

The Woman from Tantoura

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This edition published in 2019 by
Hoopoe
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
200 Park Ave., Suite 1700 New York, NY 10166
www.hoopoefiction.com

Hoopoe is an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press
www.aucpress.com

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First published by the American University in Cairo Press in 2014

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Exclusive distribution outside Egypt and North America by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.,
6 Salem Road, London, W4 2BU

Dar el Kutub No. 13058/18
ISBN 978 977 416 900 7

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ashour, Radwa

The Woman from Tantoura / Radwa Ashour.— Cairo: The American
University in Cairo Press, 2018.

p. cm.
ISBN 978 977 416 900 7
1. English Fiction
I. Title
832

1 2 3 4 5 23 22 21 20 19

Designed by Adam el-Schemy
Printed in the United States of America

1

Cast Ashore

HE CAME OUT OF THE sea. Yes, by God, he came out of the sea as if he were of it, and the waves cast him out. He didn't come floating on the surface like a fish, he sprang out of it. I followed him as he walked toward the shore, his legs taut, pulling his feet from the sand and planting them in it, coming closer. He was bare, covered only by white pants held around his waist by a rope, drops of water shining on his face and shoulders. His hair was plastered on his head, chest, and arms, wet and shining. I was standing in front of him on the shore, but when I recall the scene I see myself on the threshing floor, among the stalks of wheat, spying on him while he was unaware of me. I know that the threshing floors were on the east side, separated from the sea by the houses of the village and the railroad, and that I was standing on the shore. I was tempted to run away, but I did not run.

I was the one who spoke first. I asked him his name and he answered, "My name is Yahya, from Ain Ghazal."

"What brought you here?"

"The sea!"

His face reddened in a blush that I caught like an infection from him; shyness overcame me, and then him, too. I threw him a stammered goodbye, and then turned away.

As I was going I turned my head and did not see him, so I was sure that he could not see me. I ran to my friends and found them as I had left them, as if nothing had happened, chattering, and playing in the sand.

I told the story. It seems my words came tumbling out fast; they stopped me and asked me to start over. I did, and they began to wink at each other and laugh. I said, “What’s so funny?” I got up, shook the sand from my dress and went toward the house.

I didn’t go into the house. I bypassed it and went to the Indian fig bushes behind the rear courtyard. I began to pick the fruit and went on until I filled the large basket that we left nearby. I carried it into the house, got a knife and a large plate, and crouched near the basket. I grasped the fruit between the thumb and index finger of my left hand, avoiding the circles of spines. With a single, quick blow I cut off the upper end with the knife and then the lower; then I split the rind lengthwise with the edge of the knife, pulling it back a little. Next I put the knife aside and freed the fruit from its spiny covering with my fingers and put it on the plate. Usually I would do that with a speed that astonished my two big brothers, as they could never succeed in peeling it, despite their love for the fruit. The spines would get stuck in their fingers and they would curse and swear while I watched them, laughing. When my mother would see me absorbed in peeling the figs, she would say, “Bless you, you’re as fast as always!”

The sea was the border of the village, lending it its voices and colors, suffusing it with its scents, which we would smell even in the aroma of the large, flat stone-baked bread loaves. I don’t remember when I learned how to swim just as I don’t remember when I learned how to walk or talk. In later years I headed for coastal towns. I said, “The sea in Beirut or Alexandria is the same sea,” but it wasn’t. City sea is different: you look at it from a high balcony or you walk along an asphalt path and the sea is there, separated from you by a ditch and a fence. And if you decide to go to it you come as a stranger, sitting in one of the coffee shops on the shore, or carrying with you strangers’ gear—an umbrella, a chair, perhaps a towel

and swimsuit. It's a limited visit; you come as a guest, then you pick up your things and leave.

Like most of the houses in the village, our house was entwined with the sea. I would go to it carelessly, almost unnoticed, two steps in the water meaning to wet my feet and then a wave would surprise me, wetting my whole garment. I would jump back to the sand and in the flash of an eye it would turn me into a sand creature, then another jump and I would dive into the water all the way. I would swim and play, alone or with the other girls and boys. We would share in digging, then "Me, me, me . . ." I would go down into the deep pit and they would spread sand over me until my body disappeared, leaving only the head rising excitedly from its warm, sandy burial place. A grave surrounded by the laughter and devilment of the young. At other times I would shout at the top of my lungs like someone struck by madness, "Hun-ter! Hun-ter!" I would crawl on the ground and jump and crawl again, in my hand the copper vessel that I had secured between the rocks as a trap for fish, in which the poor thing had been caught. I would lift the silver fish by its tail and say teasingly, "My fish is always the biggest and the best." In a flash the thought would occur to me: Was it luck or my skill in scattering moistened crumbs in the bottom of the vessel, which I would cover with cloth, making holes in it that allowed the fish to slip inside when it was tempted by the food?

In our sea there is a sugar spring, a spring of sweet water fixed among the salty waves. Yes, by God, a sugar spring, and right beside it was the newlyweds' plaza. We would hold our weddings on the shore; the young man would appear after his friends had bathed him and helped him into his new clothes. They would sing to him, "The handsome one comes from the bath . . . may God and his name be with him . . . the handsome one comes from the bath . . . God and his name be with him." He would appear on a horse curried as if it were the groom. We would jump as if we had grasshoppers inside us,

jumping from the groom's street to the bride's rock to all the aunts absorbed in preparing the food, and singing:

Say to his mother, rejoice and be glad,
Place myrtle on the pillows and henna on our hands.
The wedding is here and the couple is smiling,
The home is my home and the rooms are all mine,
We are engaged, let my enemy die!

We slip in among the young men who have left the beach and gone to dance the dabka. We stand next to an old man lost in the ecstasy of singing, who has begun before anyone has arrived, just singing alone, fascinated by his own voice and the verses he is repeating.

The wedding spreads over the seashore, and expands. It is festive with the women's trills and ahazij songs, the dabka circles, the aroma of grilled lamb, and the torches. The call and response of the ataba and oof songs escape from the men's chests and reverberate, yes, by God, they escape and hover as if they might reach the Lord on his throne above, or fly beyond the neighbors to nearby villages to entertain the residents of the whole coast, from Ras al-Naqura to Rafah. Then the riders come, competing in galloping and dancing. Each is on the back of his purebred mare, digging up the sand of the beach with her hooves, her body and legs swept away as she approaches, turning, the young man on her back leaning lightly forward as if he were flying like her. The scene takes our breath away. We forget the sea. Perhaps the sea, like us, is absorbed in watching and forgets itself in calm, or is gradually overcome by sleepiness after the long evening. Like the sea, we give in to the gentle torpor. We don't notice until our mothers take us away, and we follow them like sleepwalkers. We settle into our beds, not knowing if we are in the house or on the beach, if what we see or what rings in our ears is the real wedding or a dream in our sleep.

The sea resides in the village. As for the train, it has set times, appearing and then disappearing, like the night-haunting ghoul. We are disturbed by the roar of its engines as it approaches, the earth's shaking as it passes, the friction of the wheels on the rails, its whistle bursts, the hiss of the brakes because it is stopping. The train passes through the town daily, and has a station in the east, in Zummarin. Sometimes it carries local people like us; mostly it is ridden by English soldiers or settlers with business in Haifa or Jaffa, who come and go by train. My two brothers ride Abu Isam's bus once a week, going to Haifa at the beginning of the week and returning at the end, to spend Thursday and Friday night with us.

Less than a month after I met the young man who sprang from the sea, we were visited by the sheikh of Ain Ghazal. He drank coffee with my father and asked for my hand in marriage for his nephew.

My mother said, "His name is Yahya."

I muttered, "I know his name is Yahya."

My mother didn't notice. She continued with what she was telling me.

"Your father wants to know what you think before he gives him the answer. He said to them that the alliance honors us, and God willing, good will come of it. Your father agrees, but he says, if Ruqayya accepts we will only read the Fatiha now and we'll hold the marriage in a year, when she will be fourteen." My mother said that she had objected and said, "Why would we marry her to a young man from Ain Ghazal?" and that my father said, "The people of Ain Ghazal are our maternal cousins, they have married our daughters before. And the boy has a good mind, he's educated and he's studying in Egypt." "When he said Egypt I shouted, 'Will you send your daughter away, Abu Sadiq?' He said, 'I won't send her away. The boy will finish his studies before the marriage is consummated.' I objected again, 'As long as the boy is studying in the university he won't work as a fisherman or a farmer,

and he won't live here or in Ain Ghazal. He'll get a job in Haifa or in Lid, and he might go farther away, his job might even take him to Jerusalem, and frankly I don't want to send my daughter far away. It's enough that the two boys are away in Haifa and that I don't see them more than a day and a half each week. If she's going to leave the village let her marry Amin. The father's nephew unseats a groom riding to his bride, as they say. Amin is better for her, and Beirut is closer than Cairo.' He said, 'He won't stay in Cairo, he will return to Ain Ghazal. And if he gets a job in Haifa you can take the train and reach your daughter in less than half an hour.' I said, 'And if the Jews close the road to us?' His face got red, and he scowled and said, 'God forbid! Enough talk! We're buying the man, not the location of his work. The boy is nineteen and educated, the family brings honor and distinction, his uncle is the sheikh of Ain Ghazal, an upstanding man with a reputation like gold. Ask the girl, and if she agrees, may God bless it.'"

"What do you think?" My mother was directing the question to me.

I did not say, "Even if he were working at the ends of the earth . . .," rather I said, "I agree."

My words came out clear, in a loud voice. She scolded me, "Good God, where's your shame! Say, 'Whatever you think,' say, 'It's for my parents to decide!'"

On the next visit the sheikh of Ain Ghazal came with his brothers and with a large group of his most important relatives and of men of their village. They were received by my father, my uncle, my brothers, and the elders of our village. They read the Fatiha. The formal proposal was made with Yahya pursuing his university studies in Egypt. My mother and my aunt were absorbed in preparing the feast, for which my father had slaughtered two lambs. My mother was coming and going, repeatedly whispering in my ear, "You'll have a bad reputation among the women, they'll say you're a lazy,

good-for-nothing bride. Look lively, show them what you can do.” I slipped out of the house and headed for the sea, sitting cross-legged and staring at the boy as he approached, wet and golden. I recalled the scene and then recalled again, against the background of the sound of the waves and the women’s songs and trills of joy coming from the direction of our house:

She lowered her eyes, her hand held out for their henna,
Such a small gazelle—how could her family sell her away?
O Mother, O Mother, prepare my new pillows,
I’m leaving home without even a family’s farewell!

2

The Night-Haunting Ghoul

I IMAGINE MY MOTHER DURING those days. I recall what she said, and what she did not say. I hear her as she repeats to one of the neighbors what she has already said to my aunt: “I said to him, ‘You’re sending your daughter all the way to Haifa, Abu Sadiq!’ He said, ‘You’ll take the train.’ Good God, I’ll travel from one town to another to see my daughter? And what if she goes into labor in the middle of the night? What if she gets sick, God forbid? Besides, how will I take the train, and who will tell me how to take it, and how to get off, and how to get from the station to her house? And how can I take the train when most of the passengers are English soldiers or Jewish settlers? Even if they left me alone and no one bothered me, how would I dare ask any of them a question? They might not understand me when I ask, they might make fun of me, they might intentionally mislead me so that I get off at the wrong station and get lost between towns. I might find myself in one of the companies they call ‘settlements,’ what would I do then? Knock on the Jews’ door and tell them to bring me back home? Why did Abu Sadiq choose the hard way and say, ‘Accept my choice?’ Why shouldn’t my daughter live near me, so I wouldn’t have to do anything to go see her except put on my sandals and put my scarf back on my head? She would put on the coffee when she sent for me and I would arrive before it boiled! And he says, ‘Take the train!’”

I don't know if this anxiety that possessed my mother was the normal anxiety of a woman who had never left her village, or if it was complicated and deepened by a reality weighed down by fears, a reality that led her as it led others to take refuge in all that was familiar to her and associated with her. The distance separating her from Haifa—which was twenty-four kilometers, no more and no less—seemed like a rugged road surrounded by dangers, more like Sinbad's voyage to the land of Wak Wak, or like going to the hiding place of the ghoul lying in wait for Shatir Hasan. These fears were not solely caused by the probability that her expected son-in-law would live in Haifa; after all, the young man was studying in Cairo, and neither she nor anyone else knew what work he might find, or where. In fact, God would spare her the trip to Haifa and its twenty-four kilometers; the young man would not work in Haifa and her daughter would not live there. My mother would live and die without taking the train. She would never visit Haifa, and no mount or automobile would take her to Ain Ghazal or to any of the other neighboring villages, except for al-Furaydis.

She would go there in a truck.

I tell my grandchildren tales about their great-grandmother, to amuse them. I tell them about their great-grandfather too. I say, "He used to love to tease her. Was it an old habit he had acquired when they were little, since he was her cousin and only four years older, or was it something new that came after marriage? I don't know. He would intentionally pick a fight with her and she would take his words seriously. He said, 'Take the train.' Of course he was toying with her, because Abu Isam's bus went from the village to Haifa every morning and came back in the evening, and no soldier or settler rode it. There were two Dodge cars that could be rented, that would take anyone who wanted not only to Haifa but also to Acre or Nazareth, or to Jerusalem or Jenin or Safad, or to Jaffa or even Gaza, usually to greet the pilgrims returning from

Mecca by way of Suez. But he said, "Take the train." The grandchildren laugh and I join in, even though my awareness of the irony is like a lump in my throat. They don't need to get used to traveling from town to town to see their grandmother or to visit their uncles or to attend a wedding or a funeral; they've never known any other way. I have not gotten used to it. Even after all these years, I have not gotten used to the movement of airplanes, which sometimes seems to me like a sky that the sky itself hides behind. I mutter to myself, "God rest you, Mother. If God had lengthened your life you would have known another time, and it would have taught you to know distant cities thousands of kilometers away from you. You would have stumbled over their names and clung to them, because the children are there." Did I say I have not gotten used to it? I take it back. I have become accustomed. No one can resist being tamed by time.

I said to my granddaughter Huda, commenting on a silver ornament the size of a chick pea that she had put on the end of her nose, "If your great-grandmother saw you now!" She looked at me questioningly, not knowing if the comment showed admiration or implied criticism. I smiled and said, "I was a lot younger than you, maybe four or five at the most, when the Nawar came to our village." She stopped me: "The Nawar?" "The Gypsies," I explained. Then I continued, "They set up their tents in the village square, and there was a woman with them who put a basket of seashells in front of her, the kind that are small and spiraled. She would say, 'Blow on them and give them back to me and I will read your fortune.' That seemed very exciting, and she herself seemed different, arousing curiosity by those green marks on her face. There was a little round mark on the end of her nose and others more like two horizontal lines under her lower lip, and there was a crescent earring, not placed as usual—a pair with one in each ear—but fastened on the side of her nose. Her accent was different and so was her garment; it was different

from our mothers' long dresses. She said that she could read the unknown and uncover hidden things, and that it was possible for her to tell us what would happen to us when we grew up. Everyone ran to his house; one came back with a stone-baked loaf, one carried an egg, one brought dates. She read our fortunes, but even after we learned our good luck, we didn't disperse but stayed in a circle around her. Then I found myself pulling on the edge of her dress and pointing to the green marks on her face and asking her, 'How did you color that, Auntie?'

"She laughed, 'I didn't color it!'

"'Were you born like that?'

"'That's a tattoo, and we inscribe it whenever we want. It beautifies the face. Do you want one like it?'

"'Yes, I do.'

"'What will you give me in exchange?'

"I flew to the house and came back with a copper pot that I gave to her. She made the tattoo for me. I went home and when my mother saw the tattoo she stood screaming at me, threatening to beat me. When she found out about the copper pot she made good her threat and beat me with a stick until my brothers rescued me from her. For years I didn't understand why my mother was so angry, and why she kept saying, 'Now people will think you are one of the Nawar girls.'"

What did Anis say? He was my grandson who lived in Canada, and he had been following what I told his cousin. He said what would never occur to me, nor cross my mind: "It's clear that Great-grandma was racist. What she said about the Gypsies is racist talk, it's not right, and beating children is also unacceptable." He added, in English, "It's politically incorrect!"

I burst out laughing and laughed a long time, until the tears rolled down my cheeks. I said as I was wiping away the tears, "Your poor great-grandmother! God rest her soul and bless her and her time."

I wait for Maryam to return from the university. I wait for her to finish studying her lessons. I wait for the calls from the children. I wait for the six a.m. news broadcast, and for the news at eleven at night, and then for the news at six the next morning. The hours pass slowly, in loneliness, as if I were moving about in a cemetery. The summer comes, or more precisely a certain summer month comes, and the house comes to life. We have to organize comings and goings to avoid traffic congestion, and the conflict of temperaments and desires. "What will we cook tonight?" What the girl wants, the boy won't like. One smokes ceaselessly and one can't stand the smell of cigarettes, one wants to watch a soccer match and another wants the news, while the third group wants to watch movies. One calls from an inner room, "Lower your voices a little, I want to sleep," and one asks for help from the kitchen because he has caused a minor disaster, with no great consequences. I say, "A madhouse!" and notice the confusion of Mira's face, my granddaughter who wears glasses, who reads a lot, and who takes everything that's said seriously. I explain, "I'm joking, your being here is as sweet as honey for me."

We laugh, we laugh between the jokes, the silly stories, and the recalled foolishness. We fill the gaps of months of absence with the stories of what happened to them, or to me, or to others of our family and friends who live in Ain al-Helwa or in Jenin or in Tunis or who stayed in the area of al-Furaydis, or who are scattered among the villages nearby, those we know and see from time to time and those we never meet, whose stories reach us and which we repeat, so they become part of the shared fabric of the family.

My neighbor, a young woman, a doctor to whom Maryam introduced me, asked me, "Your oldest granddaughter is in college, when did you get married?"

"Before I was fifteen."

"God forbid, you were a child!"

I changed the subject as I didn't think it was appropriate to present the story of my life, with a full accounting, to a neighbor who had met my daughter less than two weeks before, and then had surprised me with a visit, saying that she wanted to meet me. There was plenty of time for us to become closer, to become friends, and for her to know some of my story—or to be satisfied with polite neighborliness, “Good morning” and “How are you?” when we met by chance in the elevator or at the door of the building, each going her own way and knowing no more of her neighbor than her name and the broad outlines of her life.

After the month of vacation, which might be a week more or less for one reason or another, I say goodbye to the children. The schedule of arriving flights is exchanged for another one, for departures to Abu Dhabi, to Toronto, to Paris, to Lid via Larnaca or Athens, to Nablus via Amman and the bridge. We go to the airport, then we go again, then we go a third time and a fourth and sometimes a fifth. Weeping has been worn out, maybe because the tears have become ashamed of themselves, there's no place for them. The children kiss my hand and move away with unhurried steps, not turning around so I can see their faces one more time. The grandchildren, Noha and Huda and Amin Junior and Anis and Mira, follow their families with hurried steps, turning their necks again and again: “Goodbye, Teta.” I look at their smiling faces. I wave. They wave.

I hold Maryam's arm as we come home together. A space of calm to recover the usual rhythm, to contemplate, to bathe, to put the house in order, to repair my relationship with the plants which I'm convinced get angry, like children, if you neglect them.

Usually it all takes two weeks, after which the house regains its cleanliness, the window glass and the wooden shutters and the doors, the carpet and the curtains and the furniture. And I spoil the plants, seeking to please them until they are satisfied.

3

Fickle February

IN OUR TOWN WE CALL grass “spring,” because the spring is when the year turns and its season arrives, when it clothes the hills and the valleys. Classes and types and denominations of color, intense or coarse, deep or delicate, soft or light and vivid, all an unruly and unfettered green, and no one is sad. In its expanse grow the wildflowers, scattered wherever they please. But despite their red or yellow or gradations of purple, they can never be anything other than miniatures plunged in the sea of green.

All alone the almond tree ruled over spring in the village, the undisputed queen. None of the surrounding trees dared to contest it. Even the sea was jealous of the almond tree in the spring, even the sea foam was jealous, for what was its poor white compared to a heart like a carnation, taking one stealthily to a frank crimson? The almonds flower and steal our hearts, and then they capture them entirely with their delicate, deceptive fruit, stinging and sweet. We don’t wait for it to harden, we stretch our hands to pick what’s close. We climb the branches and take what we want. We eat in the trees or carry it as provisions in our pockets, or lift the ends of our garments to hold them, and then fly home.

My mother says, “February can’t be tied down.” She says, “February is fickle and stubborn, it huffs and puffs and has the smell of summer.” The winds are active and the waves high and the cold still lingers, cutting to the bone as if we

were in the depths of winter, but we know that March is only two steps away. Then the almond flowers, as if opening the way and giving permission, followed by the apricot blossoms, and afterward the trees are covered as they rush to compete, first with their flowers and then with the early fruit. Then we know that April has planted its feet on the earth, and that May will follow it, to set the wheat on the threshing floors and the fruit on the trees.

So why did they choose these four months for war, for strikes, and for killing people without number?

I didn't know all the details, what happened in Haifa on any given day, how many were killed by the powder barrel the settlers rolled down Mount Carmel on such-and-such a street, or in what village they invaded the houses by night, pouring kerosene on the stores of flour and lentils and oil and olives, firing on the inhabitants. But like the rest of the girls in town I knew that the situation was dangerous, not only because we heard some of what went from mouth to mouth, but also because there was something frightening in the air, something on the verge. On the verge of what? We didn't know. The madafa that served as a town hall for the men was almost never without meetings, where they would stay until late at night. Sometimes my father would wake us, asking us to prepare something to eat and a bed for guests, saying, "It's late, they will spend the night with us. Offer them whatever there was for supper, and get up early in the morning to prepare breakfast because they are traveling." So we would make a quick supper and prepare a bed, and get up early in the morning to make breakfast for the men who were traveling.

My father and the men of the village must have known about the partition resolution when it happened, and in those meetings of theirs they were making their arrangements to confront it. (The coastline from south of Acre to south of Jaffa, including our village, was included in the Jewish state

after the partition.) But I don't remember that I heard about it or that the topic was brought up among the women of the village, or among the girls like me. The first news that alerted me was what happened in Haifa at the end of the month of December, since one of the neighbors told my mother about fights in Haifa between the Jewish and Arab workers in the oil refinery. The neighbor said that the Jews threw a bomb from a fast-moving car and killed and wounded many of us. She said that on the very next day the Palestinian workers rose against the Jewish workers, armed with sticks and knives, taking vengeance and killing anyone they could. Before dawn the Jewish soldiers attacked Balad al-Sheikh and a neighborhood on its heights where the refinery workers from Ijzim and Ain Ghazal and other neighboring villages lived with their wives and children. They descended on the residents with axes and knives and bombs and rifles, and left behind them corpses everywhere. Some say they killed sixty residents and some say that hundreds were killed.

My mother got up hurriedly and I followed her. She went to the house of the headman and asked me to go into the madafa and call my father. He came.

"What is it, Umm Sadiq?"

"Have you heard about what happened in Haifa?"

"I heard."

"Aren't you going to go to see your boys?"

"God protect them, if one of them had been hit we would have heard the news from a hundred sources. Be calm. What happened, happened in the oil refinery, and it's far from where they live and from the school and the bank. Go home, women don't come to the madafa like this to talk to the men at the door!"

"But the boys . . ."

He cut her off. "The boys are fine, God willing, and they'll come at the end of the week. And if they can't come because of the situation, they'll come at the end of the week after."

We went home. My mother was crying and saying over and over, “O Lord, O Lord, protect her and me and my boys and deliver them, O Almighty, O Munificent.” Her voice would choke in tears and then rise in lament: “*Yaammaa*, apples of my eye, they’re shooting at you so far away and nobody even knows, *yaammaa*, oh my beloveds!” I shouted at her, “Your weeping is a bad omen, Mama. It’s forbidden! Our Lord will be angry with you and afflict them tomorrow with what spared them today.” I said it in a decisive tone, as if I were scolding her. The words stuck in her mind and she calmed down, and then turned toward the sky and said, “Forgive me O Lord, I’m not opposing your decree. Protect Sadiq and Hasan, restore them and bring them home safe and sound from distant lands. Be kind to us, O Lord.” It was as if God had heard her and shut the door as she finished speaking, and she considered it an agreement. She looked at me suddenly, as if she had finally realized that I was walking beside her, and said, “By God, by God, I will not give you to the boy from Ain Ghazal if he doesn’t promise to live far away from Haifa. We’ll record the condition in the marriage contract!”

While we waited for Thursday my mother hid her fears in her breast, afraid to break the implicit agreement between her and the Most High, as if what I had said about the omen was not from my own mind but rather an inspiration from Him, telling her His will and conditions. The poor thing kept the conditions and followed the path with determination, not crying or complaining or referring to the subject, just growing paler day by day. When Abu Isam’s bus returned from Haifa the tears began to flow silently from her eyes. Then a boy came from the direction of the highway, bringing her good news and saying that they had arrived in a car that left them at the entrance to the village, at the place we called “the Gate.” “I saw them with my own eyes.” My mother got up, washed her face and changed her dress and went out to the courtyard of the house. My father joined her. She saw them

coming from afar but she stayed calm, as if she were waiting until she could be certain beyond any doubt. When they came within two steps of her, so that her hand could touch them, she let out a ringing trill of joy—at which my father slapped her face with his hand, a resounding slap followed by a shout of anger, “Have some shame, woman! A hundred men were martyred in one week and you are trilling!” Silence fell, all movement stopped. My brothers stopped walking, I was nailed to the ground. My mother seemed thrown into confusion, not knowing what to do about the first slap she had ever received from her cousin. Then the scene resumed: my brothers began walking toward the house. They kissed their father’s hand before moving to their mother’s arms, waiting to enfold them.

My father said, “Come with me to the madafa, to give the men the news from Haifa.”

My mother asked, whispering, “And supper?”

My father asked, “Are you hungry?”

“We’ll eat and then we’ll go to the madafa.”

“You won’t die of hunger; follow me to the madafa. After that you can eat however you like.”

The madafa in the headman’s house was where the men met to talk, to spend the evening in company, to discuss recent events and sometimes to solve disputes; and there the men sat in a circle around the radio to listen to the news. Women did not enter the madafa and the only news that reached them was what the men kindly told them, which they then exchanged among themselves. When it all happened the roof collapsed on everyone’s head, with no difference between the men and the women, the old and the young, or even the nursing infants dependent on their mother’s milk for their very life. I said there was no difference; I take that back, and I look at it again. There was a difference. Yes, there was a difference.

A few weeks after my mother’s joyful trill and the slap that followed it, the refugees arrived in the village. Qisarya

was located on the sea like us but it was south of town; it fell and the residents were forced to leave, and our village hosted some of the families. Our share of the guests was a widow with two children, a four-year-old boy and a girl a year younger than I. My new friend Wisal, the first of the refugees I met, told me about the scenario that all of the coastal towns, and others, would live through three months later. The scenario was not identical in every detail but it was the same in the general outlines. My friend told me that the Jewish troops laid siege to the town, attacked it, and drove the people out of their houses.

“My mother said, ‘Where will we go? We have no one to support us, no one who can take us to another town or arrange a way for us to live.’ She insisted on staying in the house. We stayed, and we learned that others did as we did. A week after they entered the town, they took us out of the houses and destroyed them and forced us to leave. They did the same with the Muslims and the Christians.”

I found that strange, and I asked, “Are there Christians in your town?”

“Yes, Muslims and Christians and Jews.”

“And Jews?”

“Yes.”

“In the ‘company,’ or in the town?”

“In the town.”

“Many?”

“No, a few.”

“Did they drive them out?”

“They came to give them the village, so why would they drive them out? Are there Jews in your village?”

“There was one man, then he moved to Zummarin, their ‘company’ in Zummarin that’s called Zikhron Yaakov.”

“Is it large?”

“Oh yes, it’s large. East of the village. It’s about an hour’s walk away.”

“They built a ‘company’ in our town too, they can get there in a ten-minute walk. They built it in the town territory, on farmland. They built it a few years ago; its name is Sdot Yam. I haven’t visited it.”

“I haven’t visited Zummarin either, but my father visited it, because there was a problem, and the police station and the government are there. There are people in the village who sell fish there and sometimes eggs, and sometimes they buy clothes there because they’re cheap. But my father says that since the big strike in ’36 there has been a decision: we will not sell to them or buy from them. Sometimes they come to swim in the sea. Or there’s a problem, so the headman of the ‘company’ visits the headman of the village. When will you go back?”

“My mother says we’ll go back soon. I don’t believe her.”

I introduced my friend to the girls of the village. I took her to the Sugar Spring and the Newlyweds’ Beach and the islands and the castle built on one of them. She did not find it wonderful. She said, “Our village is bigger. The houses are bigger and there are more streets and we have more gardens. And we have ruins.”

“There are ruins in our village too!”

I took her to the tower to see for herself.

She didn’t wonder at it. She said, “We have more and better ruins. Marble pillars as white as milk and veined with a strange color, like smoke. And if you dig in the sand you’ll find tiled floors and pictures, as if the inside of the earth were built and paved and decorated with pictures.”

“How’s that?”

“Once a young man from our town dug and found a colored drawing of a swan, made of small stones stuck together. After that he said to the young men, ‘Dig more,’ and they found pavings with pictures of pelicans and ducks and flowers and tree leaves, in colors. One of the old men of the town said that these are ruins from the time of Byzantium and maybe

before, and no one knew the meaning of ‘the time of Byzantium.’ The old man told them that there must be important finds among them, and if the Jews knew about them they would take the village. So no one saw anything and no one knew—they kept it quiet.”

“In our village too, there’s a good swimmer who said he dove into the sea and found a big ship, not one of the new ships that broke on the coast but an old ship, with strange colored things in it. He didn’t tell anyone but my brother and my brother told me, and I haven’t told anyone but you. Maybe that’s the reason they didn’t come to our village.”

“By God we didn’t tell anyone and we didn’t inform them, but they came into the town and occupied it.”

She looked as if she was about to cry. I said, “When you return safely I’ll come and visit you there.” Then I amended, “If Yahya allows me to.”

“Who is Yahya?”

I smiled. “The groom, from Ain Ghazal. His father and uncles came and asked for me four months ago, and they recited the Fatiha with my father.”

“When is the wedding?”

“My father said, ‘Let her reach fourteen before we write the contract.’ Yahya is studying in Egypt, in Cairo, have you heard of Cairo?”

I said it proudly, emphasizing the word “Cairo” by repeating it and pronouncing it on a higher tone than the rest of the words, anticipating that my friend would be impressed.

She didn’t look impressed. She said, “I won’t get married until after we go back home. How could the proposal happen . . . and where would we receive all the important family members, when we are like this, without a home?”

The proverb of my mother’s was right: February is fickle and stubborn, it huffs and puffs and has the smell of summer.

And what a summer!

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

Sarab

by Raja Alem, translated by Leri Price

Gaza Weddings

by Ibrahim Nasrallah, translated by Nancy Roberts

Fractured Destinies

by Rabai al-Madhoun, translated by Paul Starkey



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