

No Knives in the Kitchens of This City

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The Lettuce Fields

ON MY WAY HOME I recalled that my mother was not yet sixty-five when she died so suddenly. I was secretly glad and considered it ten years too late, given her constant complaints of a lack of oxygen. My uncle Nizar told me that she rose in the afternoon from her putrid bed and started writing a long letter to an unknown person, who we thought may have been a lover or an old friend, and with whom she passed long hours talking about days past that no longer meant anything to anyone—days into which my mother had settled during her final years and had no wish to relinquish. She didn't believe that the President, like any other mortal being, had died, despite the funeral ceremonies and the national state of mourning. The television broadcast his image and past speeches; it hosted hundreds of people who enumerated his qualities and cited his innumerable honorifics with great humility, their eyes filling with tears as they referred to the virtues of the Father-Leader, the Leader of War and Peace, the Wise Man of the Arabs, the Strongest of Athletes, the Wisest of Judges, the Most Gifted of Engineers . . . Great were their torments that they could not refer to him as the First among Gods.

“Power and oppression do not die,” my mother would say. “The blood of his victims won't allow the tyrant to just die. The door has been left ajar, and will keep closing until it chokes their murderer.” She meandered through her favorite stories about the past, selecting just the right words.

Rapturously, she would describe the elegance of her friends, fragranced by perfumes redolent with hope; she would show us photographs of them where they looked like unpicked cotton bolls, snow-white beneath the setting sun. She perpetually extolled the past and conjured it up with delight as a kind of revenge for her humble life; she described how the sun used to be, yearned for how the dust used to smell after the first rain. She made us feel that everything really had changed, and how utterly wretched we were for not having lived during this beautiful era when lettuce was at its most succulent and women their most feminine.

She had left her scribbled notes on the table for days, and we paid them no more attention than we had the others. Dust piled up on the lines written in the special Chinese ink she had brought for twenty years from Uncle Abdel-Monem's bookshop at the entrance to Bab al-Nasr. She would visit him and ask for lined paper which smelled of cinnamon. Accustomed to her question, he no longer exchanged memories with her of the Streetcar Era, as they termed their barb-ridden childhood and complicated relationship; instead, in silence, he would hand her a sheaf of white pages and return her money, not hearing her when she implored him to be stoic. He would go back to sitting in his shadowy corner, where he gazed steadily at a faded photograph of his family. In its center stood his son, Yehya, smiling, his hair gleaming with oil. The arms of his brothers Hassan and Hussein encircled him, a powerful articulation of the ambitions of brothers in perpetual harmony with one another.

All Uncle Abdel-Monem saw in the photograph was Yehya, whom he had last seen as a corpse laid out in the morgue of the university hospital. His face was charred and he had no fingers; his body bore the marks of electric cables and suppurating knife wounds. One glance was enough to identify him, after which the forensic doctor, as if carrying out a routine task, had closed the iron box and wouldn't listen

to the other man's wild pleas to be allowed to touch his son's face. Instead, the doctor coolly asked him to collect the body and bury it without the usual mourning rites, guarded by six of the paratroopers who patrolled, armed and in full riot gear, the corridors of the morgue.

Abdel-Monem had arrived at the hospital with Hassan, Hussein, and a friend, and been mercilessly turned out again, all before the dawn prayer sounded. They carried the body to an ancient Volkswagen being used as a hearse, lifted it inside, and squeezed themselves in around the coffin. They stared at each other and wept in silence.

Death was spreading through the desolate streets of Aleppo, oppressive and unbearable. They arrived at the family tomb and the soldiers asked them to carry the coffin inside so that the sheikh waiting there could pray over it. Abdel-Monem just nodded as if he were demented and muttered something incomprehensible. The sheikh prayed hastily as my cousins lined up behind him. They didn't raise their eyes from the coffin as the soldiers lifted from it a fleshy lump wrapped in a filthy shroud. They weren't allowed to look into the extinguished eyes or to embrace him as one should when burying a loved one. Their tears petrified in their eyes and they simply looked at their father who was still crying silently, muttering words no one cared to decipher.

My mother woke from her long coma and sat at the broken-down dinner table beside Nizar, who hummed quietly like a fly. She read him a line of the letter to the man she described as a dear friend: "Everything is finished, I no longer hold you to your promise to dance the tango with me on board an ocean liner." She abandoned the encrypted tone of previous letters as she stated plainly that it was impossible to trust men who smelled of rats. Unafraid of the possibility of her letter falling into the censor's hand, she went on to announce in a final moment of courage that it was all the same to her,

and approval was no longer any concern of hers. She didn't for a moment consider herself to have committed any sin; rather, she felt that to face death head-on befitted the grand dreams which had died before she had, and she no longer had anything to hide about her defeat. In the months before my mother's death, Nizar became accustomed to sitting alone on an old wooden chair night after night listening to his sister's ravings whenever she woke from her bouts of torpor, as she did from time to time. She spoke to him about her hallucinations with utter conviction, as if she had watched a film that wasn't visible to anyone else. She would speak candidly about the ghosts which haunted my brother Rashid and asked Nizar about the state of the country. Before returning to her silence, she would converse with him for hours at a time, lucidly and fluently, with a force that astonished him, about such topics as the price of vegetables and her memories of nights spent with my father in that old stone house on the outskirts of Midan Akbas. She laughed as anyone might, recalling with a sigh how she had prepared coffee for Elena and taught her how to make apricot jam. To someone who didn't know them it was a perfectly normal scene: a brother and sister choosing to spend their old age together, chatting and frying seeds, settling their accounts with a family past which had never let them be. Both were immersed in reexamining characters from days gone by, and when they realized that everyone had long since died or fled, they fell silent and brooded over a history which, for all its beauty, had granted them nothing but misery.

Rashid had disappeared in her final days, and she couldn't bear his absence. She spoke about him whether coherent or delirious, and told us that he hadn't died, that he would come back. I stayed silent. I couldn't bring myself to weave tales to explain away his disappearance, convinced as I was that she had experienced enough chimeras in her life; there was no need to wound her further with yet another lie about my missing brother. For myself, I was sad that Rashid wouldn't see

my mother's body laid out peacefully. He would shed no bitter tears over the loss of all our dreams. I hoped he would be found so that, for the first time, he would assume his share of our joint responsibility and stand at the door of the hall used for the mourning rites, the hall Uncle Nizar had rented to spare us the embarrassment of people seeing our house. Just one look was enough for everyone to know how our family's dreams had been crushed.

Uncle Nizar asked me to look for irrepressible Sawzan and drag her back. He burst out crying but his voice stayed resolute, reminiscent of my mother's when she told us that my father had gone to New York, leaving us for an American woman named Elena who was thirty years his senior. She told us nothing else; just that he hadn't died, but there was no reason to ever expect him to come back. She laid out a piece of English broadcloth, three stuffed eagles, a few of his striped shirts, some threadbare trousers, and the badge and distinctive felt caps of the railroad employees. She told us carelessly that we could divide up his bequest between ourselves. When she slammed the door behind her we heard her sobbing and smelled the scent of the oncoming disaster.

I thought I would have plenty of time after my mother's death to leaf through her photograph album. Its gazelle-skin binding had never faded and remained soft to the touch; it had acquired a certain sanctity, being the sole fragment of our household which hadn't completely disintegrated. I was supremely comforted at the thought of looking at my sister Suad, whose pallor we could no more explain than her screams in the night like a lone jackal in the mountains.

Suad's ceaseless delirium in the weeks leading up to her death caused us to reflect on our fate. The family picture hanging in the living room became a psychological burden we tried to avoid, a lie, an obscenity we couldn't conceal: a father who fled from us with an aging relic-excavator my mother

had taught to make jam, and a miserable sister driven mad by an unknown cause, whose mouth gaped as she struggled desperately to breathe. We loved her, although my mother considered her a private shame to be hidden from the world.

I had just turned ten at the time and knew nothing about death, or shame. Sawsan shook Suad roughly, as she did when they fought, but Suad didn't move. My mother waited until dawn to carry her to the family tomb wrapped in a woolen blanket, helped by her friend Nariman and Uncle Nizar. That night she informed us that Suad would never come back, and explained curtly that death meant going away forever. She didn't add anything about what it felt like to bury your shame with your own hands.

We didn't believe that sweet-natured Suad would stay away. I told Sawsan that we had to find her—perhaps she was hiding in the lettuce fields like she often did, or by the train tracks which ran nearby. She used to take railroad spikes and make them into swords, brandishing them at invisible passengers.

Whenever a train passed by our house and whistled its heart-rending cry, Suad would fling open the door and hurry after it. She would count the train's cars, and cheerfully inform us that the driver could fly, assuring us she had seen his wings. We nodded credulously, imagining that after disappearing from sight around the bend, the train would fly over the fields and soar through the sky. When we asked her where it would eventually land, Suad explained seriously, as if she had expected just such a question, that the driver wouldn't stop flying until he died. She pointed with childish glee to her own slight body and concluded: "Just like me."

We walked through the lettuce fields and eventually arrived at the cemetery, and when we asked the caretaker if he knew where Suad was, he pointed to a mound of dust. Sawsan beat the dust with both hands furiously, and then collapsed in exhaustion. I ordered her to stop crying, reminding her we had to be back before dark. We walked home through the

pouring rain, and without a shred of remorse I told Rashid that Suad hated us and would never come back, all because he had stolen her wooden train. Sawsan agreed gleefully. That night I dreamed of Suad. She was driving a long train carrying a flock of birds with long beaks and no wings who sang to her sweetly. Her hair was long and white, and she smiled as she looked ahead of her, an angel no one could see.

The only person I told about my dream and the recurring image of Suad with her long white hair was Sawsan, who laughed and took me back to the cemetery. We brought wildflowers and stood next to the blank gravestone, and I listened to Sawsan as she told me solemnly that here Suad couldn't laugh or breathe, and that the worms were eating her up. From her lengthy explanation, I came to understand death as the absence of those we love.

Years later, I saw Sawsan by chance in the cheap Bar Express and reminded her of those long explanations. I told her that death was a completion of memories, not an eternal absence, and she agreed with a boozy nod of her head. She asked me if I still saw Suad, and I lied and said I saw her every day. She bowed her head sadly and took my hand, and added that thirty years should be long enough to forget anyone. I suddenly realized she was repeating the very same words my mother used about death and, like our mother, was using slow, affected hand gestures. I felt sad that Sawsan had begun to imitate our mother; I nearly asked her what it felt like to resemble a woman she hated so much.

Rashid convinced me that Sawsan had lied when she said she wouldn't remember me, adding that thirty years weren't enough to forget anyone you love. I realized later that to forget was to completely rework the small, hidden details of things, until finally we think they are true and don't believe they are the figments of our own imaginations. At the time I had started to enjoy walking in the stillness of King Faisal Street, where I would reflect that Aleppo itself was as ephemeral as the act

of forgetting; anything which remained of its true form would become a lie, reinvented by us day after day, so as not to die.

Suad's death made us think about escaping death. Rashid and I took our family's one blanket and spread ourselves out next to Sawsan who clung to us, afraid of Suad's ghost which Rashid swore he saw hovering around the closed window every night. He became engrossed in the details of his description, using terms he had learned from music harmony and the titles of violin pieces. The three of us seemed to be fleeing an inevitable fate which lay in wait for us when dusk fell and the house was submerged in quietness. Sawsan would tell us to be quiet and we would fall silent and draw closer to her warm body. She put her arms around us as if she too were seeking solace in us from her fear.

I don't know why twenty years later my feet brought me to visit Suad's grave one last time. I scattered the olive branches I had cut from our garden and sat close to the small grave for hours, weeping for her loss. It was the first time I had ever done so, unlike Rashid who had cried for a whole week after she died, before he wiped away his tears and waited for her to come back and play with him. My tears freed me from the dreams that had turned into unbearable nightmares, in which Suad appeared as an old woman, with her face daubed with cheap and garish make-up, looking like Sawsan's friends, and not the child who had asked me if I knew whether dead people got older.

I sought out the caretaker to ask him the usual questions about whether he had taken care of her grave and he told me casually that the tombs would soon be transferred out of the city, and my brother Rashid had taken possession of Suad's remains in the proper way. I was horrified at the thought that I had been weeping over nothing more than a pile of dust. I told my mother, who at that time lived with us at the house, what had happened to Suad's remains and she was astonished that I still remembered her. She made no comment on the reappearance of this old shame and merely looked into my face as if it

were that of a stranger, at the marks on my right cheek made by a sharp razor and my clothes with their sour smell of sweat.

They were nothing like those of the child she had taken firmly by the hand on his first day of school, pointing out the familiar landmarks which would lead me along a safe path. She explained that big hulking men with moustaches would lie in wait for young children who were succulent as lettuce leaves, so they could violate them in the deserted cherry orchards. She looked hopefully at the distant horizon and, laughing, repeated school songs to herself. When we arrived at the school, she went inside and sat in the head teacher's office where she introduced herself as a respected colleague and explained briefly that my father had emigrated to America, where we would join him in a few years. His searching glances reminded her that she was now an abandoned woman, and easy prey for shameless men.

She drank her coffee coolly, recovering her strength, then in a ringing tone reminded the headmaster that she had been a teacher who won the respect of her pupils and tried to teach them to listen to themselves. Finally, she added that she had returned to her beloved Aleppo on account of her children, and in a series of contradictory phrases she both praised and cursed the inhabitants of the village she had just left. When she saw that the head teacher comprehended her suffering, she added that the ascent of the military inspired anything but confidence. He agreed that the future would be bitter as old turnips. He shook hands approvingly with me, the new pupil wearing a clean school uniform that smelled of lemon cologne, with an embroidered lace handkerchief tucked into my top pocket, my nails trimmed, and my hair fixed in place with perfumed henna. The head teacher bid my mother a deferential farewell and nodded as he repeated how hard it was to live without a free press. He reminded her to look out for the *Evening Standard*, and to read the articles which called for a separation of religion and state.

The head teacher led me to my classroom through a long corridor. The school had been built by a French engineer and was originally intended as a tuberculosis sanatorium whose patients, before they melted like ice cream on a scorching summer afternoon, could meditate on its high ceilings and wide rooms, or the windows overlooking flower beds filled with crimson roses which gleamed in the spring sunshine.

My first teacher welcomed me warmly after the head teacher whispered a few words in his ear. He sat me in a chair at the front next to a young boy who looked like me; I reached a hand out to him and we became friends. His name was Jaber and he lived on a backstreet near our house. I told him about my siblings at the first chance I got and invited him to our house where we played together and swore eternal brotherhood in a scene which made Sawsan, who observed the blood oath, laugh out loud. We became friends easily and passed most of our time in my room, listening attentively to Rashid, who played us our favorite songs on his violin.

I no longer listened to my mother's reproaches; I walked shamelessly in dusty roads, I had no fear of perverts. Jaber and I were more interested in the narrow lanes of the alleys where we gathered offcuts by the cotton gins of Ain Tel, or pilfered copper wires and exhumed empty glasses from rubbish heaps. We exchanged our wares in the nearby Sunday market for a few coins, enough for us to spend the afternoon in Cinema Opera. We were ardent fans of Egyptian and Bollywood melodramas about good-looking, impoverished lovers who triumphed at the end of the film.

I would slide into the seat next to Jaber and savor the cool air and the breath of the few patrons who attended the daytime showings, waiting for my adored Naglaa Fathi to strut onscreen in a mini-dress that showed off her charms. I would say to Jaber that when I grew up I would travel to Egypt and find her to tell her that he sent her his regards, whereupon he would dig an elbow into my side to shut me

up. When I turned to him he'd have dissolved into tears, cursing the director who had ended the film without telling us how she would be delivered from her travails. Our amorous heroes and heroines lived out the sheer magnificence of love, and we tried to finish the film's story for ourselves as we gobbled our falafel sandwiches from Arax and walked back to our alley across Suleimaniya Street, whose shops smelled of wine and meat. I would try and convince Jaber to wait for the evening train but, laughing, he would wave at me and curse the trains, and I was left alone. I would put large nails on the tracks and wait for the iron wheels of the seven o'clock train to transform them into swords. Jaber would drill a hole into them using the lathe from the metal-turning shop of his uncle the turnerji, and we hung them around our necks like highwaymen.

My mother looked at the swords hanging around my neck. To her, I looked like a beggar with my filthy clothes and ragged nails. I read in her eyes that I was straying from the path, a misstep that would destroy the ascendance of the house she depended on for protection from the hubbub of the street, and from men who smelled of pickled turnips.

But the tranquility of the house didn't last long; it was soon surrounded by the shouts of Party Comrade Fawaz's relatives and the lowing cattle and bleating goats they brought with them from the villages. They built a large chicken coop before apportioning a large number of rooms among themselves. Over the summer, wives of village cousins spent their days frying eggplants and wiping snot off their multitudinous children who loved stomping around, calling on Comrade Fawaz, their big brother, to notice that they were following in his footsteps by glorifying the Leader. At night they would sing Party songs in an uproar of revolutionary passion, but songs alone weren't sufficient; they also turned up a tape recorder which broadcast the President's speeches, and would hail and applaud him along with the crowds on the recording.

The noise caused my mother much frustration, and her desperation only increased after she discovered that most of her childhood friends were now Party members. On the first page of their notebooks they would write an aphorism attributed to the President Leader, and they had committed to memory all the songs which glorified him. For the first time, my mother realized that they had started to resemble seals, wearing identical clothing and using the same cheap perfumes. She withdrew into herself and began to weave an imaginary world, in which she recovered the voices of her old friends, who strutted about, and interwove them with the snatches of distant music. She convinced herself that living a parallel life was not so bad, and concluded that it wasn't necessary to be a friend to your enemies.

She looked at me sadly. I had begun to resemble the neighbors' sons, my clothes dirty and my hair matted. She dressed me in a bathrobe and dedicated herself to a thorough cleansing of me, rubbing me with cottonseed oil whose smell reminded me of mice caught in a trap. Meanwhile Rashid and Sawsan gleefully tore up whole pages of my books and flung them into the air so they would fall like the snowflakes Sawsan used to dream of walking beneath, at the side of a lover who would lead her by the hand over the bridges of a faraway city and kiss her tenderly as evening fell.

We loved our new house. It was built of white brick and bore an inscription of a Quranic verse with intertwined letters over the door. My mother didn't object when the mason expressed a wish to engrave it on the stone arch. She left nothing to chance. She bought copper beds in the classic French style from the Sunday market and mended their posts and polished their ornamentation till they gleamed. She put them in our bedrooms and kept the large bed for her own room where she tossed and turned by herself all night, going over her remaining memories of my father. The story of her marriage

and his flight seemed like a film to her now, some implausible melodrama. She hadn't understood the cruelty my father had often spoken about before he left with Elena the American, not until she was an abandoned woman who, with her children, lived a life parallel to the Party which continued to impound any remaining freedoms. Permits to print newspapers were suspended and new ones blocked, the parliament was suspended, and a new constitution was imposed granting The Beloved President unlimited powers. Following the coup d'état, these powers were put to immediate use in the arrest of His friends and the president Nureddin al-Atasi, all to die in jail some years later. The Party alone retained the right to lead the country now fuddled by emergency rule and 'exceptional' court cases. The President, whose death in June 2000 my mother couldn't believe, had appropriated for himself all potentially sensitive offices, from President of the Republic to Party Leader and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, along with the right to appoint the judiciary of the constitutional courts, to name the head of the government, and to dissolve parliament.

When my father used to come home drunk he would knock everything in the room over and wake us up, not caring if he frightened us. He would spit on the family picture hung reverently on the wall, and ask, "What is the point of the same moments being repeated over and over in the same place?" He complained of being suffocated and heaped bitter indignation on the train station where he worked as well as on the Party and its informers. Even after the strong coffee my mother brought him, he would not be calm. She would convince him to go out into the courtyard where there was a refreshing breeze, stroke his hand gently, and wait for him to finish ranting about anything and everything. As usual he cursed God for having flung him into a Godforsaken station that stank of bleach and idiot railroad workers, insisting that he deserved a better place where he could realize his dreams.

At dawn he would fall silent and bury himself in my mother's arms, and she would lay him on the bed like a small child. After a few moments she would hear him snore, and felt relief that the troubles were over for another night. Sawsan, Rashid, and I gave a sigh of relief when he didn't kick Suad as he usually did. She would look at him as if he were a being from another world and cry whenever he approached her, hurrying to Sawsan and hiding her head in the warm embrace that surrounded us all like a little mother. There was no way we could have ever forgotten its scent.

My mother brought her old sewing machine from my grandfather's house as part of her inheritance. From cheap fabric she made colorful curtains and pillowcases, and from scant money she created our new, magical world. She spent a lot of time with a friend of hers, Nariman Siraj al-Din. Together they would scour the souk for some neglected object, haggling over the price as any impoverished woman would. The hands of these two sorceresses would bring these objects back to life: old Mamluk lanterns whose owners hadn't noticed their splendid ornamentation, an Italian chest of drawers whose front panel was engraved with a melancholy serpent and a naked woman like the maidens found on Renaissance paneling, a set of Louis XVI sofas for the guest room which were reupholstered with striated fabric. In the living room there was a cheerful living room set with walnut frames that she had collected from a pawn shop that sold second-hand things in Bab al-Nasr. Its maker had carved his initials on the sofa, and she would claim to her visitors that he was a famous Italian designer. She would stand in front of it for hours, dreaming of the new colors she would upholster it with, of how she would recline upon it during long winter nights when the rain was pouring down, a wood-burner beside her and her perfume intoxicating a man whose features were vague and known only to her, and to whom she would coquettishly reveal the

secrets of her body. She thought it would be an iconic scene, and that anyone who had such an experience would need an entire lifetime to recreate its bliss.

She loved feeling that people liked her work, and was extremely irritated if her ideas were ignored or received no courteous acknowledgment. Love of praise accompanied her all her life, along with a few other things which gave her indescribable happiness. She had succeeded in escaping Midan Akbas and returning to her beloved city, where she ordered us to hush and walk on tiptoe so as not to disturb the silence. She would lie on the sofa in the evening, a woman dreaming, sipping tea, her thoughts wandering for long periods of time over a distant horizon; then suddenly she would remember that she was alone and her eyes would silently well up. Holding back tears, she would rise to go to her closet and pick out an old nightdress, soiled with memories of my father, whose flight she had not forgiven. She never mentioned him in front of us until her very last years, when she started cursing him vindictively for having chosen to save himself and flee.

Ever tactful, Nizar would bring her cassette tapes overflowing with songs from the Nahda era. They would listen to them together and talk slowly and laboriously. He was waiting for a question which she never asked, so he told her about his dream of traveling to Paris, retelling the story of their shared dreams of wandering the alleyways of Montmartre. Together they had amassed so many maps and paintings by impoverished artists that they knew its every detail and entrance, and had imagined living an entire life within its quarters.

She asked Nizar to teach us the violin after she realized that we had started stomping around and lustily singing school songs which glorified the Party and the Leader. She bought a violin and Nizar began his tutelage. My mother adored the scene of us all wearing clean clothes, sitting on the bamboo seats and echoing musical notes after Nizar. In that image, we more

closely approximated the exemplary family she was resolved upon. In her daydreams, she longingly traced a picture of our future: either doctors or engineers, both celebrated and refined, we would listen to classical music and wear expensive ties and magnificent shoes. Every day we would gather in a circle around the dinner table at which she would preside, and she would look after her grandchildren.

No one took to the music lessons except Rashid; after five months he could play several challenging exercises with ease. Sawsan and I would flee at five o'clock, saying we didn't feel well. As the hour approached, Sawsan would speak with increasing earnestness of her afflictions, which included total paralysis and a bout of coughing that only ended after the music lesson was finished. She was made to stay in her room and tend to Suad. Sawsan drew pictures for her—of outstretched tongues, houses on which the sun never set, goats, horses—which horrified my mother. Any hint of Midan Akbas which clung to us was a nightmare for her; however much she fled it and tried to efface all traces of it, it reached out its tongue to mock her. She tore up Sawsan's pictures, who then, furious, would leave us to spend time with Suad in her little room under the stairs, trying to escape the odor of death. She told us that Suad would soon turn into a dog with no bark, and in fact her face did begin to look like that of an animal no one could identify, something like a squirrel or a decrepit puppy. Every night it came as a relief to us when Suad fell into a deep, semi-permanent sleep under the influence of the Diazepam my mother administered to her in a single cup of tea whenever she woke up suddenly. Sleeping pills no longer had any effect on her. She would take them while staring into empty space, half insensible, emitting feeble whimpers like a rabbit lost in the desert.

Whenever Rashid resumed his violin practice I would leave our room with a gravity that made Sawsan laugh. She would steal his violin and hide it in her wardrobe among her

clothes. She believed in not taking life so seriously, and told me that Rashid's excessively serious nature would turn him into a complicated person who couldn't be trusted to keep a secret. I crossed the living room to slink out and sit in the street, walking on tiptoe to avoid drawing my mother's attention as she sat in her little studio in the corner. She was painting watercolor landscapes which she would bring to a shop in Manshiya in exchange for a few coins that paid for the medicines which kept Suad alive. I would go out with the friends my mother had banned from the house so they wouldn't dirty her cushions. I cursed the suspicious silence of our house and my mother's mania for sterilizing everything—crockery and teacups, corridors and beds and pillows, clothes and shoes—on a quest that would doubtless never end, seeing as everything that came from outside was contaminated.

My mother complained to Nariman, who agreed with her, that walking in the streets had become a terrifying experience. Rough, uncultured countryside smells lingered in the air and corrupted the breeze of their city. She added that most of their colleagues were in the Party and wrote in their reports that we were bourgeois, reactionary, and slightly condescending. Nariman was desperate to emigrate to Canada, and my mother fell silent so as not to encourage her into listing the advantages of flight and fear. They both felt that their destinies were proceeding into the unknown. My mother had felt this when I was born the same week that the coup that brought the Party to power happened. She thought that my birth, even though it did not coincide exactly with the day of the coup, had been severely mistimed and that, like the many military coups in Syria, would soon be forgotten.

She again felt that her life was a collection of mistakes that could never be resolved. She was determined not to give birth to me like one of the peasants from Midan Akbas; when they went into labor, they serenely lay down in the pomegranate fields and gave birth with the aid of their friends, who would

cut the umbilical cord with a blunt knife or a stone without interrupting their discussions about the upcoming harvest. She would not allow the village midwife to touch her; superstitious after Suad's birth, she would often repeat that the midwife had caused Suad's disability.

When my mother went into labor she picked up a clean bag embroidered with yellow flowers and went to the state hospital in Aleppo. She sold her gold bracelets and bribed the nurses so they would give her a private room. The nurses tried to meet her wish that the surgical implements be sterilized more than once and the bedsheets changed no less than once every day, but after a few days they became irritated by her demands, despite her lavish bribes. They sympathized with her when they saw my feeble face and the gestures I made to them with my small hands. Meanwhile, the streets of Aleppo were empty following news of the coup. Baath Party officers had seized the General Staff building along with the radio and television stations, and Statement Number One was broadcast.

My mother got up from her bed and looked out the window and saw that the streets were completely empty. She considered the coup and the military's return to power a bad omen for a child born just a few days earlier, his eyes as yellow as dried lemon peel. A few hours after Statement Number One, soldiers burst into the corridors and chaos spread through the hospital—surgical instruments disappeared from the operating rooms, the store cupboards were emptied. My mother got up despite her pain and looked for milk to give me after hers had dried up. She begged for some milk from the nurses who stared at her, amazed that she had stayed and was determined not to leave before being assured that I would live. They whispered about her and giggled with each other as if she were an alien. The following day they asked her to leave and accepted no excuses. They picked up her numerous bags and put all her things in the corridor. They said that an Emergency Law had been announced, and as a precaution against

said emergency the new head of the Party wanted the hospital empty in preparation for any casualties.

My mother uttered a few incoherent words and groped for my father's hand. The warmth of his palm slipped into her heart, giving her the courage to declare that it would be preferable to die than live under the rule of moronic peasant officers who couldn't distinguish between the scent of lily-of-the-valley and the smell of pumpkin. My father considered this speech about peasants, which she offered up with unrelenting disdain, to be a grave insult to his family that had supported the coup from its first moment. Over the following nights they did not return to their disagreement over whether there had been a revolution or a military coup. My father recovered the scents of the wife he loved, a dreamy woman with long, soft hair, large, dark eyes, and a white, elongated face that betrayed her upbringing among the city's aristocracy.

"Love at first sight" was how my father described it. He had fallen in love with her the second he spotted her at the annual dinner of the Railway Institute, which had appointed him to the station of Midan Akbas after his graduation from the Institute of Electrical Engineering. The dinner was a special function to honor the first employees of the Institute—my grandfather, Jalal al-Nabulsi, was among the earliest. A companion of Monsieur Henri Sourdain, my grandfather was one of the remaining few who had witnessed the founding of the Syrian railways, and could narrate the heroism of his colleagues who had cleaved the horizon of the mountains of Rajo to cross the German border in the early 1930s.

It was an elegant celebration in which the honored workers strutted around in their official uniforms, their proud families exchanging glances and discreet smiles. My grandfather Jalal al-Nabulsi, who was entering his seventieth year, spoke in a hoarse and affecting voice about his old colleagues, most of whom had passed away, and lavished praise on Monsieur

Henri who had left Paris and fallen in love with Aleppo, settling down in the new district before being executed by the occupying French authorities who accused him of being a German spy. My grandfather's eyes filled with tears more than once as he talked about the plan to excavate the German border in the Rajo mountains. His proud family—my uncles Nizar and Abdel-Monem, my aunt Ibtihal, and my mother, the youngest—applauded eagerly, glorying in the picture taken of my grandfather with Monsieur Henri which hadn't been moved from its place on the cabinet in the living room for fifty years.

My mother rose like a butterfly and took my grandfather's arm to accompany him to the head table. He was greeted by the minister, who proceeded to hang a Railway Institute medal on his breast and award him a bonus and a certificate signed in green ink. The employees who were being honored stood in a line and a commemorative picture was taken of them with the minister, who was all affability, attending to the honored employees and greeting their families. From his place at the table, Zuhayr, infatuated, was gazing at my mother in the manner of a newly appointed rank-and-file railway employee. She turned from the throng of admirers around her, who were each jostling to salute her respectfully, introduce themselves, and tell her their family names. Like a dove soaring skyward, she returned Zuhayr's look with her own gaze of admiration. She was captivated by his bold eyes, his tanned face, his carefully groomed moustache—the classic image, in fact, of an ambitious public official from the sixties, everything about him inspiring confidence.

Ignoring her family, Zuhayr shook her hand and asked where she went to school. She did not stop him from holding onto her hand for a few moments longer than necessary while a strange warmth and power slipped from his hand into her heart. She told him softly that she was a student at the school in Mahabba, and saw him seize the opportunity to wave to her before he left.

Visions of his face haunted her and she sighed. She wasn't expecting to see him the very next day, waiting in front of her school and following her like a teenager. She dawdled coyly with her friends in the alleys of Jamiliya, glancing furtively behind her. She surmised that he was waiting until she was by herself so he could speak to her. Her face flushed. She shuddered from this bliss that she was feeling for the first time in her life, and feared that Nariman, her best friend and neighbor, would realize what was happening and scold her for being yet another schoolgirl hanging around a handsome young man.

He was waiting for her the following day. On the seventh day he was still waiting, and on the eighth day and the days after that, she waited for him and he didn't come. She stopped looking behind her. She hated Nariman. She didn't know where to look for him. She was absent-minded at the dinner table. Emptiness crawled down her spine, chilling her to the bone. She searched the photographs from the dinner and scrutinized all the people surrounding her father but she couldn't see him. She was afraid that his image would be wiped from her memory. When she recalled the warmth of his fingers as he introduced himself to her with such confidence, she loved him.

She fled from Nariman and went to Souk al-Telal by herself where she plunged into the crowds to look for his face, and picked out photographs of singers who resembled him. She stared shamelessly into cafés reserved for men and inspected the faces of the customers staring into space, and endured being approached by men who came out of the café and followed her, thinking she was looking for customers. She looked for him in every likely place, and when it rained she got depressed. She went into Nizar's room and curled up beside him like a housecat, sunk in silence, as he practiced Vivaldi on his violin. When he finished his exercises she told Nizar that she couldn't find him and Nizar nodded sympathetically.

When they heard the door slam and Abdel-Monem's footsteps creak, Nizar picked up his violin and his music and went into the kitchen to finish practicing, leaving the room to Abdel-Monem who called him an "insect," never missing an opportunity to insult his brother.

Nizar and my mother conspired together, and went out in the evenings to walk in the quiet streets around Baghdad Station; they ate ice cream and returned to the house in silence. He left her free to look into the faces of each passer-by in a desperate search for the man she found so difficult to forget. For her sake, Nizar would play melancholy pieces as she sat at the kitchen table, the book in front of her left open on the same page, a hand placed on one cheek like an Egyptian starlet from the fifties.

Nizar possessed fingers made of silk, and a soul which roved far away from the earth-bound worlds whose cruelty he found unbearable. Laughing, he would tell my mother that he was going to live on the moon before throwing himself on the bed beside her and crying silently. No one knew why Nizar wept. He would steal my mother's underwear and dress himself up in front of the mirror, before returning it to its place. She feigned ignorance, rearranged her silken camisoles and nightshirts, and told no one about his craving for women's clothing. The two of them would spend a lot of time together in secret, having unreserved conversations about the worlds of women. Nizar would describe a desire to feel soft silk next to his body as he fingered her lace stockings with a sigh. She would hug him, full of emotion and fear, in the knowledge that his life would be wretched and sad, his manhood wasted. She pleaded with him not to accompany men to shadowy rooms in Bab al-Faraj, and he nodded and continued to search alongside her for any trace of Zuhayr.

Nine months after their first meeting, she saw him on the Jamiliya tram. She hurtled after it, ignoring the passengers'

quizzical glances at this man who was reaching out of the carriage to a woman following close behind. He got off at the next stop and hurried toward her, and they met in the middle of the road in front of Farouq School. Terrified of losing him again, her body was trembling and her heart thudding, but when she looked at him her diffidence returned. In a nearby café they sat facing one another and she didn't answer when he asked if she had searched for him. He looked into her face for a long while and told her regretfully that he was engaged to his cousin in Anabiya, but my mother was the one he loved. In fact, her image had never left him. He drew from his wallet a photograph of her which had been taken secretly, in exchange for a considerable sum. She looked at her picture for a while, and felt a suffocating tightness. Her voice weakened and she asked him faintly if they could leave. They went out into the fresh air and walked through the park, and on a solitary bench he kissed her. Her whole being was transformed at that moment into a blaze that wouldn't go out. She thought about confessing how she had searched for him everywhere and had wept over him on Nizar's shoulder. She rose like a silent mummy, left him alone, and walked quickly away. The only thing she told him was that she was now studying at the Teacher Training Institute, making sure she had given him a way to find her. She thought of the revelations of love, his fleeting kiss, his scent which she inhaled quietly after going without protest to a house he borrowed from a friend especially for their trysts. Gently, he opened the buttons of her short blue dress, drowning in the splendor of her white skin, and carried her to the bed naked but for her underwear. She told him she didn't want to lose her virginity, and he kissed her unhurriedly, as if he had all the time in the world. He kissed her swelling breasts and brushed the nipples that were like cherrystones, her stomach, her toes. When she bent down to gather up her clothes, the evening shadows dressed her face with the colors of a certainty she couldn't lose. He told her in a whisper that he couldn't live without her.

Everything was concluded quietly. My aunt Ibtihal was a jealous custodian of the stately way of life she imagined the family to have enjoyed during the Ottoman Empire, and she was furious that my mother had accepted the proposal of a peasant whose family still shared a room with their livestock. Nariman couldn't believe that her best friend would live in a rundown, spider-infested house in Midan Akbas, the middle of nowhere, among Kurds and insignificant officials flung onto the Turkish border. Only Abdel-Monem was eager to get rid of her, especially after their recent battles over Nizar, who missed her. He wrote her long letters as if she were lying next to him and he was telling her how he had searched the shops of Aziziya for creams that would soften his skin, or a new perfume he liked. He was eloquent in expressing the pain that never left him, but when he reached the part about a friend who had invited him into his bed last winter, he stopped writing and crossed out the words. Instead he resumed his perpetual complaints about Abdel-Monem's insults, such as the time he described Nizar openly as a faggot who would pollute the family's honor, and tried to incite my grandfather to either kill him or throw him out.

Nizar did not send the letters he wrote. He collected them in a box and on one of my mother's visits he gave her a bundle wrapped in colored paper. She placed it in her handbag and read the letters slowly after my father left for work, and reread them, and reflected on her lot, how she had been thrown into the open country where the howling dogs reminded her of the death of her old dreams. She tried to convince my father to return to Aleppo and he reminded her that she had accepted his only condition, which was to live with him in Midan Akbas, close to his family in Anabiya. She fell silent and wandered over to the window, resuming her sewing in preparation for Suad, who would soon be born.

My mother had wanted to have her children in a clean hospital, with sheets smelling of disinfectant and nun-like

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