it. If heaven could take an aim and shoot, it would have already shot the foul man a hundred times. But maybe his death would be a reward.

“Stop shivering and let me finish. Damn you, you don't deserve this life!”

This time, they finally switched roles. He wasn't aware he had become prey. She raised her eyes and kept them on him. She stared at him for a few minutes. He raised his hand to hit her again but she was ready when he tried. Swinging the blade, she cut his finger off. He jumped away, pushing himself against the wall.

"Don't. Don't you know I was your everything? Don't... please!"

He was crying, but his eyes were saying something else. He felt no pain or fear, and how could he have.

"Please, let me give it all back, if you'd already given me everything. I never owed anyone anything, I won't owe you. And save your sorries for the never-after, here, it will come to you soon."

She saw only the one point on his neck. She started singing. It was like a scream echoing in the cavity of a skull. She wanted to get back at him, to honor him with another cut. He did not let her, son of a bitch. Once again he managed to trick her, to leave her motionless. With a swift move, he thrust the razor in her heart. The singing stopped, again. Like cobweb in the wind, the fragile shadow broke and fell to the floor.

The breaths were buying seconds. Confused for a moment, he wanted to apologize to her, but instead ran away, leaving her alone. As she laid there all dazed, the shard that was her heart began to sink. It sank down her ribs, biting at her throat. She remembered David and his father. Finally, death reminded her he had died, just like her mother. Strange, but not even that interested her. She became selfish. But late, too late to cancel out that stabbing, to liven, leave and come back again. And not as the same person, but as someone on their own. The song caught up with her. She wasn't able to follow it, the verses jumped about too quickly for her to catch their meaning.

Her eyeballs got pink. They collected all the red from her cheeks and lips. The lines were running away, leaving a white palm on a black body. She became beautiful. If she could've just seen herself like that. A pity. Death beautifies, makes you young again, and not for your sake but for other's sake. So that you can be remembered like that, better than ever. And so she was now. The song, then pain. Pain, then the song. Only pain. Suddenly nothing.

## Pierwszy lot

**Alicja Wojciechowska. Polska**

To był jej pierwszy lot i bez wątpienia ostatni.

Wszystko przez tego jej durnego szefa. Mówiła mu, że tego nie chce, ale on nie słuchał. Nigdy jej nie słuchał z tym swoim kpiącym, protekcyjnym uśmieszkiem i niebezpiecznym, drapieżnym błyskiem w oku. Powtarzała, że ma chłopaka, że ma inne zobowiązania, ale on miał to gdzieś. Może potrafił przejrzeć jej kłamstwa, może była za słaba, żeby postawić między nimi mur. A może zdawała sobie doskonale sprawę, że na jej posadę sekretarki w prestiżowej firmie czyha cały tabun innych kobiet i musi spuścić uszy po sobie? Nie stawała się w końcu coraz młodsza. Robiła, co szef jej kazał, bo bała się utraty takiej dobrej pracy. Nie była niezastąpiona, wiedziała o tym. Czasami protestowała, oczywiście, ale on jej nie słuchał. I pozwalał sobie ciągle na więcej. Aluzje, poklepywania, powłóczyście spojrzenia, które mroziły jej skórę. Kazał jej zostawać po godzinach, a ona zgadzała się na to z uśmiechem, chociaż się bała. No i wreszcie stało się. W jego biurze. Żałowała, że zostawiła gaz pieprzowy w torebce, lecz z drugiej strony wiedziała, że nie odważyłaby się go w ogóle użyć. Ona była nikiem, on miał miliony na koncie. Kto by jej uwierzył? Przecież to zawsze wina kobiety, jej ubioru, jej uśmiechu, jej całej. A więc stało się raz. I drugi. I trzeci. I czwarty, piąty, szósty, dziesiąty...

Ludzie faktycznie wyglądają z tej wysokości jak mrówki.

Małe problemy małych ludzi. O, tam na przykład dalej. Jakiś mężczyzna szarpie za ramię zapłakaną dziewczynkę. Chyba też coś krzyczy, ale ona oczywiście nie może usłyszeć słów. Nie musi, słowa jej własnego ojca wciąż brzmią jej w uszach nawet po tylu latach. „Ty niewdzięczna cholero”, „Daj tatusiowi buziaczka”, „Stul pysk, boli mnie głowa”. No i ten oddech cuchnący piwkiem. Wyrwała się stamtąd, jak tylko mogła. Poszła na studia do wielkiego miasta, chociaż ojciec śmiał się, że po co jej to wszystko, skoro i tak będzie tylko smażyć jajecnicę mężowi i rodzić bachory.

Kto by pomyślał, że słońce może tak pięknie odbijać się od szyb?

Ach, no i tak, oczywiście pozostawała jeszcze kwestia jej byłego narzeczonego. Proroctwo ojca o mały włos się nie ziściło. Był czas, gdy naprawdę chciała rodzić wybrankowi dzieci i gotować mu obiadki. Ale jej przywiązanie pozostało nieodwzajemnione. Nie dość, że podkradał jej pieniądze z portfela, to jeszcze dowiedziała się, że zdradzał ją na prawo i lewo. Najpierw błagał ją o wybaczenie, lecz gdy jego krokodyle lzy jej nie wrzusiły, usłyszała od niego na odchodnym, że jest paskudna, gruba i oziębła jak zdechła ryba. Przegnała go na cztery wiatry, ale ta rana nie zaleczyła się nigdy.

Jaki piękny zachód słońca.

Nie tylko ta rana się jątrzyła. Parę dni po rozstaniu dopadły ją nudności. Przeczynała swoją zgubę, ale dla pewności zrobiła test. Rezultat brzmiał jak wyrok. Nie była gotowa, nie była przygotowana, nie mogłaby poradzić sobie z tym wszystkim sama. Nie potrafiłaby się nim zaopiekować, skoro ona sama wymagała opieki. Pojechała za granicę i załatwiła sprawę. Odetchnęła z ulgą, starając się wrócić do równowagi. Nie mogła. Zewsząd dobiegały ją głosy,

czasami wprost, czasami podprogowo: „Twoje ciało nie należy do ciebie”, „nie masz prawa do decyzji”, „wiemy, co słuszne, wiemy, co najlepsze, ty się mylisz”, „zbrodnia”, „pójdziesz do piekła”. Nie wierzyła w to, odpychała od siebie te myśli. Ludzie byli okrutni, ale Bóg nigdy by jej nie opuścił, Bóg był sprawiedliwy i miłosierny, tak ją uczono.

Dlaczego właściwie zdecydowała się na ten lot? Na ten bilet w jedną stronę w nieznaną? Impuls chwili, jak jej się wydawało. Wreszcie doszła do głosu ta jej część, która chciała wyrwać się na wolność, chciała zrzucić kajdany przeszłości, wymazać wszystkie krzywdy, których doznała, i cały smutek, jaki przypadł jej w udziale. Ostateczna wolność od obelg, uprzedmiotowienia, braku kontroli nad swoim życiem, swoim ciałem, braku możliwości powiedzenia „tak” albo „nie”. Nikt nie szanował jej wyborów, nikt nie słuchał, nikt nie rozumiał, a nawet nie starał się zrozumieć.

Miała dość życia w świecie skrojonym pod mężczyzn, który tylko utwierdzał ich w przekonaniu, że są wspaniali i bezkarni. Teraz będzie wolna, rozwinie skrzydła niczym anioł. Odleci do lepszego miejsca. Miejsca, z którego się nie wraca.

Jej serce ścisnęło się, gdy uświadomiła sobie pewną rzecz.

Przecież Bóg także był mężczyzną.

Ciało uderzyło o beton z przeraźliwym hukiem.

## Her First Flight

Alicja Wojciechowska. Poland

It was her first flight, and without doubt her last.

All because of that stupid boss of hers. She'd told him she didn't want to, but he wouldn't listen. He never listened to her, with that mocking, condescending little smirk of his and that dangerous, predatory glint in his eye. She'd said again and again that she had a boyfriend, that she had other priorities, but he didn't care. Perhaps he could see through her lies, perhaps she was too weak to put up a wall between them. Or perhaps it was because she was only too aware that there was a whole herd of other women hungry for her position as secretary in a prestigious company and she had to put up and shut up. After all, she wasn't getting any younger. She did what her boss said because she was frightened of losing such a good job. She wasn't irreplaceable, she was conscious of that. Sometimes she protested, but he didn't take any notice. And he took more and more liberties. Allusions, wandering hands, languid stares that made her skin crawl. He'd tell her to stay behind after hours, and she would agree with a smile, though she was scared. And then it happened. In his office. She wished she hadn't left her pepper spray in her handbag, but then again she knew she'd never have dared to use it anyway. She was a nobody; he had millions in his bank account. Who'd have believed her? It's always the woman's fault – because of how she dresses, because of her smile, because of everything about her. And so it happened. Once. And then again. And a third time. And a fourth and a fifth and a sixth and a tenth...

People really do look like ants from up there.

Little people and their little problems. Oh, there, over there, for instance. Some bloke grabbing a tear-stained little girl by the shoulder. He looks like he's shouting something at her as well but she can't hear what, of course. She doesn't have to – her own father's words still ring in her ears even after so many years. "You ungrateful little bitch," "Give daddy a kiss," "Shut up, you're giving me a headache." And his disgusting beery breath. She got out as soon as she could. Went to university in the city, though her father laughed at her and asked her why, since all she was ever going to do was serve up scrambled eggs to her husband and push out more brats.

Who'd have thought the sun could glance so exquisitely off the window panes?

Oh yes, and then there was the question of her ex-boyfriend, of course. Her father's prediction had very nearly come true. There had been a time when she really had wanted to bear her beloved children and cook him dinners. But her loyalty had not been mutual. Not only had he regularly helped himself to money from her purse, but she'd also found out he'd been two-timing her left and right. At first he'd begged her to forgive him, but when his crocodile tears failed to move her, the last thing she'd heard was that she was ugly, fat, and as frigid as a dead fish. She'd sent him packing, all right, but the wound had never healed.

What a beautiful sunset.

And that wasn't the only festering wound. A few days after the break-up, she'd

started feeling nauseous. She'd sensed her downfall, but she'd done a test to be certain. The result came like a sentence. She wasn't ready, she wasn't prepared, she couldn't have coped with it all alone. She couldn't have looked after it when she herself was in need of looking after. She went abroad and got rid. After that she breathed a sigh of relief and tried to get back on an even keel, but she couldn't. From every side she was bombarded by voices, sometimes directly, other times more subtly: "Your body doesn't belong to you," "the decision isn't yours to take," "we know what's right, we know what's best, you're wrong," "it's a crime," "you'll go to hell." She didn't believe that; she repulsed that thought. People were cruel, but God wouldn't abandon her. God was just and merciful, that was what she'd been taught.

Why exactly had she decided to take this flight? This one-way ticket into the unknown? It had seemed like an impulse. At

last that part of her that wanted to break free was getting its say, the part of her that wanted to break the chains of the past, erase all the wrongs she had experienced and all the sadness she'd had to bear. Finally – freedom from the insults, the objectivisation, the lack of control over her own life, her own body, her lack of agency to say "yes" or "no". No one had ever respected her choices, no one had ever listened, ever understood; no one had ever even tried to understand.

She'd had enough of life in a world tailored to men, a world which only reinforced their conviction that they were wonderful and untouchable. Now she would be free, she'd spread her wings like an angel. She'd fly away to a better place. A place of no returns.

Her heart gave a lurch when she realised one thing.

God was a man too.

The body landed on the concrete with a sickening thud.

## طمث

حازم رعد. سوريا

ليس الموت حقاً، الموت واجبُ الجميع أمام الإله، وعلى عباده أداء واجباتهم وإن لم ينالوا من الحياة إلا عذاباً ووحدةً وثلاثة حروب، أحقاً تعلنون الخريف بأنغام العشاق الحزينين؟ الخريف يعلنه الله بالوفيات ورقةً تلو أخرى، وحلماً تلو آخر.

توفيت جدتي أميةً، أنهى أبنائها تعليمهم الجامعي، وتناول بعضهم على كليتين دفعةً واحدة.

توفيت جدتي جدةً نموذجيةً؛ حاكت لنا الصوف، وطبخت لنا في المناسبات العائلية، وتدمرت من كثرة الأحفاد وآلام الرأس ذات عيد، ليس هذا العيد.

توفيت جدتي قبل أيام من ولادة حفيدة ابنتها الأولى. لطالما حدثتنا الجدة عن إغلاق الله للأبواب وفتحها للشبابيك.

توفيت جدتي ولا كلام يكفي لتوصيف حجم الغصة في العنق.

لكن الخلاصة، مثل الرصاصة في قلب شاعرها  
حكمة قاتلة

العشرون من أيلول، لما يعتدل الخريف بعد، ولا يبدو اعتداله قريباً في الأفق؛ تربة أحواض النباتات التي أضحت ملجأً والدتي الأخير من الحرب تشفقت، والجميع يبيل نفسه برذاذ الماء – لا مكيفات، ولا مراوح، ولا كهرباء لتشغيل أيٍّ منهما حتى لو توفر – معطيات اليوم شديدة الاعتيادية لولا أن فقدت الجدة شهيتها منذ بعض الأيام. كان الناظر ليدرك أن الإحباط سيد مشاعر الجميع أينما نظر.

يعتقد الدمشقيون أن الحرب لما تتسلل بعد إلى دمشق، لكن الحرب في دمشق أكثر تجلياً من الحرب في أيٍّ من المناطق التي أضحت الاشتباكات فيها عادةً يوميةً لدى الجميع. قد لا تحلق الغربان فوق دمشق، وقد لا تشعر بخطر الموت الغير اعتيادي في أي لحظة ومكان بعد الآن، لكن كم التنازلات التي يقدمها الدمشقي ثمناً لبقائه بعيداً عن المتنازعين على جغرافيا الوطن الكبير أكبر من أن يُحتمل، ورغم ذلك لا يرى الدمشقي مشكلةً في هذه التنازلات؛ لا بأس في سلبه العنب حبةً حبة، المشكلة الحقيقية في نظره هي سلبه سلة العنب دفعةً واحدة.

والطفلة، آنذاك، فقدت عذريتها اغتصاباً إذ عمت الفوضى إبان بدء الحرب؛ صار الجميع جميعين، أولهما رأى في السعادة خيانةً لدم كل من مضى، والآخر رأى في السعادة استكمالاً لمشوارهم، والطفلة تحب السعادة، ولا ترى في الحزن وفاءً لأحد، ولا وقت لديها لرتائهم أجمعين. إلى الشاطئ إذاً، حيث سنحتفل حتى الصباح كل يوم، وحيث لنا الكحول والمخدرات وموج البحر ملاذاً، وحيث سنقف أمام أحدهم، نصارع إلى أن تخور القوى، ثم نبكي، ثم نقضي من الحياة سنةً دون سبب واضح للحياة.

ثلاثة سنوات منذ اغتصبت هذه الطفلة، والقضية اليوم هي الجدة الجميلة التي فقدت من وزنها ما تيسر استجابةً لقرار رب أمر بأن يجلب لها حفيدها حفاضاتٍ للمسنين في آخر أيامها. القضية الآن هي رغبة الجدة الشديدة، كما كل المسنين، في دفنها في مسقط رأسها في مقبرة العائلة، والقضية الآن هي حركة الجدة التي اقتصرت على تحريك العيون، وبلغ الطعام، وسائر الحركات اللاإرادية وحسب. لم يكن حملها من الطابق الثاني حتى السيارة التي تنتظر أصعب ما في قساوة هذه التجربة، القساوة بلغت أوجها عندما سمعت والدتي؛ ابنتها، تطلب مني ألا أصدم جدتي بشيء إذ نعملها جنّةً شبه هامة على الدرج، ثم تبكي.

ولم نستطع الانتظار حتى عودة الكهرباء لننزلها بالمصعد، فحتى السيارة التي تحمل تصريحاتٍ تسمح لها بالمرور عن شتى الحواجز إلى مسقط رأس جدتي المحاصر، لا تستطيع دخول المدينة بعد ساعة معينة بعد الظهر، كما أنها لا تستطيع المرور بعاجزٍ عن الحركة دون مرافق له، خروجاً أو دخولاً، ودون رشاؤٍ يدفعها سائقها لمن طلب بلا نقاش، ناهيك عن لزوم كون المرافق أنثى لا ذكراً، وامرأة لا طفلة، وكلما تقدمنا في الزمن قليلاً زادت الاشتراطات عنقاً. في دمشق المحاصرة حقاً نوع آخر من الحصار، أكثر خنقاً، وأكثر إذلالاً، وأكثر قدرةً على تحويل مدنٍ قائمةٍ إلى عنابر سجونٍ عملاقة. جدتي لم تكن تدرك الوضع شأنها شأن المكتفين ذاتياً بالحياة في هذه العنابر من قبل أن يصيبها النزاع بشيء، لذا، أوصت لنا جدتي بدفنها حيثما دفن جدي الجميل.

واستحالت الطفلة امرأةً منذ أن عاشت التجربة التي عاشت، لكن الاغتصاب لا يعني مجرد الاغتصاب في هذا المكان، فكل ذكر في حياتها يرى فيها مستوعباً لسائله المنوي منذ أن قررت مشاركة تفاصيل الحدث الأليم مع الذكر الأول بعيداً عن العائلة، ولا معنىً لغضب العائلة آنذاك، ولا معنىً لدموعها، ولا معنىً لمجمل التربيّات على الكتف؛ لا دعم يكفي لإسنادها ريثما تقف على أقدامها أمام ما حصل. الحل ربما في إيجاد ذكرٍ يفرغ فيها شهواته ثم يهمس بأذنها بأي جملةٍ عشوائيةٍ شرط أن يهمسها بحنان، وشرط ألا يهمس بأذنها أن أحبك. وجدت الطفلة ذكرها هذا، عاشت لديه، لا معه، وبحثت به عن مكانها في الحياة، ولا خواص.

لكن الجدة، رغم إرضاعها طاعة الوالدين لأطفالها عبادةً لوجهه تعالى، ورغم وجود ابنتيها إلى جانبها بينما تلتف أنفاسها الأخيرة، وحيدةً بعيون الجميع. الجميع يسأل أن أين أبناؤها أمام الموت، ولا يرثون قرب وفاتها بقدر ما يرثون وقوفها أمام الموت دون محرم ربما، أو بقدر ما يرثون بناتها بأن اضطروا للمرور بهذا الطرف دون وجود إخوتهم إلى جانبهم وجانبها، أو لست أدري، ولا أحد يدري، حتى من شعر بالحزن على بناتها أكثر من حزنه على مرض الجدة الجميلة لم يستطع صياغة تبرير لهذا الحزن، حتى بابتدال حزنه على مشاعرهن بدنو لحظة فراق والدتهن، لم يستطع.

دمشق مغزية بكل ما فيها، قد تقتلك ثلاث مرات في كل يوم، وقد تتهكم على موتك كلما سبحت لها الفرصة، لكنك ستنسى، ستتهم الجميع بكل ما يصيبك لكنك ستستثني هذا المكان ناسياً أن الشيطان كان ملاكاً ذات يوم، تماماً كما تنسى مع كل صباح أن الله قد وعدك بأن الشمس ستشرق من الغرب ذات

يوم، وستصير الحياة أجمل في ذاك اليوم، لكنه مشغولٌ عنك بالمجاعات في قارةٍ أخرى. ستستثنيها وستنثار فيك الفشعريرة عند كل أغنية في مديحتها، وستطفو مازوخيتك إذ تمر بأحد ساحاتها ذات يومٍ مرغماً لأن النفق تحت الساحة مفخخ بالمتفجرات، تنظر إلى المعلم في هذه الساحة أياً كان، وتفكر بعظمة الله إذ جعلك تمر من هنا لتذكر كم كانت الحياة جميلةً في ظل الأمجاد التي دفعت لنصب هذا المعلم ذات يوم.

والطفلة التي أضحت امرأةً تحب دمشق، والسهر، والسكر، والخبيثة. رؤوس الثالوث المحرم في هذا المكان هي الدين الذي افتقرت لأبسط تكويناته العقائدية في شخصها، والجنس الذي مارسه شبقاً شبق الأعاصير للدمار، والسياسة التي ابتعدت عن ممارستها خوفاً من العواقب على ذاتها وعلى من تبقى من العائلة. نعم، أحببت المرأة عائلتها رغماً عن كل الخراء الذي اجتازوه سويةً، أبعدت الطفلة عن عائلتها، ثم اغتصبت، ثم نزحت، ثم تعرض الأب لمخاطر الحرب مرةً إثر مرة، ولم تنزل المرأة طفلةً مع عائلتها، فالمقياس هنا هو قدرتها على رسم ابتسامةٍ على وجه الأب الجدي أبدأً بطفوليتها وحسب، والطفلة تطابق هذا المقياس وسائر ما تبقى من المقاييس.

الساعات الأولى من الحادي والعشرين من أيلول، بعد غدٍ يعتدل الخريف لدى الجميع، لكن خريفاً آخر قد يمتد أعواماً قد "اعتدل" للتو لدى الوالدة وأختها، رغم أن المولود قادمٌ بعد أسبوعين تماماً، لكن قنطاراً من المواليد الجدد لا يكفي للابتسام أمام موت الأم، هكذا تقول الأم، أمي، وهكذا يقول الجميع.

الأصدقاء يعزفون الغياب أمام جامعٍ أثري في دمشق، يحتسون الكحول، ولا يدركون أن غيوم السماء تطفو وتطوف رثاءً لجديتي الجميلة؛ لنا مواساة أنفسنا بالشعرية حتى وإن تهكماً، وكل فعلٍ أمام الموت مباح.

والطفلة اكتشفت أن الرجل الذي مارست معه الخبيثة بحد ذاته خبيثة، فابتعدت، وعادت تحمد بالعيش بلا سببٍ للحياة.

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العاشر من كانون الثاني، قد يحيا نصف أهل المدينة بلا كهرباء أكثر من نصف نهارهم، وقد تصل الانقطاعات في المناطق المحاصرة حد العشرين ساعةً في اليوم، لكن حجة الفتاة الأخرى لتأخرها عن الوصول إلي في موعدنا المحدد هو أنها لم تغادر مصفف الشعر إلى أن انتهى فيلمها المفضل، ولم تتخيل أن الخط العسكري على الحاجز قد يكون مزدحماً بهذا القدر. "سبع سياراتٍ أمامي" تقول، "والعسكري على الحاجز فتح حديثاً مع سائق أحدها، تخيل!". أذكر يوم اضطررنا لإسعاف أمي إثر جرح من زجاج مكسور؛ كاد الجنود يطلقون النار على أبي لأنه دخل من الرتل الذي خطوا عنوانه بوضوح "خط عسكري وإسعاف".

أسطح المدينة القديمة في دمشق لا ترتوي سهراً حتى شروق الشمس، ربما انقطعت عن عاداتها لفترة إذ أدرك سكان المدينة أن الحرب تبعد ثلاثة كيلومترات ربما عن حيث يسهرون، ولم ينسوا اليوم، لكن احتساء الويسكي أمام سماءٍ تخلو إلا من النجوم وذبول الرصاصات الخطاطة يحمل ربوبيةً في طيات سور ياليتها أبعد من أن يتجاهلها أحد. فلنسكر إذاً؛ على أسطحٍ قديمةٍ قدم الأزل فلنسكر، وفي ساحات البيوت، على بلاط رصفه عبيد ونزفت عليه الجواري مزيجاً من الدم والدموع، فلنسكر، ولنسكر في الأقبية إذا أزعجتنا الاشتباكات حد الطغيان على صدى مكبرات الصوت خاصتنا؛ صوت النزاع أقوى من صوت الحناجر، إلا إذا صدحت حناجرنا تحت قبوةٍ بأربعةٍ جدرانٍ يحيطها التراب من كل جانب.

والعمة التي لا يتجاوز طولها المتر والنصف تجاوز عمرها السبعين، لكن كفيها أكثر تشققاً من تربة أحواض نباتات أمي في يومها ذلك، فالعمة لا تزرع أحواض الزينة وحسب، لكنها تزرع في مزرعة بيتها الصغيرة ما استطاعت، ليس ترفاً، ولا حباً بالعرق الأخضر كما يقول عنها الجميع، وإنما حاجةً ملحةً لتأمين ما يمكن تأمينه من حاجات البيت دون مواجهة انهيار العملة في سبيل سد الجوع، فالبذور مما تنبت الأرض، والسماذ من روث قطيع الجار، والماء من البئر، ولا ذكور يساعدون في البذر أو السقاية أو الحصاد؛ كل الشباب في ريفها المنسي إما أقحموا في الحرب عنوةً، أو أنهم متخفون حد عدم الظهور حتى في "حديقة" المنزل.

على كل حال، لا يهم هذا الكلام الفتاة الأخرى أبداً، بل أبعد من ذلك، فهي قد تدفع على الوقود لتأكل السلطة الأفضل في دمشق كما يعادل مصروف عائلة العمة أسبوعاً كاملاً، وقد تذهب حتى أبعد فتدفع ما يكفي لسفري إلى بلد مجاور لتناول وجبةٍ ما مع السلطة متجنباً الشعور بخيبة الأمل إذ قطعت كل تلك المسافة لتأكل صحناً من السلطة لا يشبع، فالسلطة لا تشبع إلا المحاصرين في بساتين أطراف العاصمة، حقيقة تلك ولا جدال. لم يكن استغرابها من وجود المتسولين أمام مطعم كهذا ملفتاً، ولا كون قلبها أرق من أن تتجاهلهم بكل تكبر؛ ستحدثهم قليلاً، ثم ستعطيهم ما لا يكفي لشراء علبه كبريت من الكشك المقابل، ثم ستعود إلى منزلها منقعةً ما تنفق وقوداً وطعاماً وأفلاماً للسهرة، ثم ستغفو قريرة العين أن أطعمت صبيلاً جائعاً اليوم، ولن تنسى لوم الحرب على عدم تعبير أفراد الشعب عن حبهم لبعضهم البعض بشكل كافٍ، أو ربما على انعدام سلوك إلقاء الغرباء التحية على بعضهم البعض، أو ربما حتى عن أننا لم نعد نميط الأذى عن الطريق، كما عاداتها، ثم ستنام دافئةً كما كل يوم.

بعيداً قليلاً عن حيث نحن مات العشرات جوعاً، وبعيداً قليلاً عن حيث نحن لا يذكرهم كيف بدت الحياة عندما حوت أماكن أمانة؛ كيف لأي مكان أن يكون أمنياً بين فكي كماشية لا ترحم، أول الفكين طائرات ومدفيعات ودبابات تحافظ على أعمدة دخان الموت قائمةً ما دامت الشمس تشرق كل يوم، وثانيهما ذلك الذي يؤمن أن الله سيبعث له طيراً أبايلاً إذا رجم الزانيات وجلد محتسي الكحول وفرض النقاب والمحارم على الإناث والسراويل الطويلة الفضفاضة والذقون على الذكور. بعيداً قليلاً يقطن هؤلاء، والكل يعرف، ولكن في السكر اعتراف من الجميع بعجز الجميع عن مساعدة الجميع، وفي الضجيج هروب من رتابة الأيام التي تعاد أبداً تحت ظل العجز، وفي الرقص رفض، وإن شاعري وحسب، لاستيلاء العجز على حياة الجميع بكل أبعادها دون متنفسٍ أخير.

لكن العمّة لم تعرف الرقص إلا في عرس ابنها ذات مرة، حين أصرت إناث العائلة أن العرس لن يكتمل إلا برقص والدة العريس، ولم يتناقل الإناث الحكايات عن براعتها في هذا الطقس بعد أن رقصت؛ ربما كان حدثاً دخلياً على روتينها اليومي، لكنه كان جزءاً من الحدث الأكبر، زواج الابن، وكل الأحداث بعد هذا الحدث تشبه نفسها: تستيقظ مع صياح الديك، تسقي وتقليم، تقلب الأرض، وقد تتنوع الواجبات بين حين وآخر فتضطر لحصاد محصول دون آخر، كاسرة رتابة الأيام بأحداث تشابه في صخبها صمت البكم، لا أكثر. في ريفها المنسي لا تسلية إلا معالجة محصول الأرض بعد جمعه كل فينةٍ وأخرى، ولا مجال للترف اللهم إلا في الدعاء والصلاة أمام جبروت الظالمين.

في الحادي عشر من كانون الثاني، أخبرتني صديقتي أن أباها على وشك السفر، وأطلقت خريفاً جديداً لا أعرف موقفي منه حتى يومنا هذا. بكت حينما شرحت لي كيف وعد والدها بأن يحصل له على تأجيل الخدمة الإلزامية عبر علاقاته، لكنه فشل، وفي غضون أيام سينطلق الأخ إلى خارج الحدود ريثما تتم تجهيزات سفره إلى أوروبا. التعاطف واجبٌ في حضور هذا الموقف، فغياب الأخ يعني بالضرورة أن الفتاة ستبقى وحيدةً بين أبناء أغنياء الحرب، ويقدر ما يثير أغنياء الحرب الغثيان عند الاطلاع على ممارساتهم، بقدر ما يبدو ملائكةً أمام معظم أبنائهم وما يمارسون؛ في الحرب يسلم الأغنياء أبناءهم تحسباً، وفي الحرب يرفدون الأبناء بمرافقين غالباً ما يكونون الأقل حظاً الذين وجدوا أنفسهم يقومون بخدمتهم الإلزامية في جيش الوطن حماةً لأولئك الأبناء، وفي الحرب يملك الأبناء سلطة ذويهم بين يديهم دون تعبٍ التسلق للوصول إليها، والصديقة تقع وسط كل هؤلاء. قد لا أستطيع تبرير انفصامها عن واقع الحرب بالحد الذي بلغته، لكن الحياة بين أبناء أغنياء الحرب عقوبةٌ لا يستحقها أحد.

تعيش الصديقة على بعد بضعة كيلومترات نحو الشمال من المدينة القديمة، حيث يحيا من تبقى من الطبقة المتوسطة بين الأغنياء، وحيث لم ينقطع السكان عن نزاهاتهم اليومية مع كلابهم يوماً رغم كل الموت في هذا المكان. انفصامها ذلك ربما كان انعكاساً لانفصام المدينة عن ذاتها، فحتى على أصغر المقاييس تعاني هذه المدينة شرحاً لا مفر من ملاحظته بنظرة موضوعية واحدة؛ أشد مجتمعات المدينة التجارية ترفاً يقع على بعد أمتار قليلةٍ من أشد مراكز المدينة للمهجرين قسراً فقراً، يتذمر رواد المكان الأول من زبون يتناول السوشي بالشوكية بدلاً عن العصي، ولا يحق لسكان المكان الثاني التذمر من سكن عشرة أشخاص في غرفةٍ واحدةٍ تفصلهم عن بعضهم البعض ستارة قماشية وحائبات تحوي ما استطاعوا حمله من الذكريات.

والعمّة لم تزل تزرع حتى اقتحم العسكر ذات يومٍ في حملةٍ على الريف وحده للقبض على المتخلفين عن الحرب من الذكور. ذهب العريس، ولطمت العمّة يوماً، ولطمت العمّة بضع يومٍ، ثم صلت وتهجدت وقامت ليلها ونهارها، ثم انضمت إلى الجدة الجميلة في مقبرة العائلة.

تحت الحرب تستحيل المدن تجمعاتٍ مدنيةً منزلةً عن بعضها البعض بقدرٍ أكبر من أن يتخيله من يعيش تحت مظلة السلام، دويلات صغيرة يفصل بعضها البعض نقاط تفتيش وحواجز لا تستطيع

المرور عبرها إلا بوجود اسم وجهتك على أوراق هويتك، ويستثنى من القاعدة ضباط الجيش  
والعاملون فيه، دبلوماسيو الحرب أبدأً. لن تموت هذه المدينة ما رقصت الفتاتان تحت مطر النار هذا،  
لكنها ستقتلها ذات يومٍ شأن عاداتها باغتيال الجميع، رصاصاً، أو اغتصاباً، أو خطفاً، أو بأيٍّ من  
أدوات دمشق لاغتيال عابري دويلاتها منذ أن بدأ النزيف.

ودمشق باقيةً، تخون الجميع، إلا من ترك فيها جرحاً لا يموت.

## Menstruation

**Hazem Raad. Syria**

Death is not a right. Death is the duty everyone owes their God, and his worshippers must discharge their duty even if in life they have tasted nothing but torment, loneliness, and three wars. Do you think you can announce the coming of autumn with songs of sad lovers? God announces autumn with death, one leaf after another, one dream after another.

My grandmother died illiterate. Her sons graduated from university, and some of them went on to postgraduate studies. My grandmother died a model grandmother. She wove wool for our clothes, she cooked on family occasions, and during one holiday she grumbled about how many grandchildren there were and what a headache it was. Not this holiday.

My grandmother died days before her daughter's first granddaughter was born. She had always told us how God never closes a door but he opens a window. My grandmother died and there were no words to describe the weight of my sorrow.

But let's make an attempt: it was a bullet in the storyteller's heart. A murderous wisdom.

The twentieth of September. Autumn had not yet begun; it did not even seem near at hand. The soil was cracking in the vegetable patch that had become my grandmother's last refuge from the war. Nobody could do more than moisten themselves with a dribble of water. There was no air conditioning, no electric fans, and no electricity to run them if they had been there. A grimly normal day, except that grandmother had had no appetite for several days. Anyone who cared to look

would have seen everyone about them under the yoke of frustration.

The people of Damascus think that the war has not yet crept into their city, but actually you can see the war more clearly in Damascus than in any of the places where they are now used to daily battles. The crows may not be circling over Damascus, and maybe the people do not feel that they may suffer an unnatural death at any moment. But how much the Damascene has conceded as the price of remaining far away from those fighting over the geography of an unbearably big country! And yet he sees nothing wrong with his concessions. It's all right if you eat one slice of his bread after another; the only problem is if you take the whole loaf away in one go.

The girl, then a child, had lost her virginity when she was raped during the chaotic early days of the war. Already then there were two opposing camps: one side said that happiness was a betrayal of all those who had died, and the other held that to be happy was to continue their struggle. The child liked to be happy, and didn't consider it an act of loyalty to anybody. Neither did she have time to lament all the dead. So let's go to the beach, where we can party every night until morning, and we have alcohol and drugs and the waves of the sea as a refuge. We will stand in front of a wave and resist it until we are worn out, then weep, then live out a year of our lives without any clear reason for staying alive.

It's three years since the girl was raped, and the question now is the beautiful grand-

mother, who has lost most of her weight in keeping with the destiny decreed for her by a God who would have her grandson bring her adult diapers in her last days. The question now is the grandmother's burning wish – like all elderly people – to be buried in the family grave in her hometown. The question is that the grandmother's movements are now confined to her eyes, swallowing her food, and other, unconscious, movements. Bringing her down the stairs to the waiting car was not the cruellest moment that day. That came when I heard my mother, her daughter, asking me not to bump my grandmother into anything as we carried her downstairs an all but lifeless corpse – and then bursting out crying.

We couldn't wait for the electricity to come back to bring her down in the lift. The car had the permits it needed to pass through all the checkpoints on the way to my grandmother's besieged hometown, but it still could not enter the city after a given time in the afternoon. Neither could it carry an immobile patient without an escort. And, of course, the driver had to unquestioningly pay bribes to whoever demanded them. Above all, the escort had to be female not male, and an adult woman not a child. As time went on the conditions became more and more impossible to comply with. In besieged Damascus, there truly was another kind of siege, more choking, more humiliating, more capable yet of turning whole cities into enormous prisons. My grandmother had not understood the situation, because she was one of those who can happily live in the prisons until the conflict harms them directly. And so she asked us to bury her where my handsome grandfather was buried.

The young girl had become a woman when she suffered what she suffered. But in this place, rape does not mean just rape. Every male in her life now saw her as a mere

receptacle for his sperm, ever since the first time she confided the details of the painful incident to a male outside her family. Her family's anger, then, counted for nothing; her tears counted for nothing; all the pats on her shoulder counted for nothing. No support was enough to help her stand on her feet and face what happened. Maybe the solution was to find a male who could empty his lust into her and afterwards whisper any random phrase into her ear, as long as it was something affectionate. And as long as he didn't whisper into her ear that he loved her. The girl found that male. He kept her in his house and she sought her place in the world with him, not with her family.

It didn't avail grandmother that she had taught her children from the cradle that obedience to your parents is next to godliness. It didn't even matter that she had her two daughters by her side as she drew her last breaths. In the eyes of the world, she was alone. They all asked where her sons were while she was dying. They lamented her coming death less, perhaps, than the fact that she was facing it without a man of the family beside her; less than they lamented that her daughters were forced to make that journey without any of their brothers to accompany them. I do not know – nobody knows – how many of them felt more sorrow for the daughters than for my beautiful grandmother's illness, but were unable to justify that sorrow even by pretending that it was over their mother's approaching death.

Damascus is alluring in every way. It may kill you three times every day, and mock your death too if you give it the chance, but you'll forget. You'll blame everyone for what you suffer, sparing only this place, because you have forgotten that Satan was once an angel. You also forget, every morning, that God promised in the Koran that the sun will, one

day, rise in the west, and that life will be better on that day. But He is busy anyway with famines on another continent. You will spare Damascus and your spine will tingle at every song in its praise. Your masochism will come to the surface when, one day, you are forced to cross one of its squares because the underpass is stuffed with explosives. You'll look at the statue, whoever it commemorates, and praise God for making you pass this way and remember how beautiful life was back when they were singing praises at its pedestal.

The child who became a woman loves Damascus; she loves staying up late, getting drunk, and sinning. In this place the three persons of the forbidden trinity are religion, whose basic doctrines are unknown to her; sex, which she practised with a lust like the lust of a hurricane for destruction; and politics, which she has given up for fear of the consequences for herself and what remains of her family. Yes, the woman loved her family despite every fucking thing they had been through together. The child had been sent away from her family, then raped, then forced from her house. Her father had been exposed to the dangers of wartime and again. Yet the woman was still a child when she was with her family. That was measured by her ability to bring a smile to her father's ever-serious face with her childishness. The child still meets that measure and all the other measures.

The early hours of the twenty-first of September. The day after tomorrow, autumn will have begun for everyone. But for my mother and her sister, another autumn has begun, one that may last for years. The baby is due but no number of babies can make you smile in the face of your mother's death. So says the mother – my mother – and so says everyone.

The friends commemorate the passing outside a historic mosque in Damascus. They

slurp alcohol, not knowing that the clouds are growing dark and scudding past in mourning for my beautiful grandmother. We console ourselves with poetry, even if it's in mockery. In the face of death, everything is permissible.

The girl found out that the man who had sinned with her was himself a sin, and she went back to praising living without a reason for staying alive.

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The tenth of December. Perhaps half the city's residents spend more than half the day without electricity. In the besieged areas, the cuts can reach twenty hours a day. But the other girl's excuse for being late to meet me is that she had waited until the end of her favourite film to leave the hairdresser's. She hadn't imagined how long the military queue at the checkpoint could be. "There were seven cars in front of me," she says, "and the soldier at the checkpoint began chatting with one of the drivers, can you imagine!" I remember the time we had to rush my mother to hospital after she was injured by broken glass. The soldiers almost opened fire on my father because he had gone into the line where they had put a sign clearly saying "Military and Emergencies".

Evenings on the rooftops in the old city of Damascus are not complete until the sun has come up. The habit may have been broken for a while when the people of the city realised that the war was only three kilometres from where they were spending their night. They still haven't forgotten, but sipping whisky under a sky empty save for the stars and the tails of tracer bullets has too much of a Syrian kind of divinity to be renounced. So let's get drunk, on rooftops as old as time, in the courtyards of the houses, on paving stones laid by slaves where slave girls shed blood and tears. Let's get drunk, let's get drunk in the basements if we're up-

set because the sound of the clashes is overpowering our speakers. The sound of fighting is louder than the sound of singing, but not if you're singing in a basement whose four walls are surrounded by clay.

My aunt is less than a metre tall and more than seventy years old, with cheeks more cracked than my mother's vegetable patches were that day. My aunt doesn't just sow decorative plants. She sows everything she can in her house's little vegetable patch. It's not for pleasure, nor for love of green things as everybody thinks, but out of an urgent need to make sure she can provide whatever the family needs to keep hunger at bay despite the collapse in the value of money. The seeds are from her own plants, the manure is the dung from the neighbour's livestock, and the water is from the well. There are no men to help her sow, water or harvest: all the young men in her forgotten country district have been hauled off by force to the war or are so carefully hidden they will not even venture into their own gardens.

In any case, this talk is of no interest to the other girl. Far from it: she would be happy to spend as much on petrol to go and eat the best salad in Damascus as my aunt's family lives on in a whole week. Indeed, she would spend as much as it would cost me to leave the country, in order to eat another dish with the salad and avoid the feeling of disappointment after going all that distance to eat a bowl of salad that left her hungry. The only people who can eat their fill on salad are those in the besieged farmland on the outskirts; that's a fact no one can deny. There was nothing odd about her surprise when she saw beggars outside one of those restaurants, nor about her being too soft-hearted to haughtily ignore them. She would talk to them a bit and then give them some money that wouldn't pay for a box of matches from

the kiosk across the street. Then she would go home, after all the money she had spent on petrol and food and films for the evening, and close her eyes with an easy mind because she had fed a hungry boy that day. And as always she would blame the war for how members of the public did not show sufficient love for one another, or how strangers no longer said hello to each other, or even removed nuisances from the roadway. And then she would sleep comfortably, like every night.

Not far from where we are, dozens died of hunger. Not far from where we are, they no longer remember what life was like when there were safe places. How can any place be safe between a merciless hammer and anvil, the hammer of warplanes and artillery and tanks that make sure the smoke of death still rises to greet the sunrise every day, and the anvil of those who believe that God will send them divine assistance as long as they stone adulteresses, flog drinkers, make women wear a face veil and have a male escort, and make men wear baggy trousers and grow their beards? That lot are not far away, everybody knows it, but getting drunk is a way for us all to confess that we are all impotent to help anyone. The uproar is an escape from the monotony of days that repeat themselves in the shadow of impotence. Dancing is a rejection, if only poetically, of impotence's uncontested mastery over all aspects of all our lives.

My aunt only danced once, at her son's wedding. The females of the family insisted that the wedding would not be complete without the mother of the bridegroom dancing. The females of the family didn't exchange stories about her mastery of the rite afterwards. Perhaps it was a breach of her daily routine, but it was part of the greatest of events, her son's wedding, and everything that happened after that event was alike. She

would wake up when the cock crowed, water and prune her plants, and dig the earth. Her duties might vary from time to time if she had to harvest one particular crop, breaking the routine of the days with a different kind of monotony. In her forgotten countryside area, there was no entertainment but dealing with the crops every so often after their harvesting time came around. There was no room for any luxury except praying to God against the oppression of wrongdoers.

On the twenty-first of December, my friend told me that her brother was about to leave the country. That started a new autumn and I still do not know where I stand in relation to it. She cried when she told me how her father had promised to use his connections to have his military service postponed. In a few days her brother would cross the border; meanwhile they would make arrangements for him to travel on to Europe. You have to show sympathy in such circumstances. And with her brother gone, she would be left alone among the sons of the war profiteers. The behaviour of the war profiteers may be nauseating, but they're angels compared to most of their sons. In times of war, the profiteers arm their sons as a precaution; they call up bodyguards for them, most often from those who have the ill fortune to perform their military service in their country's army by protecting those sons. In war, sons wield their fathers' power without having had the trouble of earning it for themselves. And my friend was stuck among these people. I might not be able to justify the extent to which she detached herself from the reality of war, but to live among the sons of the war profiteers is a punishment no one deserves.

My friend lives a few kilometres north of the old city, where most of the remaining middle class live in amongst the wealthy,

where most of the residents still walk their dogs every day despite all the death this place has seen. Perhaps her detachment from the war reflected the city's alienation from itself. Even on the smallest scale, no objective look can fail to see the tear that rends this city. The most luxurious shopping centres are only metres from where the starkest poverty haunts those driven from their homes. In the shopping centres they grumble about a customer who eats sushi with a fork instead of chopsticks. And close at hand people cannot grumble if ten of them share a single room divided only by curtains and by the suitcases containing whatever memories they were able to carry.

My aunt kept sowing until one day the soldiers burst in during one of their campaigns to arrest those shirking war in the villages. Away went the bridegroom, and my aunt struck her cheeks in grief. She struck her cheeks for days, then took to staying up all night praying, and then she joined my handsome grandfather in the family grave.

In wartime cities turn into urban compounds more rigidly divided than those who live in peace can imagine: miniature states separated by checkpoints and barricades that you can only pass if your destination is also written on your identity card. The only exceptions are for army officers and military staff, the eternal diplomats of war. This city will never die as long as the two girls dance under this rain of fire, but it will kill them some day, because it has the habit of assassinating everyone, whether by bullets or rape or abduction, or by any of Damascus' other ways of assassinating those who cross between its miniature states since this bleeding started.

And Damascus remains, betraying everyone, except those who left it with an undying wound.

## Leyla

**Lara Bulut.** Turkey

Her insan topraktan yaratılmış; yaratan kendi ruhundan ruh üfleyip insana can vermiş. Vakti geldiğinde ise yaratıcının verdiği nefesi almasıyla insanın ruhu bedeninden çıkar; bedeni ise toprağa geri dönermiş.

Ben Leyla; yirmi iki yaşında, ruhunun çıkıp da bedeninin toprağa karışmasını yalvararak bekleyen Leyla. Ölmeyi böylesine şiddetli bir arzuyla ister miymiş insan? Ben istedim. Ne zamandır yatıyorum burada? Bir saattir mi, bir gündür mü, bir haftadır mı? Bu gece benim en uzun gecem; hatta bu geceden önce hiç var olmadı sanki bu ruh, bu beden. Benim gözlerim mi bunlar? Kime ait bu eller, bu dudaklar; kimin bu bedenin içinde çaresizce çırpınan ruh? Ah benim bitmek bilmeyen karanlığım; güneşin doğuşuna bir daha tanıklık edemeyecek, ilk defa gördüğü bu karanlık gözlerde kendi cenazesini seyreden zavallı gözlerim; ben önce sizi kaybettim. Gözlerimden ummazdım bunu ya; o sırtışı görmekten iyiydi belki. Sonra, her sabah annemin sesiyle güne başlamama vesile olan kulaklarımı kaybettim. Kendi çığlıklarımı işitmez oldum; yoksa hiç çıkmıyor muydu sesim, bilmiyorum. Önceleri kaçardım sandığımı, sanki bir ömür altında debelenip durduğum üzerimdeki o tonlarca ağırlığı; bütün gücümle o yapış yapış boyna, saçlara geçirdiğim tırnaklarımı, defalarca parça parça edilmiş, kana bulanmış göğüs uçlarımı, kasıklarımı, kadınlığımı hissetmez oldum. Nefes alıp verişlerim yavaşlarken artık biliyordum, kurtuluş çok yakındı. Demek ölüm böyle bir şeydi. Son defa içime çektiğim nefeste babamın şefkat dolu kokusu; kapanan gözlerimin önünde annemin her derdi unutturan sıcacık gülümsemesi vardı. Keşke son bir defa görebilseydim onları, kardeşimi, Selçuk'u, arkadaşlarımı... Hani hiç bırakmayacaklardı beni; yapayalnızdım şimdi, en zoru bu kimsesizlikmiş.

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Bardaktan boşalırcasına yağın yağmurun altında şemsiyeleriyle uzaktan simsiyah büyük bir bulutu andıran insanlara yaklaştım. Bu insanlar kimdi, niçin burada toplanmışlardı? Kalabalığın uğultusunu bıçak gibi kesen çok tanıdık bir ses duydum. Etrafındaki onlarca insanın çabalarına rağmen yüzükoyun kapaklandığı topraktan kafasını kaldırmayan bu kadın, annem miydi? Yerden kalkmasıyla kendini iki adım ötesinde kazılmış toprağın içine bırakması bir oldu. O, çukurun içindeki tahtaları delicesine söküp fırlattıkça bembeyaz bir surat çıktı ortaya. Aynada her gün defalarca karşılaştığım bu çehre hep soluk muydu böylesine? Demek, bütün bu insanların gözünden dökülen yaşlar benim içindi. Bir eliyle kafamı göğsüne bastırıp diğeriyle dizlerine vuran annem yalvarırcasına bağıırıyordu; “Beni de gömün.”

Kardeşim benden on yaş küçüktü. Ameliyathaneden çıkan doktor, annemin nur topu gibi bir kız çocuğu dünyaya getirdiğini söyleyince babam beni sevinçle kucaklayıp annemin yanına girmişti. Hastanede halamın yanında oturmuş sabırsızlıkla sıranın bana gelmesini beklerken; koridorun ucundan uzaktan akrabamız Ayşe teyze göründü. Bir hayli iri cüssesini taşımakta

zorlanan kısa bacaklarından olsa gerek, telaşlı yürüyüşle, üzerimize doğru yuvarlanmakta olan bir topa benziyordu. Nefes nefese kalmış yaşlı kadın halama dönerek sordu.

“Oğlan mı, kız mı?”

“Hiç sorma, bu da kızmış! Ben baştan Adem’e bu kızı almalıym demıştim ama dinleyen olmadı. İşte kadın böyle vezir de eder erkeği rezil de.”

“Ay sen niye üzüyorsun kendini, aslan gibi iki oğul doğurmadın mı? Oğlan doğuran övünsün, kız doğuran dövünsün.”

Herhalde söylediklerini çocuk aklımla anlamayacağımı düşündüklerinden yanımda rahatça konuşmuşlardı ama ben çoktan ikisini de hiç sevmediğime karar vermiştim. Bundan yıllar sonra, üniversite sınavını kazandığım zaman, “Bu kadar okuduğu yetmedi mi Adem, bak başınıza iş açacak bu kız. Evlendirelim hayırlı bir kısmetle, kimse akli çok çalışan kızla evlenmek istemez, başınıza kalır valla!” diyerek üniversiteye gitmeme engel olmaya çalışan da halam değil miydi zaten? Gerçi benimle yaşıt oğlu da aynı yıl üniversite sınavına girip kazanamamıştı. Bana olan bütün garezinin sebebi şüphesiz buydu. Yoksa kendi de kadın değil miydi, başka niçin olabilirdi ki kadınları böyle hor görüşünün sebebi?

Cesedime sarılmış sayıklayan annemle, onu oradan çıkarmaya çalışan babama baktım. Küçüklüğümden beri bana dağ gibi heybetli gözükten babacığım adeta küçücük kalmıştı. Zavallı anneciğim diye düşündüm, haklılarmış; kız doğuran dövünürmüş, bu halde olmanızın tek nedeni benim; benim kadın olmam. Keşke erkek olsaydım!

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Kelepçeli elleri birbirine kenetlenmiş, üzerinde eğreti duran takım elbisesiyle başı önünde, ağır adımlarla kürsüye yaklaştı.

“Adınız?”

“Ha, Ha-san efendim.”

Demek adı Hasan’dı. O gece bana canavarların en büyüğü gibi görünen o kapkaranlık adam, soluk beyaz teniyle, çelimsiz vücuduyla ne kadar da sıradan bir insana benziyordu. Hatta sorulara ezile büzüle, kekeleyerek verdiği cevaplarla mahcup bakışları da hesaba katılacak olursa canavardan çok ürkek bir kuşa benzetilebilirdi bu Hasan!

“Maktul Leyla Ataman’ı tanır mıydınız?”

“E, e-vet efendim.”

O an, annemle babamın arasında oturup ellerini sıkı sıkıya tutan avukat ayağı kalktı.

“İtiraz ediyoruz Hâkim Bey, yalan söylüyor.”

Hâkim, avukatı söz sırasının kendine olmadığıyla ilgili uyarıp Hasan’a beni tanığına dair yemin edip edemeyeceğini sorunca düşünmeye başladım; tanışsaydık ne değışirdi ki? Hasan’ın hıçkırarak ağlamaya başlamasıyla, müvekkilinin psikolojik durumunun konuşmaya elvermeyeceğini belirten avukatı, sözü devraldı. Bunun sadece basit bir tanışıklık olmadığını, evli ve bir çocuk babası müvekkilinin, genç ve güzel bir kızın kışkırtmalarına dayanamayarak içine girdiğı bu ilişkiden çıkmak istemesi üzerine, genç kızın bu durumu kabullenemeyerek müvekkilinin erkeklığıne dokunacak sözler sarf ettiğinden bahsediyordu. Mahkeme salonundaki uğultular iyice artmış; izleyiciler avukatın sözlerini ayaklarını yere vurarak protesto ediyorlardı. Avukat aldırmandan devam etti:

“Maktulün müvekkilimin erkekliğine hakaret ettiği ve hakaretin cinsel suçlarda cezayı hafifletici bir unsur olarak kabul edildiği aşikârdır. Ayrıca, daha önce cinsel tecrübesi bulunan bir kızın tecavüze uğradığının iddia edilemeyeceğini belirtmek isterim. Önünüzdeki dosyaya sunulmuş örnek mahkeme ve Yargıtay kararları bu söyleyimi doğrular niteliktedir. Müvekkilimin duruşmadaki saygın tutumunun göz önünde bulundurularak, haksız tahrik ve iyi hal indiriminden yararlanmasını talep ediyorum.”

Donmuş gözlerle avukatı izleyen babama baktım. Ah yanına gelebilsem, “Ben öyle bir şey yapmadım babacım, tanımıyorum bile bu adamı, kimseyi kıskırtmadım.” diyerek seni teselli edebilsem. Hatta koluna girebilsem, çıkarsam seni buradan, güzel bir sahil kıyısına götürsem, bu adam yerine benim ağzımdan dinlesen yaşadıklarımı. Bugüne kadar ayıptır diye seninle hiç konuşamadığımız şeyleri anlatabilsem, cinselliği ilk defa sevdiğim erkekle yaşadığımı, bundan Leyla olarak hiç pişmanlık duymadığımı ama yine de senin kızın olarak benliğimi kaplayan suçluluk duygusuyla yüzüne nasıl haftalarca bakmaya utandığımı anlatabilsem. O zaman beni anlar mıydın baba, yoksa kızar mıydın? Acaba bu konuşan avukat gibi daha önce cinselliği deneyimleyen kızının bütün bu başına gelenleri hak ettiğini düşünür, benimle bir daha konuşmaz mıydın? Sanki bu söylediklerimi iştmiş gibi yerinden kalkan babam avukata dönerek, “Kızımın bugüne dek ne yaşadığı bırak senin gibi insan müsveddelerini beni bile ilgilendirmez. Şimdi sen; kızın daha önce bunu yaşadığı için ırzına geçilmeyi, parçalanıp öldürülmeyi hak etti diyorsun ya, kızımı bir kez daha öldürüyorsun.” diyerek koşar adımlarla mahkeme salonunu terk etti.

Kapıdan çıkışıyla etrafı bir insan seli tarafından kuşatılan babama; tanıdığı, tanımadığı insanlar sarılıyor, ağlayarak baş sağlığı diliyorlardı. O kalabalığı yarmayı başaran bir muhabir, belki de perişan haldeki adamcağızı bir nebze sevindireceğini düşündüğünden, davaya Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı’nın müdahil olduğunu, siyasilerin davanın takipçisi olacaklarına dair açıklamalarda bulduklarını müjdeliyordu. Demek, ben böylesine önemli bir insandım ya da Bakanlık, eli mahkûm, basının bu kadar ilgilendiği bir davaya kayıtsız kalamamıştı. İfadesiz suratı, içine çökmüş gözleri ve düşmüş omuzları ile mecali kalmadığı her halinden anlaşılın babamın tek yapabildiği zor da olsa ayakta durmaktı. Hâkimin duruşmayı ertelemesiyle annem ve koluna giren avukat arkalarındaki onlarca insanın tezahüratları eşliğinde dışarı çıkınca, kameralar o tarafa yönelmişti. Avukat, basından acılı aile bireylerini rahat bırakmalarını isterken bir yaygara koptu, “Adem Bey bayıldı!”. Apar topar çağırılan ambulansa taşınan babamın yaşlı kalbi, yaşadıklarını kaldıramamıştı.

Kimse varlığını hissetmediği gibi, bir de ailemin benden sonra yaşadıklarına tanık olmak, bedenimin çektiği bütün acılardan daha ağırdı. Baygın, tek başına yattığı o hastane odasında sessizce kulağına fısıldadım, “Baba”.

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Yargılamanın gizliliği ilkesini ihlal ederek meslekten men edilme riskine aldırmayan avukatım, canlı yanında ‘ahlaksız’ olarak tanımladığı karşı tarafın savunmasını anlatıyordu. “Yalvarıyorum” diye devam etti sözlerine:

“Bu topraklarda yaşayan milyonlarca kadın; sizlere yalvarıyorum, bugün bir milat olsun. Hepiniz Leyla olabilirsiniz, her gün, her an olabilirsiniz. Bu ülkede son on yılda kadına yönelik şiddet, taciz, tecavüz ve kadın cinayetleri yüzde bin dört yüz artmışken, siz erkekler, bilebilir

misiniz bir sonraki Leyla'nın sizin kızınız, sevdiğiniz veya kardeşiniz olmayacağını? Üstelik çoğu kadın, kendi kabahatimişçesine yaşadıklarını dillendiremediğinden, açıklanan rakamlar gerçeği yansıtmıyor. Bu insanlar ya hiçbir şey olmamış gibi aramızda dolaşmaya devam ediyor ya da davası görülebilenler mahkemelerce 'cezanın sanık üzerindeki olumsuz etkisi' düşünülerek iyi hal indiriminden yararlanıyor. Şimdi sizlere soruyorum; vicdanlarınız rahat mı? Yıllarca bizi ataerkil toplum olarak nitelendiren tarihçilerimiz, kadının sırtından sopayı karnından sıpayı eksik etmeyeceksin diyen atalarımız, "Anası tecavüze uğruyorsa neden çocuk ölsün? Anası ölsün." şeklinde açıklamalar yapan siyasetçilerimiz, 2016 yılında bu ülkede kadın hala ikinci sınıf insan muamelesi görüyorsa maalesef sorumlusu sadece sizler değil aynı zamanda bizleriz. Sorumlusu, tacize uğrayıp utandığı için dile getiremeyen kızlarımız, aman namusumuzun elden gittiği duyulmasın diyen analarımız, yaşamını hayatındaki erkeklerin uygun bulduğu sınırlar içerisinde yaşayan bütün kadınlarımız; bu zulme, bu baskıya bir dur demenin vakti gelmedi mi artık? Ne olur anlayın, ateş düştüğü yeri yakmıyor; ateş her yerde, her yerimizde... Leyla için sesinizi çıkartmıyorsanız; çocuklarınız, torunlarınız aynı şeyi yaşamasın diye sesinizi çıkartın."

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Bu olayların ülkenin gündemine oturmasıyla, siyasetler de televizyonlarda bir bir boy gösterip kadınlara yine bitmek tükenmek bitmeyen nasihatler vermeye başlamışlardı. Kadınlara erkeğin eşit yaratılmadığından, erkeklerin kadınlar okuduğu için evlenecek kız bulamadığından, topluluk içinde kadının kahkaha atmasının bizim kültürümüze uygun olmadığından bahsediyorlardı. Hatta bir tanesi başı örtülü olmayan kadının perdesiz bir eve benzeyip bu evin ya satılık ya da kiralık olduğunu söyleyecek kadar ileri gitmişti. Bunları dinlerken aklıma hep çocukluk anılarım geliyordu, sahi neydi bizim kültürümüzün kadına biçtiği rol?

Herhalde altı yaşlarındayken bir gün, annemle yapılan hazırlıklara yardım etmek üzere komşumuza gitmiştik. Evdeki herkes telaş içindeydi ama en çok da güzeller güzeli Zeynep ablam. Ona niçin bu kadar süslendiğini sorduğumda akşam kendisini istemeye geleceklarini söylemişti.

"İstemek ne demek Zeynep abla?"

"Evleneceğim işte Leyla, tâbi babam verirse."

Dolu dolu gözlerle koşarak Zeynep ablamın babasına gitmiş "Ne olur verme Zeynep ablamı, bizimle kalsın." dediğimde tonton adam bir kahkaha patlatarak, "Leyla, bütün genç kızlar bir gün evlenirler, sen de o yaşa gelince seni de babandan isteyecekler." demişti. Ülkemizde adet olduğu üzere bir kızla erkek evlenmek isterlerse, çocuğun ailesi kızın evine gelir ve içilen o meşhur Türk kahvesi esnasında çocuğun babası, kızı babasından isterdi. Bu gelenek öylesine sorgulanmadan kanıksanmıştı ki; aslında bu merasimle, o güne dek babasının himayesi altında olan kızın hâkimiyetinin çocuk ve dolayısıyla ailesine geçtiğini ancak şimdi anlayabiliyordum. Neden kadınlar bir eşya muamelesi görüyorlardı, niçin hayatlarındaki bir erkek tarafından öbürüne veriliyorlar ve hatta Anadolu'da bu istemeye bir de başlık parası ekleniyor ve çocuğun ailesi kızı resmen satın alıyordu? Eğer kendi ailemiz bile bize eşya muamelesi yaparsa, erkeklerin kadınlığımızı, sadece insan olduğumuz için bize saygı duymasını bekleyebilir miydik?

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Gecenin karanlığında, mezarın başında yalnız başına ağlayan bu adam; şişen yüzüne, gözüne ve karmakarışık saçlarına rağmen ne kadar yakışıklıydı. Selçuk’la üniversitenin ilk günü tanışmış, onu gördüğüm ilk an, aşkın ne demek olduğunu anlamıştım. Şimdi mezarımın başında kahrolan bu adama bir kez dokunabilsem sanki bütün yaralarımız kapanacaktı. Hasan’ın hoyrat dokunuşları hiç Selçuk’unkine benzemiyordu; Selçuk bana her dokunduğunda, kendimi öylesine özel hissedirdim ki, sanki bu dünyada bir o, bir de ben kalmışız gibi... Bu duyguyu benden kim alabilirdi?

Bir gün televizyonda bir siyasetçinin “Hamile kadınların sokakta dolaşması doğru değildir, zaten Türk kadını evinin süsüdür” demesiyle bir hışımla televizyonu kapatıp ellerimi tutmuş, “Sevgilim, sen hiçbir yerin süsü olamayacak kadar değerlisin, sen benim sevdiğim, benim aklım, fikrimsin. Hamile kaldığında birlikte bütün dünyayı gezelim mi?” diye sormuştu. Yüzümde kocaman bir gülümseme ile sevdiğim adama sarılmıştım. Onun bu tepkisinden duyduğum gurur mu yoksa çocuğumuza hamile kalma fikri mi daha çok hoşuma gitmişti bilmiyorum.

“Sevgilim, bizim bir çocuğumuzun olması artık mümkün değil ama sen baba olmalısın. İkimiz için, hayallerimiz için iyileşmek zorundasın. Kendin gibi insanlara, kadınlara değer veren güzel çocuklar yetiştirmelisin. Seni çok seviyorum, ne olur hayata küsme sevgilim; hem kim bilir, belki söyledikleri gibi öbür dünyada kavuşuruz.”

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Babamın kameralar önünde geçirdiği kalp krizi ve avukatın yaptığı duygusal konuşmaya bir de siyasilerin kadınların ne yapmaları ve yapmamalarına dair verdiği demeçler eklenince ortam iyice gerilmişti. Önce mezarlıkta sonra mahkemede duyduğum o uğultu, artık sanki bütün evlerden yükseliyordu. Gecenin karanlığında ışıkları açık her bir evden ismimi işitiyordum. O uyumayan insanlar, sabahleyin tüm Türkiye’yi “Susma Haykır”, “Yasta Değil İsyandayız”, “Susmak Neyi Halleder Sen de Anlat” başlıklarının altına yazılan hikâyelere, serzenişlere, isyanlara uyandırdılar. Bu sefer söz sırası ahlak bekçilerinde değil, gerçek hikâyelerin gerçek kahramanlarındaydı. Söz, otobüste babası yaşındaki adamın tacizine maruz kalıp sesini çıkartmayan bütün lise öğrencilerindeydi. Tenha bir sokakta yürürken arkasından yaklaşan ayak sesleri yüzünden adımlarını hızlandıran kadınlardaydı. Yemek siparişini getiren kuryeye kapıyı açarken, içeride olmayan abisine “Ben baktım” diye seslenen kızlardaydı. Bu hikâyelerin istisnasız her evde yaşanıp da en yakınları tarafından kendilerine anlatılmadığını şaşırarak öğrenen erkeklerdeydi. “Eve varınca ara” cümlesinin bu topraklarda niçin bir zorunluluk olduğunu sorgulamaya başlayan, kadınlara yönelik her alandaki şiddetle ve ayrımcılıkla mücadelenin herkesin sorumluluğu olduğunu idrak eden erkeklerdeydi. Yine bu erkekler; dilimize pelesenk olmuş “erkek sözü”, “erkekliğe yedirememek”, “erkek işine karışmamak”, “adam olmak”, “adamdan saymak” gibi söz öbeklerinin kullanılmaması için farkındalık yaratmaya çalıştılar. O gün annesinden, karısından, arkadaşından bir etek kapan erkek öyle sokağa çıktı; üzerlerinde “Ne yaparsan yap, kız gibi yap”, “Keşke Kadın Olsam” yazılı tişörtlerle sokaklarda dolaşan, kafelerde oturan binlerce erkek vardı. Sosyal medya sayesinde daha önce ismini bile duymadığım birçok ülkede insanlar, ellerinde resimlerimle, kadına karşı şiddeti, ayrımcılığı protesto ediyorlardı. Aynı sıralarda avukatlar ise kadına yönelik şiddet suçlarında iyi hal indiriminin kaldırılması için başvurularda bulundular. Hükümet ise bütün bu tepkilerden çekinmiş olacak ki; kürtajın yasaklanmasını ve on beş yaşın-

dan küçük kızların tecavüzcüsüyle evlendirilip beş yıl sorunsuz bir evlilik yaşadıkları takdirde tecavüzcünün cezasının affedilmesini öngören yasa tasarılarının görüşmelerini askıya aldı.

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Hastane odasının önünde ailem, arkadaşlarım, ömrüm boyunca suratını hiç yoksa bir kez görmüş olduğum bütün insanlar doktordan gelecek haberi bekliyorlardı. Beni şaşırtan onlardan ziyade, cenazeden beri git gide artan, daha önce hiç görmediğim yüzlerdi. Sanki o insanlar da hastanenin bekleme salonunda, bahçesinde, semtinde, televizyonlarının başında benimle birlikte babamın uyanmasını bekliyorlardı. “Gözü kör olası yıktı yuvamızı, adı batası, sürüm sürüm sürünesi” diye sayıklayan babaannem konuşmaktan yorulmuş, babam uyumaktan yorulmamıştı. Doktorun izniyle, annem kardeşimle birlikte odaya girdi. Odada varlığımı hissetmişcesine havayı birkaç kez içine çekip yaşlı gözleriyle etrafa bakarak kapıyı kapattı. Onlar bilmese de işte yine dördümüz bir aradaydık. Ölümü hissettiğim gibi onlarla vedalaşma vaktimin de geldiğini hissediyordum. Onlara söylemek istediğim ne varsa, onlarcası, yüzlercesi bugün tanımadığım insanlar tarafından söylenmişti. “Babam” diye fısıldadım kulağına, “Ne olur uyan”. Yanındaki koltukta birbirine sınıksı sarılmış uyuyan annemle kardeşime baktım.

“Artık onların sana her zamankinden çok ihtiyacı var. Benim için de kolay değil baba ama şimdi gelemezsin yanıma. Sen benim değerlim, kahramanım; bak küçük kızının da ihtiyacı var bir kahramana. Annem, en zoru senden ayrılmak, sen ki; benim hayat buluşum, bana böylesine karşılıksız, sonsuz sevmeyi öğreten, bana kadın olmayı, kadınlığımla gurur duymayı öğreten canım annem; bil ki, kızın bugün buradan giderken mutsuz değil. Belki bugüne kadar, bizim toplumumuzda ve daha birçoklarında kadınlar, erkeği olduğundan defalarca büyük gösteren bir aynaydılar ve ben dolu dolu bir ömür yaşasaydım, yaşlanabilseydim eğer, bugün dokunduğumun binde biri dokunamayacaktım bu insanlara, haksızlığa uğrayan kadınların sesi olamayacaktım. Canım kardeşim, bir gün yaşadıklarımı anlayacağımı ve şimdikinden çok daha fazla üzüleceğini biliyorum. Senden isteğim, kendin olman, kadınlığından hiçbir zaman utanmadan yaşaman ve kalbi kırık annemizle babamıza sahip çıkmandır. O çok merak ettiğin son okuduğum kitap Mesnevi’de Mevlana şöyle der; “Üzülme, herkes ölür, kimi toprağa, kimi yüreğe gömülür.”

Tan ağarmak üzere, vedalaşmak istediğim onlarca insan var hâlâ ama sanıyorum mümkün olmayacak. Güneşin doğuşuyla babamın gözlerini açışına son defa tanıklık ettim; şükürler olsun...

Ben Leyla, 22 yaşında ruhum da bedenim gibi sonsuzluğa karışırken şimdi; hiçbirinize dargın değilim. Benim karanlığımdan ışık yaratmaya çalışan güzel insanlar; sayenizde barıştım karanlığımla. Hepinize genç bir kızın kalbini ve hayallerini emanet ediyorum. Sizden tek dileğim, hakkım varsa vasiyetim, içinizdeki Leyla’yı hiç unutmamanızdır. Hoşça kalın...

## Leyla

**Lara Bulut.** Turkey

It is said that every human being is made from earth. The creator then breathes life into us, from his own soul. When the time comes, the creator takes that breath away; the soul leaves the body and the body returns to earth.

My name is Leyla, a girl of 22, Leyla who is beggingly waiting for her soul to leave her body and her body to mingle with the earth. Has anyone ever wanted to die with such a burning desire? I have. How long have I been lying down here? An hour, a day, a week? Tonight is my longest night; as a matter of fact, my soul, my body had never existed before this night. Are these my eyes? These hands, these lips, this soul helplessly writhing within this body, who do they belong to? Oh my never ending darkness; my poor eyes watching their own funeral in those dark eyes they saw for the first time; it was you that I lost first. I would never expect that of my eyes, but maybe it was better than seeing that smirk. Then I lost my ears, thanks to which I used to start the day with my mom's voice every morning. I became unable to hear my own screams, or maybe I didn't make any noise at all, I don't know. I can no longer feel the tons of weight over me, my struggle under which felt like a lifetime, that neck I grabbed with all my strength, my nails stuck in hair, my nipples torn apart and blood smeared, my groins, my womanhood. As my breathing slowed down, I knew that salvation was close now. So that was how death felt. In my last breath I felt my father's scent full of affection; my closing eyes saw my mother's warm smile which made you forget all your troubles. I wish I could see them one last

time, my sister, Selçuk, my friends... They were supposed to never leave me alone; but here I was, all alone. This solitude was the most difficult of all.

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I approached the people who reminded me of a huge black cloud with their umbrellas under the pouring rain. Who were these people and why had they gathered here? I heard many familiar voices that cut through the humming of the crowd like a knife. Was it my mother who couldn't lift her head from the earth where she was lying face down? She no sooner got up than fell down again, in the ground dug up two steps ahead. As she madly tore apart and threw away the pieces of wood within the hole, a ghostly white face revealed itself. Was the face I saw every day in the mirror pale like that all the time? Apparently, all those people were crying for me. Pressing my head against her chest with one hand and slapping her knee with the other, my mom was pleading "bury me with her."

My sister was ten years younger than me. When the doctor walked out of the operating theater and announced that my mother had given birth to a healthy baby girl, my father had embraced me happily and gone in to see my mother. As I was impatiently waiting for my turn to come with my aunt sitting next to me, our distant relative Ayşe appeared at the far end of the hallway. She was walking in a flutter, probably because of her short legs hardly carrying her pretty large body, and looked like a ball rolling towards us. Hardly catching her breath, she turned to my aunt and asked:

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“Don’t even go there, this one’s also a girl! I told Adem in the first place that we shouldn’t accept that girl in our family, but he didn’t listen. A woman can make either a prince or a wretch out of a man, as you can see.”

“Why do you have to worry? Haven’t you given birth to two strapping sons? Let the daughter’s mom beat herself up.”

They hadn’t hesitated a bit talking like that with me sitting next to them, probably thinking that I wouldn’t understand them as a child. But I had already decided that I didn’t like the two, at all. When I passed the university exam years later, it was my aunt who tried to prevent me from going to university, asking, “Don’t you think she got enough education, Adem? You’ll see, this girl’s going to be trouble for you. Let’s marry her off with a suitable man; no one will want to marry a girl with brains like that, then you’ll have to look after her forever!” She had a son of my age, who had taken the university exam in the same year and couldn’t pass. Without doubt, that was the only reason for her grudge against me. What other reason could make her look down on women like that, when she was also a woman herself?

I looked at my mother, who clung to my corpse in a delirium and my father, trying to take her out of there. My daddy, who always seemed to be big as a mountain ever since I was a child, had become so tiny. My poor mommy, I thought, they were right: a daughter’s mom was supposed to beat herself up. I am the only reason why you are in this situation now. It’s all because I am a woman. I wish I was a man!

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A man in handcuffs, wearing a suit that looked so out of place on him, slowly approached the stand, with his head bent down.

“Your name?”

“Ha, Ha-san, sir.”

So, that was his name. How ordinary he looked now, with his pale complexion and skinny figure, that dark man who had seemed like the biggest monster to me that night. Hasan resembled more a timid bird than a monster, considering the humble and submissive way he answered the questions, stammering and looking around bashfully.

“Did you know the victim, Leyla Ataman?”

“Ye-yes, sir.”

The attorney sitting between my parents and holding their hands firmly, immediately stood up.

“We object, your honor. He’s lying.”

As the judge warned the attorney that it wasn’t his turn to speak yet and asked Hasan if he could swear that he knew me, I started to think; what difference would it make if we had met? Hasan started to sob, so his attorney took over, stating that his client’s psychology didn’t allow him to speak. He said that ours was no ordinary acquaintance; it was about a married man, a father of one, finding himself in an affair, unable to resist the seduction of a young and beautiful girl. When he wanted to end the affair, the young girl didn’t take it kindly and uttered words to offend the manhood of his client. The murmur in the courtroom rose; the audience were protesting against the attorney by slamming their feet. The attorney ignored them and continued:

“It is apparent that the victim insulted my client’s manhood and insult is acknowledged as an extenuating circumstance in sexual crimes. Furthermore, I would like to note that a woman engaged in previous sexual activity cannot be claimed to have been raped. The precedent court and state council decisions in the file before you confirm my argument. I request that my client is granted a re-

duction in penalty due to unjust provocation and good conduct, considering the respectful manners of my client during the hearing.”

I looked at my dad, who had fixed his gaze on the attorney. If only I could walk up to him and console him saying, “I never did that daddy; I don’t even know this man. I didn’t provoke anybody!” I wish we could walk out of here, arm in arm, then I’d take you to a nice place by the sea where you could hear what I’ve been through from me, rather than this man. I wish I could tell you things we could never talk about until now, because it was considered inappropriate, I wish I could tell you that my first sexual experience was with the man I loved, which I never regretted as Leyla, but still made me too embarrassed to look you in the eye with the sense of guilt that took over me as your daughter. Would you understand me then, daddy, or would you be mad? Would you think that your daughter, having previous sexual experience, had it coming, just like this attorney?

My father stood up, as if he had heard me. “My daughter’s past is no one’s business, not even mine, let alone miserable creatures like you. You killed my daughter once more, saying she deserved to be raped, torn into pieces and murdered, just because she experienced that before,” and ran out of the court room.

My father was surrounded by a swarm of people as soon as he walked out. People he knew or hadn’t seen before were hugging him, giving him their condolences. A respondent, having managed to walk through the crowd, heralded the involvement of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies in the case and announced that politicians were now following the case as well, probably thinking this would comfort the miserable man to some extent. So I was either a very important person, or the Ministry could not ignore a case which

had caught so much attention from the press. Judging by his face devoid of expression, sunken eyes and slumped shoulders, the only thing my dad was capable of doing was stand up, albeit with difficulty. The cameras turned to my mother and the attorney in her arm, who were walking out accompanied by the cheer of the audience upon the postponement of the hearing by the judge. As the attorney asked the press to leave the grieving family alone, there was a sudden clamor, “Adem’s passed out!” The old heart of my father, who was now being rushed into the ambulance, was too weak to go through all that.

To witness what my family had to go through, plus my existence going unnoticed by everyone, was more painful than everything my body had suffered. I whispered in my father’s ear, in the hospital room where he lay alone, “Dad.”

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Without regard to the risk of being expelled from his profession due to violation of the principle of confidentiality of hearings, my attorney was talking about the defense of the other party, which he described as “immoral” in a live broadcast. “I am begging you,” he continued:

“Millions of women who inhabit these lands, I’m begging you, let today mark a milestone in history. Each one of you could be Leyla, any day, any moment. With the one thousand and four hundred per cent increase in the acts of violence, harassment, rape and murder against women in the last ten years in this country, how could you men be sure that your daughter, your loved one or your sister won’t be the next Leyla? Moreover, considering that many women cannot report such assaults, as if it’s their fault, the official figures do not reflect the actual situation. These people either walk among us as if nothing happened or are tried at court, where they

benefit from a reduction in penalty due to good conduct, considering the ‘adverse impact of the penalty on the defendant.’ I ask you now, is your conscience clear? Our historians who have classified us as a patriarchal society for years, our elders who said a woman is no good without a stick up their back and a child in their belly, our politicians who made statements like ‘Why should the child die if its mother was raped? Let the mother die.’ If women are still getting second class treatment in 2016 in this country, we are as guilty as them. Girls who are molested but remain silent because of their shame, mothers who cover up these crimes just so that no one hears about the stain on their honor, all women confined to the limits set by the men in their lives: isn’t it time to stop this cruelty, this oppression? Please understand that you don’t have to play with fire to get burned; the fire has surrounded us, it’s everywhere now... If you don’t speak up for Leyla, speak up for your children, your grandchildren so that they don’t go through the same.”

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As these events came high on the country’s agenda, politicians had begun appearing on television networks, sharing endless advice with women. They were talking about how women and men weren’t created equal, how men couldn’t find girls suitable for marriage because women were overeducated, how it’s inappropriate in our culture for a woman to laugh aloud in public... One of them had even gone so far as to say that a woman without her head covered was like a house without curtains, which meant the house was either for sale or for rent. Listening to all these brought back memories of my childhood. Really, what was the role our culture defined for women?

When I was about six, I and my mom had visited our neighbor to help her with preparations. Everyone there was in a rush,

but mostly Zeynep, who was a real beauty. When I asked her why she was dressed up like that, she had told me that they would ask for her hand in marriage that night.

“What does it mean to ask for someone’s hand in marriage, Zeynep?”

“I’ll get married Leyla, if my dad allows it, of course.”

With tear-filled eyes, I ran to Zeynep’s father and told him “Please don’t give her hand in marriage, let her stay with us.” The old man gave a bellow of laughter and said, “Leyla, all young girls marry someday. They will also ask your father for your hand in marriage, when you are of age.” In our country, tradition required that when a girl and boy wanted to get married, the boy would visit the girl’s parents with his family and ask the father to give away his daughter, while drinking a cup of the famous Turkish coffee. This tradition was acknowledged without question, to the extent that I couldn’t understand what the ceremony meant until today; it simply marked the passing on of the ownership of the daughter, who was under her father’s guardianship until that day, to the boy, thus his family. Why were women treated as commodities, why were they given away from one man in their lives to another, not accounting for the dowry still paid in Anatolia, which basically meant the purchase of women by the husband’s family? If even our families treated us like commodities, how could we expect men to respect us, our womanhood, just because we were human beings?

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The man crying alone in the darkness of the night over my grave was so handsome despite his puffy face, eyes and messy hair. I had met Selçuk on the first day of university. I knew what love meant the moment I saw him. Now it felt like all our wounds would be healed if I could touch this man, grieving

here by my grave, just once. Hasan's abrasive touch was nothing like Selçuk's. Every time Selçuk touched me, I would feel so special, as if it's just me and him left in this world. Who could take that feeling away from me?

One day, hearing a politician say "it is not appropriate for pregnant women to walk around the streets. A Turkish woman is the ornament of her home" on television, he turned off the television in a fury, held my hands and said, "My dear, you are too precious to be an ornament anywhere. You are my beloved, my mind, my soul. Would you like to travel around the world when you are pregnant?" At that moment, I had hugged the man I loved with a big smile on my face. I don't know if it was the pride I felt in his reaction or the idea of being pregnant with our child.

"Sweetheart, we can't have a child now, but you have to be a father. You have to recover, for the two of us, for our dreams. You have to raise beautiful kids who value human beings, who value women, just like yourself. I love you so much, please do not turn your back on life darling. Who knows, maybe we'll meet again in the afterlife, just as they say."

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The heart attack my father had in front of the cameras, coupled with the sentimental speech of the attorney and the politicians' statements about what women should and should not do, had caused quite a stir in the country.

That humming I had heard first at the graveyard and then at court seemed to rise from every house now. I could hear my name uttered in every home with its lights on in the darkness of the night. Those people who stayed up all night awakened the whole country with stories, outcries, protests written under titles "Shout, don't be quiet," "We are rising, not mourning," "Silence is no good, speak your story." Real heroes of real stories had a say

now, not the bigots. All high school students who were harassed by men old enough to be their father on the bus had a say now. Women who quickened their steps because of footsteps approaching from behind in a quiet alley had a say now. Girls who called out to their non-existent brothers, "I got the door!" while getting their food from the delivery guy had a say now. It was time to speak for men who had learned to their surprise that these stories were experienced by someone in every household without exception, yet they weren't told about it even by the people closest to them. It was time to speak for men who began to question why people had to say goodbye telling each other "call me when you are home" in that country, men who came to understand that the fight against the violence and discrimination against women in every area was everyone's shared responsibility. It was these men again, who worked to raise awareness against the use of phrases like "man up", "take it like a man", "be man enough", which had become buzzwords in our language. That day, thousands of men poured out into the streets wearing the skirts they had snatched from their mothers, wives or friends, with T-shirts saying "take it like a woman" and "wish I was a woman" on their tops. People in many countries I hadn't even heard of before were protesting violence and discrimination against women with my pictures in their hands, all thanks to social media. Meanwhile, attorneys made applications for cancellation of the reduction in penalty due to good conduct in crimes of violence against women. The government, probably in fear of all these reactions, suspended the negotiations regarding bills that prohibited abortion and that pardoned the rapist if little girls younger than fifteen were married off to their rapists and had a problem-free marriage for five years.

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My family, my friends and all the people I had seen maybe only once in my life were waiting in front of the hospital for news from the doctor. What surprised me more than them were the faces I had never seen before, which had multiplied since the funeral. It was as if those people waited for my father to recover together with me, in the waiting room or garden of the hospital, in the neighborhood, in front of their televisions. Even my grandmother who kept muttering “damned man wrecked our home! Curse him, and curse his name!” all the time had grown tired of talking, but my dad wasn’t tired of sleeping. The doctor let my mother and sister enter his room. My mom sniffed the air a few times, as if she had felt my existence, looked around with tear-filled eyes and closed the door. Here we were again, the four of us, though they didn’t know that. Just as I felt death, I felt that the time to say goodbye was also near. Whatever I wanted to tell them, tens and thousands of words, were already told by people I didn’t know. “Daddy,” I whispered in his ear, “please wake up.” I looked at my mother and sister, sleeping in each other’s arms.

“Now they need you more than ever. It’s not easy for me either dad, but you can’t come to me just yet. You are my precious, my hero; your baby daughter also needs a hero. Mom, parting from you is the hardest thing; you are my reason for existence, you taught me how to love infinitely, without expecting anything in return; you taught me how to be a wom-

an, how to take pride in my womanhood. My dearest, I want you to know that your daughter’s not unhappy as she leaves everything behind today. Maybe, until today, women in our society and in many other societies were mirrors who magnified men a thousand times their actual size and if I could live for a full lifetime, if I could age, I wouldn’t be able to touch those people the slightest bit like how I touch them today. I couldn’t be the voice of women who are victims of injustice. My dear sister. I know that you will someday know what I went through and will be much more upset than you are today. All I ask of you is to be yourself, to live with no shame of your womanhood and watch over our heartbroken parents. In that book I last read, *The Masnavi*, which you were so curious about, Rumi says, “Don’t be upset, everybody dies. Some are buried in the ground, and some in the heart.”

The dawn is about to break. There are still dozens of people I’d like to say goodbye to, but I’m afraid it won’t be possible. As the sun rose, I saw my father open his eyes, for the last time. Thank God...

My name is Leyla, a girl of 22. I don’t resent any of you, as my soul fades into eternity just like my body. Beautiful people who wanted to create light from my darkness; I came to terms with my darkness, thanks to you. I bestow the heart and dreams of a young girl on all of you. My only wish, my will, if I can, is that you never forget the Leyla within you. Goodbye...

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